



Interrupting and Disrupting Single Stories: Working with Muslim Youth to Provide (Counter)stories and (Re)shape our World(s)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am the Humanities Coordinator and Teacher at Edmonton Islamic Academy in Edmonton, Canada in Treaty 6 Territory on the traditional meeting grounds, gathering place, and travelling route to the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Métis, Dene and Nakota Sioux. My ultimate goal is to keep inquiring into my stories of experiences alongside youth with/about single stories (Adichie) and counterstories (Lindemann Nelson, 1995) alongside students. A part of that goal is to guide and learn alongside Social Studies and Language Arts teachers to become the best version of themselves as educators. My own professional development efforts have been focused on gaining insight into the experiences of diverse Muslim children, youth and caregivers/families. Outside of my 20 years of teaching grades 8-12 and professional pursuits, my greatest accomplishment is being the mother of two amazing teenagers. I enjoy all things related to home decor and design and have been fortunate to have teaching and leadership experiences in Canadian and International school contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

Awakening to Single Stories

What happens when we only hear one story about a particular person, people, place and/or situation? If we only hear about a person, people, place, or situation from one point of



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view, we risk accepting one experience as the whole truth. We face the danger of a single story (Adichie, 2009). Chimamanda Adichie asserted, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (12:49). Instead, she suggests, we must seek diverse perspectives—particularly the stories of people who have a unique claim to their story as it is important that they tell stories that only they can tell about their experiences, hopes, and fears, because doing so helps break down the power of dominant stories and stereotypes.

THE RESEARCH

This autobiographical narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) tells my research story about disrupting and challenging single stories of Muslims alongside youth and children during my graduate studies. It begins where my journey of formal teaching began, at Edmonton Islamic Academy (EIA), a place that is a companion of my heart and mind (Basso, 1996). Through my position as a teacher at the grade nine level teaching social studies and language arts, I have been fortunate to disrupt the single stories of people who have been marginalized, including those of Japanese Canadians, Chinese Canadians, Ukrainian Canadians, Uyghurs in China, Black Americans, Palestinians, and most urgently right now, Indigenous communities which are still grappling with the effects of forced assimilation into what was referred to as “Canadian culture.” However, this “Canadian culture” and our lives and their pathways are not fixed in time or place; instead, they are shaped and continually reshaped by the stories I and others live by, with, and in (Saleh, 2017). How we understand, share, and think with the stories of our and one another’s lives matters.

Bumping Up Against Single Stories as a Teacher and Narrative Inquirer

For the last five years, my life experiences and experiences in education have made “no single story” the theme of my grade nine classes. For the last four years, I have asked all students the same question as a pre-viewing activity: “What is the story of a Muslim?” After 10 to 15 minutes of students sharing their ideas, I recorded their answers on the whiteboard. In this process, as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), students were drawing on their “personal practical knowledge,” that is, their personal knowledge and experiences as knowing beings.

With great shock, I began to notice the major trend of the storyline the students were following. I began to wonder why their “personal practical knowledge” would be such a negative single story of Muslims because they are themselves Muslim. The mind map that we ended up creating included words such as: terrible, violent, extremists, oppression of women—and heartbreakingly—terrorists. In response, I gave students time to reflect on their words and expressed that they could put an “X” through any words they felt were irrelevant or inappropriate. Upon closer inspection of the photo below of the whiteboard,



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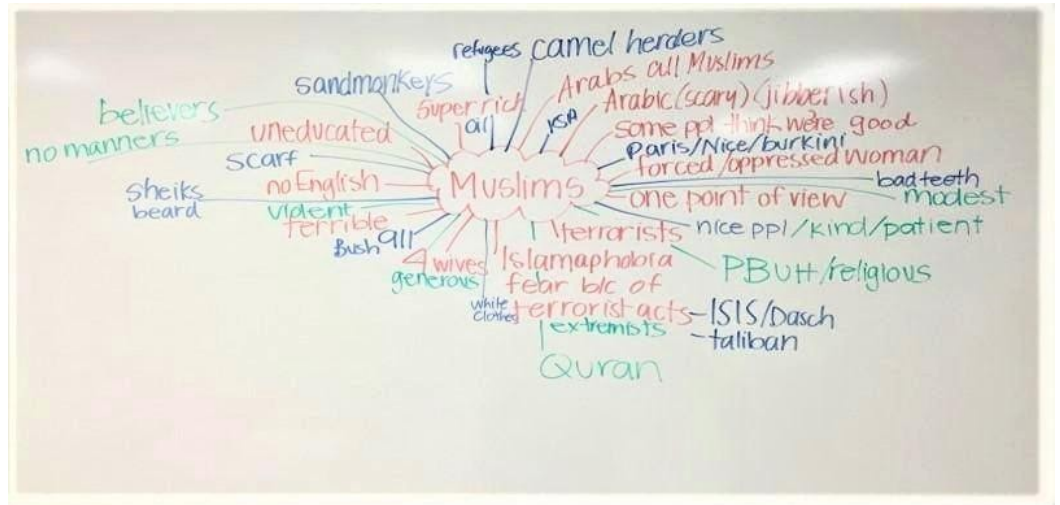


