This book is a collection of readable, accessible, compelling, varied, voiced, passionate, real, textured, multi-faceted, hybrid, fearless, fearful, cautious, bold, modest, and inspired accounts of living Islam in relation to mainstream schooling in the West. The book helps to make the diverse experiences of Muslim students (from elementary through university, student through professor) both contextual and complex. The politics and education about Islam, Muslims, Arabs, Turks, Iranians and all that is associated with the West’s popular imagination of the monolithic “Middle-East” has long been framed within problematics. The goal of this book is to push back against the reductive mainstream narratives told about Muslim and Middle Eastern heritage students for generations if not centuries, in mainstream schools. The chapters are each authored by Muslim-acculturated scholars. This book will be of interest to teachers, administrators, students and scholars. As well, the content is suited to fields of study including ethnic studies, critical multicultural education, anti-oppression approaches to education, curriculum studies, social issues in education, social contexts of education, and qualitative research in education.

Cover photography by Mariam Manna, age 12.
MUSLIM VOICES IN SCHOOL
Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education

Volume 52

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Scope
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative.

The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

With an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity—youth identity in particular—the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfulfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
MUSLIM VOICES IN SCHOOL

Narratives of Identity and Pluralism

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FOR JOE
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INTRODUCTION

Voice & Other Acts of Insubordination

I’m also troubled by, not what Senator McCain says, but what members of the party say. And it is permitted to be said such things as, “Well, you know that Mr. Obama is a Muslim.” Well, the correct answer is, he is not a Muslim, he’s a Christian. He’s always been a Christian. But the really right answer is, what if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer’s no, that’s not America. Is there something wrong with some seven-year-old Muslim-American kid believing that he or she could be president? Yet, I have heard senior members of my own party drop the suggestion, “He’s a Muslim and he might be associated with terrorists.” This is not the way we should be doing it in America…I’m troubled about the fact that, within the party, we have these kinds of expressions.

Former Secretary of State Gen. Colin Powell, Oct 16, 2008, Meet the Press

There was a time in my life as an educator when I did not speak about politics and education. It was my most naïve moment…For me, now I say that education is politics. Today, I say education has the quality of being politics, which shapes the learning process. Education is politics and politics has educability.

Paulo Freire, 1986. p. 61

“Contrary to what a lot of people think,” Jimmy Yan told me when I called him to discuss the case, “most of the racism in our society happens to the most vulnerable members in our public schools.”

Moustafa Bayoumi, 2008, p. 109

Politics and schools are inexorably intertwined. The politics and education about Islam, Muslims, Arabs, Turks, Iranians and all that is associated with the West’s popular imagination of the monolithic “Middle-East” has long been framed within problematics. In schools, we, as other non-powerblocs (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997), are a problem.

In How Does it feel to be a Problem Moustafa Bayoumi tells the story of Yasmin, a young, smart, Muslim girl of Arab and Filipino heritage. Yasmin lives in Brooklyn, struggling, perhaps more appropriately fighting her way through the high school public school system. Her simple desire to join the student governance, with her platform of “I’m here to help you” (p. 89) is at first embraced by her peers, but when it becomes clear that her faith requires some accommodation for her performance of her elected duties (she offers to set up and clean up for the school dance but on religious grounds can not participate) she is dismissed from her elected position by each level of the school’s institutional brain trust. In brief, to the school structure, she is a problem.
We are (as are and were others) a problem. Playing with Canadian and U.S. collective memory, Waubageshig (1974) titles his book *The Only Good Indian* tempting his reader to complete the sentence with U.S. Civil War General Philip Henry Sheridan’s reputed sentiment, “…is a dead Indian.” Ward Churchill’s (2004) book *Kill The Indian Save the Man* confronts the sentiments of indifference in Canada and the U.S., institutionally and interpersonally, to the residential school era and its legacy. Bayoumi’s (2008) Brooklyn hookah café Arab-American participant naively and incorrectly remarks “We’re the new blacks … You know that, right?” (p. 2); and when this perspective is juxtaposed against popular Aaron McGruder’s (2001) *The Boondocks* cartoon, “We’re number three! We’re number three!” in the context of a *Newsweek* article stating that Arabs and people presumed to be from the Middle East (read: brown) now superseded Black Americans as the most hated racial group, it is difficult to ignore the triangulation at work among: people of the Middle East, other “others,” and the racialized and now globally-situated vocabulary of violent, evil, foe, problem. It wasn’t long ago that U.S. General William Boykin described his combat in Somalia in a biblical good versus evil trope, popularly stating (and subsequently amending) that while in pursuit of his self described Muslim foe, “I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol.” From the Crusades to Gulf War 2, we, as that diverse group of people that represents the West’s *Islamic World*, whether “over there” or “right here” and “home grown” are a problem, and perhaps nowhere does this problem discourse play out more intricately than in schools and other non-formal locations of education.

