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Supporting Muslim Students Through Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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My place of birth is Beirut, Lebanon and I moved to Canada 20 years ago. I am currently teaching in the Peel region in Ontario and pursuing my Doctoral studies at Brock University, Ontario. I desire to foster a learning environment that recognizes the diversity of students, builds on their abilities, and provides equitable opportunities and outcomes. These goals drive my studies that explore how Muslim students conceptualize their identity in Canadian schools. At a professional level, I have been focusing on shared narratives among teachers and their relevance for engaging in self-reflective practices. I believe that one way to humanize our classroom experiences is to examine our own biases and take steps to minimize them so that our students are empowered to make become agents of change.

I am a parent of 4 amazing children who never cease to inspire me through their experiences and stories. I love reading and travelling. My home country remains my favourite place to visit despite all the hardship that Lebanon endures. The smells, sounds and memories of my homeland remain the cornerstone of my personal, academic, and professional journeys

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INTRODUCTION

For some, the ongoing reverberations of 9/11 reduced all Muslims to a single entity, thereby portraying them as the enemy. This stereotype reflects long-held assumptions that the Orient is profoundly different from the West (E. Said, 2003; E. W. Said, 1978). Further, the

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world's political climate and media portrayals have advanced a justification for bias against Muslims (Singh, 2016). These factors, including a lack of adequate immersive experiences for pre-service teachers to engage with religious and cultural diversity, have contributed to the delegitimization of some Muslim students' voices (Ali-Khan, 2014; Guo & Tan, 2014; Zine, 2000, 2004). Teaching practices from a Eurocentric perspective impact Muslim students' school experiences by accentuating an alternative understanding of inclusion and diversity (Ali-Khan, 2014; Banks et al., 2001; Zine, 2000, 2004). This understanding might employ a celebratory approach that praises multiculturalism as an implicit form of assimilation (Moss & Colman, 2001; Sensoy et al., 2010; Stevens et al., 2019). This approach shifts narratives surrounding equitable opportunities on Muslim students and their degrees of conformity by focusing on grit and resilience (Gorski & Pothini, 2014; Hammond & Jackson, 2015).

In school, students have the chance to compare traits that vary from shared racial or ethnic heritage to shared religion or language, which often reveals valued dominant social norms (Hudley & Irving, 2012; Wigfield et al., 2015).Henceforth, educators must be aware that even thoughts and perceptions can translate into microaggressions that undermine Muslim students' backgrounds and lived experiences. A re-conceptualization of diversity and inclusion should ensure that Muslim students do not experience exclusion that erodes the significance of their diverse backgrounds and lived experiences. This article proposes an approach to Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP) through Collaborative Inquiry (CI), to help educators approach diversity as a guiding principle acknowledging the varied narratives Muslim students bring to the classroom.

THE RESEARCH

Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP)

Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP) (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010) is based on the conceptualization of Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995a; 1995b) Culturally relevant pedagogy and Geneva Gay's (2002) Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy recognizes culturally and linguistically diverse students' rights in attaining high academic achievement while upholding their cultural identities (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). Similarly, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy encourages educators to put students from diverse backgrounds' social and academic well-being at the forefront of the learning process (Gay, 2002; Samuels, 2018). Both frameworks emphasize learning experiences that allow students to draw on their backgrounds as a source of knowledge (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011; Rychly & Graves, 2012). CRRP employs these two frameworks to remove barriers that hinder diverse students' involvement in learning by emphasizing the crucial role of their backgrounds (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010).

Collaborative Inquiry

Breaking down barriers requires educators to critically reflect on the values they intend to adopt and the experiences they envision for their students in their classrooms. (Ham-

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mond & Jackson, 2015). Through Collaborative Inquiry (CI), educators recreate knowledge within communities of practice that support them in leveraging their students' unique backgrounds and competencies (Ainscow, 2012; Arkhipenka et al., 2018; DeLuca et al., 2015; Wenger, 1998). Consequently, an engagement in CI help promotes CRRP by building upon students' lived experiences, family/ community engagement, and cultural/religious knowledge, which may eventually assist teachers in restructuring practices that enhance students' authentic engagement.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