Figure 1 Student answers recorded on the white board to the question “What is the story of a Muslim?”

one can see that none of the words were crossed out.

I was startled as I began to notice this trend in the storyline, I simultaneously became deeply troubled and I tried to travel to their worlds. I am referring here to Lugones’ (1987) concept of “traveling to someone’s ‘world’ as a way of identifying with them” and “understanding what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes” (p.17).

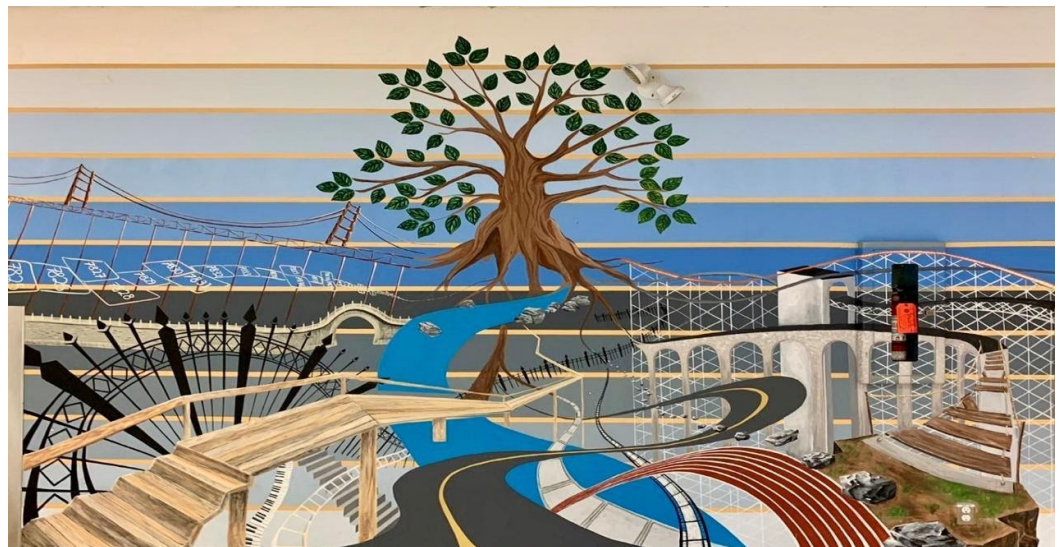


Figure 2 This mural speaks to this students’ belief in the need for spaces for world-travelling.

The students are around fourteen years old and were born after the horrific events of the morning of September 11, 2001. Shortly after, the United States began the ‘War on Terror’ which led to an increase in Islamophobia across the globe. The harmful media stereotypes reinforced a new dominant narrative of Muslims, a deficit and dangerous narrative that



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seemed very alive in the heads and hearts of the students.

Adichie reminds us, “Show people as one thing and one thing only over and over again and that is what they become.” That is the consequence of the single story. With this idea in mind, I asked students to reflect on our stories as Muslims as we viewed Adichie’s TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*. As they watched, I asked them to answer the following question: What is a single story? After the talk ended, I asked them what the single story represented. The students understood it as a stereotype. Once they understood the basis of what a single story meant, they watched it again and filled out a listening comprehension worksheet. Then they gathered into small groups to share their thoughts.

After much free-form discussion, I asked the students to reflect on the idea of the single story and write a personal response. When the students came back with their personal responses a week later, I asked them to highlight their favorite part of their response. I again asked students to gather into small groups of two to four to share their highlighted part and any other ideas. This was a work in progress, and is still a work in progress as we continue thinking with our stories even today.

Imagining Counterstories

At this point, I realized that we all needed to step outside the dominant and deficit stories and turn our attention toward the counterstories emerging in the students’ stories of their own lives. Nelson (1995) describes counterstories as “narratives of resistance and insubordination that allow communities of choice to challenge and revise the paradigm stories the ‘found’ communities in which they are embedded” (p. 24).