Muslim youth in the West wherever they are on the continuum of secular to orthodox, continue to struggle in negotiating intersecting, and sometimes dissecting, meanings of self– their religion, race, ethnicity, culture, way of life, community and knowledge. This struggle occurs alongside the current War on Terror political climate, the multitude of media entertainment images (Shaheen, 1984, 1991, 2001) a news media (FAIR, 2001) and a schooling system (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004) that consistently and systematically represents a homogenous and myopic Islamic faith, Muslim culture and people. The 2005 riots in France in which Muslim youth were predominantly positioned as perpetrators, the outrage and protests of Muslims regarding the Danish *Jyllands-Posten*’s publication of demeaning caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed, the banning of hijabs in schools, the denial of Muslim prayer spaces at universities, the continued detainments and implications of terror intents about countless Muslim young men in North America, and other incidences that so widely sanction the debasing of human rights and human dignity have left non-Muslims confused, angry, and poorly informed about their fellow citizens, while once again reducing all Muslims to being defined by a media that allow no diversity of voice, no understanding of context, nor space for complexity.

With this book, we seek to advocate the use of “counterstory” narratives (Nelson, 2001) utilized to empower and repair damaged group and individual identities that emerge from dominant-group constructs of Muslim people. Our goal is to push back against the reductive mainstream “stories” that have been told about
INTRODUCTION

us for generations if not centuries, in mainstream schools (al-Qazzaz, 1975; Said, 1979; Suleiman, 1977, 1983; NAAA, 1980; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2006; Sensoy, 2007; Stonebanks, 2008) and in media (Ghareeb, 1983; Said, 1997; Shaheen, 1984, 1991, 1997, 2001; Stonebanks, 2008; Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2007; Steet, 2000; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004). The chapters are authored by Muslim acculturated authors, and tell a multitude of experiences about Muslim student experiences in Western schools. Through this collection, we hope that non-Muslim readers will have an opportunity to read a diversity of perspectives about Muslim experiences. We expect these counter-narratives to facilitate the repair of damaging, hegemonic narratives that have permeated the Western dominant consciousness and collective memory (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). Through the sharing of these more diverse, contextual, and complex stories, these chapters become “…narrative acts of insubordination” (Nelson, 2001, p. 8).

But enough about you, let me tell you about me…


We began this book with the intention of gathering readable, accessible, compelling, varied, voiced, passionate, real, textured, multi-faceted, hybrid, fearless, fearful, cautious, bold, modest, and inspired accounts of living Islam in relation to mainstream schooling in the West. We believe that the authors of these chapters represent these qualities, and that the collection together helps to make the diverse experiences of Muslim students both contextual and complex. Our intention is that MVS be a “handbook.” Each of the twelve chapters can be used separately, or alongside of other readings referenced with discussion questions at the end of each chapter. The book is organized chronologically from elementary through university experiences of Muslim students. In chapter 1, Mona Abo-Zena, Barbara Sahli, and Christina Safiya Tobias-Nahi describe the narrative experiences of Muslim students participating in an essay contest about courage. We say without shame that our favourite passage in the whole of this book is written by sixth grader, Osama who writes, “Imagine having a meeting with the President of the United States. Would you be late? Of course not. Well I had a meeting with the Creator of the Universe…you wouldn’t want to miss that meeting.” The authors share Osama’s and other Muslim students’ stories of courage, and offer a nuanced analysis of how these students navigate stereotypes, post-9/11 fears and other dynamics of school and social life.