Reflecting on Practices to Challenge Normative Views

Teachers' involvement in a CI necessitates the critical examination of normative approaches to teaching by acknowledging students' diverse bodies of knowledge. CRRP prompts teachers to question their practices and admitt to the power relations manifested in school experiences (Delpit, 2006). Therefore, part of the teachers' CRRP practices within the CI approach is to constantly reflect on biases and assumptions they may hold. These reflections present opportunities to address the power dynamics contributing to distorted understandings surrounding Muslims. For example, teachers should be aware of how the dichotomous nature of the terms "us" and "them" serve to isolate Muslim students, and explore with their students how these terms may contain an underlying prejudice that may alienate Muslim students. Educators should also integrate the socio-political contexts of their students' lives into classroom discussions (Maged, 2014). These contexts could serve as a vehicle in which students learn to exercise critical objective thinking and recognize implicit/explicit prejudice (Moss & Colman, 2001; Samuels, 2018). In relation, teachers should take a stand on issues such as Islamophobia, particularly if the topic is discussed in class. For some Muslim students, being neutral may imply conformity with the discriminatory gaze (Gorski & Pothini, 2014). Teachers should not be afraid of rendering Islamophobia visible through active listening and facilitating meaningful reflections of the stories shared in class. Valenzuela (1999) presents the idea of authentic caring that serves the purpose of engaging restorative interpersonal relationships and the recognition of other people's dignity and their freedom to co-exist within the society. Notably, storytelling can help students express their emotions and bring their peers' awareness to their perspective (Chaux et al., 2008). Further, when they describe their own stories, students demonstrate a sense of authorship, making them more likely to present their viewpoints (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010).

Cultivating CRRP also relies on educators' continuous provision of a supportive, responsive environment that encourages families to share their knowledge (Henderson et al., 2020; Hoover & Erickson, 2015). Educators could use this knowledge to incorporate aspects of Muslim students' backgrounds into the classroom, including books, artwork, and pictures. Teachers can invite families to share meaningful stories about religious and cultural traditions such as fasting in Ramadan or celebrating Eid. By looking beyond the basic knowledge, students, teachers, and parents reflect on the wisdom underlying traditions and rituals.

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When teachers commit to the CRRP through CI, their practices and philosophies are always subject to revision and exploration, thus redefining the relationship between a teacher and student in a way that values and validates the diverse backgrounds of Muslim students. Thus, teachers should cultivate humility by acknowledging their privileges and attempting to create holistic approaches that foster social justice and include all students' unique experiences, including Muslim students (Cho, 2017; Diangelo & Sensoy, 2014; Reid, 2017). As Lisa Delpit (1998) notes, "teachers would realize that suddenly, many of the 'sensible' ways of doing things no longer seemed acceptable" (p. 73). Crucially, teachers need to remember that creating a classroom environment where students feel free to express themselves takes patience and perseverance.

Capitalizing on Prior Knowledge and Aspects of Identities

Teachers' validation of students from diverse backgrounds reflects pedagogical practices that carefully consider aspects of their identities and encourage students to share cultural scripts that speak of belonging and recognition (Kirova, 2010; Trawick-Smith et al., 2015). Students construct knowledge from various sources including cultural scripts, such as traditions, heritage, and rituals, to make sense of their environment (L. L. Katz, 1991). Hence, teachers should exercise critical awareness towards the "symbolic curriculum" that devalues what is not represented (Gay, 2002, p.108) and tailor the learning experience to mediate academic content with Muslim students' backgrounds. For example, students can share their personal views on specific terms, concepts or themes, which can open up lively class discussions that foster shared traditions and customs (Rodríguez et al., 2004). In addition, educators can articulate the significance of different disciplines and how they are reflected in the works of Muslim figures.In Science and Math subjects, teachers can discuss with students how Muslim scientists laid the foundations for numerous concepts and the significance of seeking knowledge from various perspectives. As part of this discussion, teachers and students can discover how they might go beyond merely achieving outcomes by redefining learning objectives and exploring the personal relevance of knowledge. Through this framework, Muslim students could make meaningful connections to the content of the academic curriculum while also acknowledging their backgrounds.Muslim students would gain a deeper appreciation of their learning environment that recognizes and fosters their voices. Relatedly, in English language arts, stories about Muslims from different backgrounds could serve as a backdrop for text analysis that reveals othering themes. Through reading literary texts that use teacher-prompts and engaging students in narrative thinking, students can re-evaluate their existing values by renegotiating their power relations and examining how they compare to their Muslim peers (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010).

Ultimately, CRRP does not attempt to create harmony, but rather disrupts homogeneity to recreate new meanings of diversity. When classroom relations are governed by non-hierarchical relationships, differing perspectives emerge, and students may articulate these differences through interruptions. Thus, the teacher must be ready to accommodate for flexible interactions that maintain respectful boundaries and empower Muslim students to advocate for their representations.

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CONCLUSION

When schools are part of a network that acknowledges Muslim students, this reduces the risk of alienation; teachers can support building bridges that minimize fear between different groups of society and secure safe routes of connection and continuity. Accordingly, CRRP, through a CI approach, can address the development of practices that would ensure an active engagement of Muslim students in their learning experiences. Such practices would help educators understand their students' backgrounds and mobilize educational strategies that appreciate and recognize diversity as an asset. Ultimately, respect and recognition could have a ripple effect that extends beyond school walls and help Muslim families in the process of negotiating their identities and asserting their presence within their surroundings.