Discussing this concept with the students, we acknowledged that we had to challenge the story the world had scripted for us and “imagine other possibilities, restoring our own and our relational stories” (Huber et al., 2003, p. 344). To guide their work, I asked the students to consider three questions:

1. How can we change the story of what a Muslim is?
2. What do we need to do to change these stories and highlight the diversity of Muslims?
3. How can we challenge the negative single stories of Muslims?

What came next astounded me. The students wanted to create a new mind map in response to my original question “What is the story of a Muslim?” They came up with “Muslims: Version 2.0 in Real Life” as the students decided to co-create their own counterstory.

The picture that illustrates the outcome of their thoughts is labeled “AFTER.” This time, however, students brainstormed the words: peaceful, disciplined, modest, diverse and of course, misunderstood.

These mind maps were a way for the students to map out their understanding of, and resistance to, the dominant narrative. The maps are symbolic of their tensions and negotiations with the single dominant story of Muslims against their lived stories as Muslims. Through their “counterstory” they were imagining possibilities to (re)shape their communities and world(s) as they felt increasingly empowered to re-enter and reclaim full control of their narratives and challenge the negative single stories of Muslims.



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Figure 3 This canvas represents the danger of single stories that students have learned to internalize and accept as a dominant narrative.

(Re)Presenting Counterstories

The students wanted to narratively repair, empower, and humanize Muslims by disrupting the dominant story and constructing their own stories. In the midst of becoming, they created their own personal counterstory constructions through different mediums. Words do not do justice in describing their manifold mediums of expression, but hopefully the images below and throughout this article give a sense of their beautiful resolve.



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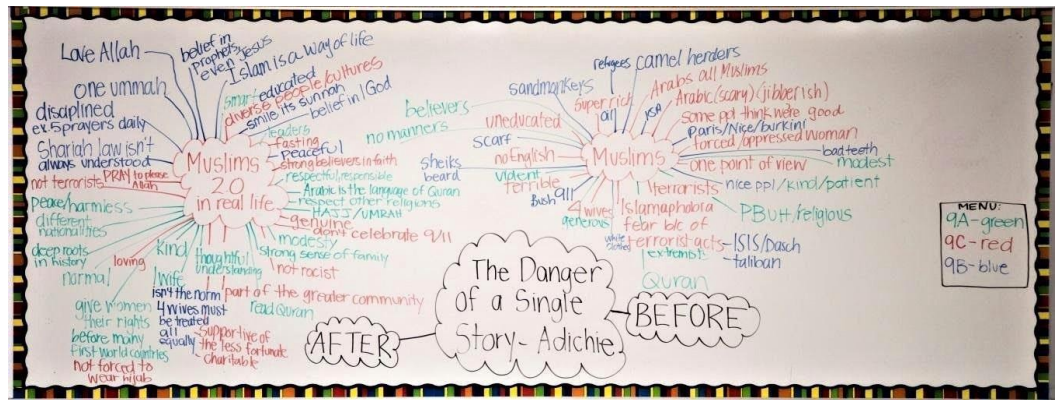


Figure 4 The whiteboard illustrates the thought process of the students before and after watching Adichie's (2009) "The Danger of a Single Story."