In chapter 2, Shaza Khan offers us a glimpse in to the lives of adolescent Muslims involved in a youth program. Through her interviews and conversations with these students, Khan describes the complex set of challenges that youth face as Muslim students attending predominantly non-Muslim schools in the U.S. Khan writes, “Crisis has often been thought of as a central aspect of adolescence and identity formation. For Muslim American youth, there have been systemic efforts to locate the crux of their crisis in the “clash of cultures” which is perceived to be inherent in their backgrounds as practicing members of the Islamic faith and residents of a democratic and secular United States.” Khan’s discussion gives a
sense of the breadth and depth of mainstream school ignorance about the lives and experiences of Muslim students, and also the strategies many Muslim students adopt to cope with these challenges.

In chapter 3, Seema Imam continues the theme of ignorance of Muslim student life by pulling front and center, and examining, the discourse of separation of church and state in relation to schools. Imam catalogues some of the central and persistent aspects of the school curriculum (both the formal and informal curricula of schools). Her chapter gives us a sense of the volume of dominant societal messages that Muslim youth must navigate. Imam writes, “[M]any schools still tell Muslim parents that “we” cannot cover religion because “we” observe separation of church and state … In interviews, the participants shared stories about how they themselves or their children were deeply involved in the religious activities of other faiths while in school, in spite of the discourse about the separation of church and state [such as] …Children are asked to sing Christmas songs including religious ones for assemblies; Children were required to make Christmas tree decorations and take them home for their own Christmas trees.” The detailed account that Imam offers gives readers a cogent sense of the prevalence and endurance of Christianity and Christian-privilege in school culture.

In chapter 4, Nawell Mossalli gives us a deep look in to the life of a Muslim teenager in small town, adding “voice to the cold statistics,” as Mossalli puts it. In addition to Rana’s story, Mossali describes the various school-based experiences of other Muslim students such as fifth-grader Hashim who is forced to repeatedly contest to his classmates that they didn’t just ride camels in his home country, or of Kareem, a second grader, who has a piece of ham waved in his face by his teacher, arguing “it’s not going to bite him!” These stories while easily dismissed as isolated incidences, as a collective become difficult to ignore. Rana’s story invites readers to examine the question, if Rana is successful as a “typical” American teen, at what cost was this success achieved? A sobering question, and one that demands our attention as educators working in pluralistic societies.

In chapter 5, Özlem Sensoy investigates the construction of “textbook Muslims” in school settings. It is well-known in critical education circles that in the absence of personal experiences with groups who are different from oneself, our primary source of education about “others” is the school curriculum and media. Sensoy examines the kind of education about Muslims that students will obtain if their only source of knowledge is the “textbook Muslim.” She offers this analysis alongside of mainstream discourses about Muslims (and those thought to be Muslims). She writes, “The images of textbook Muslims in this sample conveyed an overall sedentary nature of life among Muslims. This, in and of itself, may seem like a small point. However, I would argue that this type of depiction of sedentary-ness functions to uphold another familiar binary discourse in the West. “Rolling up one’s sleeves” to “get down to work” and “hammer out agreements” are more than metaphors. They are core elements to explaining mainstream Western experiences of advancement, progress, and modernity.” This chapter challenges us to consider what part of our knowledge about Muslims is actually knowledge about “textbook Muslims.”
Chapter 6 is Dalia al-Houseini’s personal account as an immigrant Canadian of Arab heritage. She discusses how school-based discourses influenced her self-image and self-concept as a Palestinian and Muslim Canadian. The chapter is organized in vignettes that unfold like scenes in a life narrative about identity negotiation and flux. Among the most compelling parts of the chapter is al-Houseini’s discussion of her experiences with other Brown students in her high school. She writes, “As I befriended the brown group, I felt more welcomed. We had more in common. I remember one of the first things I was ever told by them was that I was Brown. Sometimes we would joke that I was beige because I looked White, but my ethnicity was not White. We would always discuss diversity issues such as foods we have in common, similar traditions and similarities in language. We all felt that we shared tradition and a common experience of oppression. We never outright said to each other that race is playing a major factor in our friendship, perhaps no one had taught us the language to express what we all knew, but we would find other ways to communicate our feelings.” There are some profound lessons to be learned here about the value of fostering safe spaces for students with shared group identities to talk about, and develop the language to examine their racialized experiences.