Q & A WITH NISREEN ALAMEDDINE

Question #1

Teacher's Question

You write that "teachers should cultivate humility by acknowledging their privileges and attempting to create holistic approaches that foster social justice and include all students' unique experiences, including Muslim students." This resonates for me, but what are some practical examples for how I could do this in my classroom?

Nisreen Alameddine's Response

Diangelo and Sensoy (2014) propose three practical strategies teachers can use in their classrooms to cultivate humility:

1) **Silence breakers**: This strategy promotes open discussions that otherwise might be silenced or considered taboo. "Breaking the silence" facilitates critical questioning and humbleness in the process of examining perspectives from different vantage points (p. 192).

We can use this strategy effectively by seeking opportunities to connect the curriculum content, when possible, with the socio-political context and world events that situate Muslim students in unfavorable conditions. Some of the topics, such as prejudice, rights, and equitable representations, are integrated into the Social Studies, Language and Visual Arts subjects at the very least. These academic subjects serve as a vessel to break the silence and address some of the narratives surrounding Muslims. For example, in the light of the recent vote to ban hijab in France, I took this opportunity to discuss how can such vote exclude some Muslim women who willingly wear the head covering.

2) **Analogies**: By using analogies in classrooms, teachers depart from a binary paradigm that obligates students to "agree/disagree" (p. 192). Such a strategy helps students and educators go beyond the conventional answers by linking relevant scenarios to broader social issues that require students and teachers to examine them from different perspectives.

I have personally used an analogy similar to the "mattress analogy" (p. 197) suggested by the authors in one of my science classes. I was covering the concept of gravity and explain-

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ing to my students how astronauts experience gravity on board of the International Space Station in a different way than we do on Earth. When these astronauts come back to Earth, it takes time for them to readjust physiologically, and they experience some discomfort. However, this discomfort indicates that their physiological system is adjusting to Earth gravity, which is important for their well-being. In a similar manner, when we gain new understandings that make our biases or assumptions visible, it can be uncomfortable, but we should embrace this discomfort as an avenue to validate other people's viewpoints, which ultimately paves the way for the well-being of our communities.

3) **Vignettes**: By applying vignettes, teachers can use stories that students can relate to by placing them in the role of the protagonist (p. 198). In this way, students take on the role of the "other" and look at the world through their eyes. Such strategies open up avenues of inquiry that have not previously been explored, while also instilling essential interpersonal and empathetic skills.

Role-playing based on stories or books that teachers strategically choose, places students in multiple social positions that allow them to discover unfamiliar situations (Fischer & Laan, 2002). Language and performing arts subjects are excellent mediums that could provide an authentic experience in which students fully engage in perspective-taking that tackles discrimination, racism, and marginalization. Role-playing could create an internal conflict as students confront their biases. Subsequently, they might seek to resolve this conflict by seeking to understand their peers' point of view better.

Question #2

Teacher's Question

What are some resources you recommend to teachers to learn more about Muslim innovations and histories so we may integrate them into our lessons?

Nisreen Alameddine's Response

Below is a list of resources that include some books and websites that I have used to start up discussions and prompt students to relate their academic content with their contexts:

- The Toronto District School Board developed a guidebook for educators to celebrate Islamic heritage every October as recognized by the Government of Canada. The guide offers practical ideas and resources that can be easily incorporated in schools and classrooms: https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/docs/IHMResourceGuidebook-UPDATES%26REVISIONS.pdf
- This link contains a list of resources compiled by the Ontario Ministry of Education for educators to address Islamophobia: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/memos/feb2017/Resources-for-Teachers-Anti-Racism-and-Islamophobia.pdf
- This website provides educators with classroom resources they can integrate into their lessons. I personally have used the book "1001 Inventions: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Civilization" (Al-Hassani, 2012) in lessons: https://www.1001inventions.com

- The Challenge Islamophobia Project is based in the United States. I find it very useful and have adapted many of the topics for my classroom discussions: https://www.challengeislamophobia.org
- The American Institute of Physics offers two lesson plans that cover topics in kinematics and feature Muslim scientists: https://www.aip.org/taxonomy/term/9111
- "1001 Inventions: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Civilization" (Al-Hassani, 2012)
- Traveling Man: The Journey of Ibn Battuta (Rumford, 2004)
- The Amazing Discoveries of Ibn Sina (Sharafeddine, 2015)
- The Genius of Islam: How Muslims Made the Modern World (Barnard, 2013)

Question #3

Teacher's Question

I am having difficulty imagining what Collaborative Inquiry (CI) looks like. Can you describe the step-by-step process you've used successfully?

Nisreen Alameddine's Response

First, it is important to acknowledge that by reading articles, reflecting on the knowledge shared, sharing personal perspectives, and seeking clarifications, teachers are already showing genuine engagement in CI.