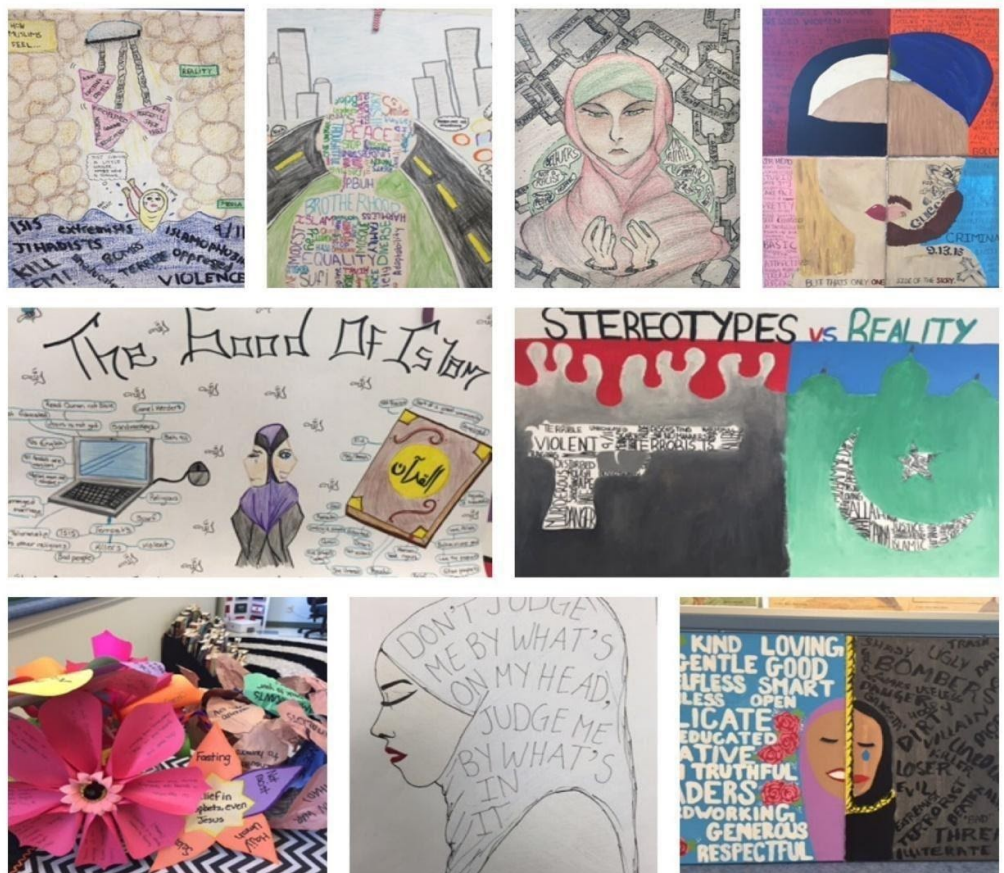


Figure 5 Their counterstories through different mediums.



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PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

Amplifying our Voices and Stories

On this landscape, I hope like my sister, Muna Saleh, that “educators, researchers, and community members from within and across Muslim and other Canadian communities...will listen to, foreground, and amplify our voices rather than presuming to speak to, about, and/or for us” (Saleh, 2019, p. 288). But how do we do this?



Figure 6 This mural symbolizes the need to amplify the voices of young Muslims rather than presuming to speak to, about, and/or for them.

It is important to articulate and increase understanding to amplify the voices of Muslim youth and children by providing mirrors as well as windows and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). As educators, it is also important to be mindful about single stories of the Muslim experience. In literature, Muslims are usually only seen in the context of Islamic communities, rather than in cross-cultural spaces, intersections, and interactions. It is important that Islam is portrayed as a natural part of a child’s life rather than some exotic and foreign religion. We should represent Islam as it exists in the life of most Muslims, as only one part of their multi layered identity; because what is excluded is often as telling as what is included.

What I take away from this profound experience is that as an educator, I am learning as I co-compose my own being while living a curriculum with students through which we are each continuously in a process of becoming. As I have traveled alongside students, I have experienced their deep acknowledgment that there are no single stories and their openness to world travel. I wonder, in the broader social contexts where the students are also composing their lives, if the people with whom they interact are also seeking to move beyond single stories of them and to travel to their multiple and diverse worlds.



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Q & A WITH AMANAH ELJAJI

Question #1

Teacher's Question

You teach at an Islamic school. To what extent do you think the discussion within a public school setting might be less open? What advice would you give to teachers to provide space for Muslim students to provide counternarratives that reshape their worlds and the worlds of their non-Muslim peers?

Amanah Eljaji's Response

I believe that any discussion within a public school setting is possible. However, students will need a safe space to provide their own “counterstory” (Nelson, 1995, p.1) in order to reshape their worlds and the world around them. To create this safe space, I would suggest fellow teachers must create a culture of care, expand the “we,” and most importantly encourage yourself and your students to always wonder.

Create a culture of care: In almost all cultures that follow the Muslim faith, they have been taught to believe that “teacher knows best” (Noddings, 2005, p.3). Noddings (2005) reminds us then “it is part of our duty as teachers, then, to know and to use our knowledge to initiate the young into a community of knowing” (p.3). But, again, how?

Noddings (2005) recommends that you first “establish and maintain caring relations, and these relations exhibit an integrity that provides a foundation for everything a teacher and student do together” (p.4). For me, this begins with listening to our students and gaining their trust. When you create a space of ongoing relationship of care and trust, you have created a safe space where you can engage in a dialogue with students. It was through the two-way process of dialogue that my students and I were able to build a culture of care and that has been the reward that has enriched our community life.

Expand the “we”: Isn’t the goal of the curriculum to empower students to make the world a better place? In order to do this, we must continually reflect and wonder about how we will become “visionaries who question, analyze, reflect, critique, and engage in social action that leads toward a more equitable postmodern democracy for the twenty-first century” (Schwartz, 2015, p. 11).