Chapter 7 is about sexual orientation identity among Muslim students. Younes Mourchid offers us a detailed look at the experiences of the Muslim LGBTQ community by examining the narratives of gay and lesbian Muslim university students. The complexity represented in this chapter is deeply educative. As one of Mourchid’s participant’s says, “The ‘shit’ hit the fan with the events of 9/11 and my identity as a Muslim kid fossilized… I became associated with everything America was angry about… I began to distance myself from my religious identity and the baggage that came with it… I asked my parents to move somewhere else where no one knew we were Muslim… I just wanted my faith to be a private matter and question for me.” This stance is brought in to tension: as the events of 9/11 fuel unfavorable sentiments about Islam and Muslims, many young gay and lesbian Muslims who Mourchid writes about describe having to make sense of their sexual orientation identity within the framework of existing narratives about being gay in Islam and also post 9/11 narratives about Arab and Middle Eastern peoples.

In chapter 8, Shabana Mir offers us an analysis of three students navigating their personal and school-based experiences at university. The call for (or boasting about) a “diverse university student body” is not uncommon to those of us who work at universities. Mir examines how Muslim students negotiate being part of a “proper body politic,” which often means “White-majority-with-White-influenced-minorities.” Mir writes, “As students of higher education, it is essential for us to grapple with the difficult question of how minority students may preserve identities, while we seek to promote diversity and inter-racial and inter-cultural exchange on campuses.” Mir argues that such contexts can create circumstances that put minority students’ identities at risk. The stories of the three undergraduate women she recounts give insight in to how such risk manifests.
Chapter 9 is about navigating intersecting minoritized identities. Author Samaa Abdurraqib describes her experiences as a university student navigating what it means to be an African American Muslim woman. She discusses the complex intersections and readings of her body: as foreign, as Black, as other, and explores the marginalization of her body as Muslim. She captures this tension in this way, “When Islam is discussed in the classroom, the assumption is that I am not necessarily speaking from a position of knowledge or authority, and thus my experience of being Muslim and the knowledge that stems from that experience are not perceived as valid. On the other hand when race and Black-ness is discussed, I am immediately afforded a position of authority.” What are the effects, causes, and functions of the eclipsing of her Muslim identity and centralizing of her Black-ness? How and why this occurs is the topic of her essay.

In chapter 10, Carolyne Ali Khan offers us a creative essay that draws the reader closest in to what it might be like to “feel” the experience of being Muslim in the West. Her essay situated in her own school-based experiences (as student, as well as teacher) connects these experiences to mainstream discourses about Islam. She juxtaposes her own, personal, family-anchored education about Islam with the popular mainstream narratives. She writes, “‘What is that in your hand?’ Nothing Dad…just some leaves, from the bush.” “Let me see.” I opened my small hand. “Ah,” (my father sighed, shaking his head gently) “Look at how perfect even this tiny leaf is. Beautiful. That little plant in your hands was growing outside peacefully. It is one of God’s creations, just like you… It is not uncommon to open a Muslim newspaper (in Pakistan, Jordan and Egypt where I have lived) and find an article or photograph that expressly illustrates the connection between God and nature. In keeping with this, the Islam that I learned from my father, regards the sensual, (with the joys of food/drink, music, and love of nature), as a way to be respectful of God’s perfection as it is mirrored in a rich world. I have yet to see a representation of Muslims as embodied and sensual beings in the news or in school curriculum in the U.S.” Ali Khan’s essay embodies what it means to navigate hybrid spaces for Muslim students.

In chapter 11, Christopher Stonebanks examines pop culture narratives about Muslims and considers them alongside of conversations had with two Muslim teacher education students. He begins his analysis by asking, “What space, if any, has the teaching profession created, facilitated, or even allowed for Muslims to actively participate in the public school system?” His discussion bridges mainstream narratives and values attributed to Muslims with the perceived incompatibility between those values and Muslims in school contexts. The discussion with participant, Abdul, is illuminating, Stonebanks writes, “Abdul, who noted his visible Muslim-ness, joked how in his first year introductory course to teaching, the professor cautioned the students on the reality of judgement concerning proper attire and appearance while attending their in school field experience. [Abdul said], ‘Yeah, they always use that word, “be well groomed.” As I look at myself in the mirror, I’m not well groomed according to your definition. (Starts to laugh) According to the definition centuries ago, I’m very well groomed!’ …On the one hand, the field of education prides itself on its “acceptance of diversity” while on
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the other hand, this young Muslim man has to navigate preconceived notions of a beard or clothing that he knows is sadly associated with “one of those prototypical terrorists.” This chapter closely examines how such narratives of incompatibility can influence the experiences of Muslim teachers in school settings in the West.