A common theme in the various frameworks that describe (CI) is that it is a cyclical process that involves defining an area of focus, facilitating the implementation of an intervention, and assessing the impact (Nelson & Slavit, 2008). As defined by Donohoo (2011), the process of (CI) consists of the following steps:

1. **Identifying your focus**: For example, the topic of interest may be validating Muslim student voices by using Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy.
2. **Gathering and analyzing information**: By observing classrooms, communicating with parents and educators, conversing with students, exploring readings, and connecting with members of the community, teachers approach an understanding of their students' backgrounds and experiences.
3. **Action on the new knowledge**: Based on their encounters and collective understanding, the teachers devise a plan of action and implement strategies that validate Muslim students' representations.
4. **Sharing knowledge**: Teachers recreate and share new forms of understanding that impact their practices and the student-teacher relationship. They would do so in a manner that acknowledges and values the voice of their students.

Reflecting on these steps, some important aspects of (CI) that I always include in my professional practice include:

- Engaging with communities of practice, including my co-workers, professionals, and community members that share knowledge and provide opportunities to reflect, supports my efforts to implement responsive classroom practices (S. Katz et al., 2009; Lave, 1991).
- In order to cultivate a safe atmosphere in my classroom, I consult with these communities and connect with families to leverage their insights.
- When employing pedagogical strategies, I consider the diversity of my students and whether these strategies are relevant to my students. I ask myself: Do my assumptions matter and what impact do they make?
- Humanizing my learning and those of my students allows me to accept my mistakes and reflect on them meaningfully to adjust my practices so that they respect the diverse identities and backgrounds of my students.
- I reflect critically on my practices because of their nonlinear nature. Admitting that these practices are not merely the application of logical methods and steps helps me to recognize that they involve intuition and emotions.

Question #4

Teacher's Question

What do you recommend reading so that I can learn more about Collaborative Inquiry (CI) in the classroom? Are there any action research studies about this?

Nisreen Alameddine's Response

In formulating my understanding about action research through Co-creation CI, I have found the following readings to be very helpful. Most of these articles provide analysis of teachers' experiences and perspectives along with the barriers they encounter to cultivate CI.

I recommend Ainscow et al.'s (2012) article, Using collaborative inquiry to foster equity within school systems; Bray's (2002) article, Uniting teacher learning; Carroll's (2009) article Chartered Teachers and the process of professional inquiry; Cunningham's (2011) book *Improving Teaching with Collaborative Action Research;* Deppeler and Ainscow's (2016) article, Using inquiry-based approaches for equitable school improvement; DeLuca et al.'s (2015) article Collaborative inquiry as a professional learning structure for educators; Goodnough's (2016) article, Professional Learning of K-6 Teachers in Science Through Collaborative Action Research.

Additionally, the following links provide frameworks that guide a practical approach towards implementing CI using a systematic process:

- Collaborative Inquiry in Ontario (2014): http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS_CollaborativeInquiry.pdf
- Collaborative Inquiry: A Facilitator's Guide (Donohoo, 2011): http://misalondon.ca/PDF/collabpdfs/Collaborative_Inquiry_Guide_2011.pdf

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- A Facilitator's Guide to Collaborative Inquiry (2012): http://thelearningexchange.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/limestoneCollaborativeInquiryFacilitatorsGuide.pdf

Question #5

Teacher's Question

What are some examples of literature that we can use in our classrooms to highlight the diversity of Muslims?

Nisreen Alameddine's Response

The following books portray a small glimpse of the diversity that encompasses Muslims. All of the books except "The Beekeeper of Aleppo" are suitable for elementary school students. Topics range from Muslims celebrating their heritage and traditions to Islamophobia and the refugee/immigrant experience. These books speak of belonging, identity, pain, solidarity, but above all, strength that transcends peripheral descriptions of Muslims. The focus of teacher-led discussions needs to shift away from the pain narrative in order for these themes to be explicit and allow Muslim students to speak of their personal backgrounds and experiences.

- Muhiima's Quest (Rodaah, 2017)
- Nadia's Hands (English, 1999)
- The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family (Muhammad, 2019)
- The Grand Mosque of Paris: A Story of How Muslims Rescued Jews During the Holocaust (Ruelle, 2010)
- The Beekeeper of Aleppo: A Novel (Lefteri, 2019)
- Once Upon an Eid: Stories of Hope and Joy by 15 Muslim Voices
- The Turtle of Oman (Shihab Nye, 2016)
- Other Words for Home (Warga,2019)
- My Name was Hussein (Kyuchukov, 2004)
- Rickshaw Girl (Perkins, 2008)
- Four Feet, Two Sandals (Williams, Mohammed & Chayka, 2007)
- My Name Is Bilal (Mobin-Uddin, 2005)
- Moon Watchers: Shirin's Ramadan Miracle (Jalali, 2017)

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