As a teacher researcher, I am always learning how to expand the “we” to be inclusive of all students as I co-compose with my students because we are each continually becoming. It’s a fluid process which is unfinished. My guiding principle is to inquire and “to focus on experience and to follow where it leads” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 188) as I continue to meet students, families, teachers and administrators on “storied landscapes with a sense of wonder” (p. 228).

Wonder: I hope that my article resonates for a multiplicity of diverse individuals and communities, and also provides insights into how we might (re)shape our multiple worlds, not just Muslim youth. With that, I invite you to think and wonder alongside me as we imagine



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possibilities for (re)shaping our communities and world(s) (Lugones, 1987).

Question #2

Teacher's Question

How can we answer your sister's call to "foreground and amplify" Muslim voices rather than speak "about and/or for" Muslims, especially in classrooms with students from diverse religious backgrounds?

Amanah Eljaji's Response

My Muslim sister (and the editor of this special issue), Dr. Muna Saleh, hopes that "educators, researchers, and community members from within and across Muslim and other Canadian communities... will listen to, foreground, and amplify our voices rather than presuming to speak to, about, and/or for us" (Saleh, 2019, p. 329). But how do we do this? This task is very difficult but important. I believe it's important to articulate and increase understanding to amplify the voices of Muslim youth and children. I would like to share with you what being in the midst alongside my students has taught me.

Provide many mirrors as well as windows for Muslim children and youth: It is vital that we provide many mirrors for children and youth to see themselves as well as windows through which other diverse worlds can be viewed. Rudine Bishop (1990) asserted, "when children cannot find themselves reflected... or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part." This lesson has reverberated for not just Muslims but many marginalized groups who unsuccessfully look for "mirrors" to see themselves.

Be wakeful of single stories of the Muslim experience: Even the most well-intentioned educators can practice unintentional discrimination (Neito, 2000) when there is a lack of discussion about differences. Therefore, it is important to be wakeful about single stories of the Muslim experience. It is important that Islam is portrayed as one part of a child's multi-faceted identity because what is excluded is often as telling as what is included. In the words of Adichie (2009), we must remember that "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."

Foster religious literacy: While today's classrooms are increasingly religiously diverse, this is often not addressed in classrooms and schools. This silence may be because, as educators, we may be unsure about how to approach the task, be uncomfortable with the idea, or do not believe that it is necessary. However, I resonate with Green and Oldendorff's (2005) assertion that "If we want children to feel safe and cared for at school and if we want to respect their families' hopes and beliefs, it is important that we know about their deepest convictions and values" (p. 210), which includes religion. However, this does mean teaching religion but rather of teaching about different religions, faiths, and spiritualities.



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Encourage world traveling: I cannot change the world, but I hope to “change human beings who might change the world” as Maxine Greene beautifully states by encouraging them to world travel and expecting myself to world travel as well. Only when we have traveled to each other’s ‘worlds’ are we “fully subjects to each other” (Lugones, 1987) and only when we are subject to each other, can we make the intention to remain “wide awake” (Greene, 1995).

Question #3

Teacher’s Question

Do you recommend of any specific resources that function as counterstories to single stories of Islam and Muslims for different age groups?

Amanah Eljaji’s Response

The resource that I would recommend to start a journey to counter single stories of Islam and Muslims is the Kitaab World website at <https://kitaabworld.com/>. In January, 2017, they launched a “Counter Islamophobia Through Stories” campaign to change the stories and misinformation about Muslims. They have compiled a list of 45 books to provide multiple opportunities to engage with stories that reflect the diversity of the Muslim experience. In no way is this list comprehensive of all the literature of Islam and Muslims, but it is a starting point that offers a way to start conversations about diversity and create a sense of belonging and respect.

Question #4

Teacher’s Question

What is Bishop’s (1990) concept of “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors?” Would it be possible to elaborate on this point?

Amanah Eljaji’s Response

Rudine Bishop (1990) wrote:

“Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books” (p. ix).

Sims Bishop discussed how we need diverse books in which children can see reflections of themselves — but also look through and see other worlds. She used the phrase “Windows, Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors” as a metaphor to explain how children see themselves in



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books as one sees their reflection in a mirror. In addition to acting as mirrors, literature can also serve as windows that readers can look through. This provides an opening onto worlds beyond their own as they get a glimpse into the lives and experiences of others. While the sliding door also allows readers to travel into the world, whether real or imagined, and encounter all that it has to offer. As educators, we have the critical task of making sure our students have access to books in our classrooms and libraries that serve as both windows and mirrors. This YouTube video offers a wonderful explanation from Sims Bishop herself: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AAu58SNSyc

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