Chapter 12, by Imran Mogra describes the life stories of two Muslim teachers in the U.K. The chapter offers a holistic story encompassing the early lives, school experiences as students, and as teachers in mainstream schools. The narratives Mogra describes communicate the juggling that occurs when teachers navigate their religious identities in schools. While for one teacher, “the positive response from her current head teacher suggests that the school is empowering her as she is attending courses, sharing her expertise and demonstrating her competency and has offered herself for promotion.” Other, “teachers experience prejudice, ridicule and hostility in their work place and in society …[and] unfortunately are pushed to consider alternative careers.” Avoiding a unilateral story of “the” Muslim teacher experience, Mogra’s chapter describes both the successes and challenges of Muslim teachers engaged in teaching.

Because education is politics, it makes sense for the liberating teacher to feel some fear when he or she is teaching.
Paulo Freire, 1986, p. 61

Transgressive knowledge and classrooms do not come without risk. The authors within this book present experiences and voices (their own as well as of their participants) that may make some readers uncomfortable with what is being offered and unsure of whether or not they should bring such perspectives in to the class. After all, it is easier to use the multitude of resources framing Muslims in a neo-liberal “caring” perspective of being in need of support, resources, or care than it is to present the possibility that the problem may require much more inward gazing and reflection on the part of mainstream structures of schooling. We, Christopher and Özlem, as editors believe strongly that this book, and its intent to present voices in schools that are otherwise muted, is part of a tradition of critical scholarship that is rooted in the works of scholars such as Paulo Freire, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Shirley Steinberg, Ira Shor, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Tariq Ali… and most specifically for this book, from the work of and dialogue with Joe Lyons Kincheloe.

The idea for this book took hold on the McGill University campus at the corner of Dr. Penfield and McTavish. Contemplating for a moment, the Department of Integrated Studies in Education’s Canada Research Chair in Critical Pedagogy, Joe, gently responded to the question I (Christopher) had just posed with his own, What do you think we should do next? It was after dinner and we had just stopped at the stone stairs on our way back to our cars parked at the top of McGill’s infamous steep climb to the Education building. This was a kind of halfway rest stop en-route to the peak of K2 mountain, and an opportunity to continue our conversation. On that late spring evening, while students busily navigated past us,
to and from their university business, we talked for over an hour about a common vision we had for schools. My own deeply influenced by Joe’s work:

A regressive politics of knowledge helps produce a technicist education that is more concerned with “how to” than “why” questions. (...) Imagining what could be — a central goal of any critical pedagogy — has no place in such regressive schools. (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 4)

**Imaging what could be...**

Joe had a profound vision of what could be, but he also had pragmatic knowledge, from years of experience working in the trenches across the United States, of what primarily existed in schools. When promoting what could be, Joe was always quick to point out the “wonderful” and “brilliant” teachers and classrooms he had encountered (Kincheloe, 2003), but mindful of the realities of what was and unfortunately continues to be the norm. Joe had spent a lifetime observing and responding to social injustices. He was a child of the Cold War, segregation, the civil rights movement and a volunteer medic (exempted for medical reasons) in the Vietnam War (to pre-empt his eventual draft into a conflict he protested against) – all of which contributed to his examination of the manner in which schools produce and legitimate some knowledge, while disregarding others and other forms of knowledge production. Joe came into his academic stride during his country’s military foray into the Middle East in the early 90s. During this time of continued miseducation and media-driven knowledge about the history, ideological, social, psychological, emotional and even pathological values and current conditions of the peoples of the Middle East, Joe’s dedication to social justice could not divert from addressing the dehumanization and marginalization of Muslims in both formal and non-formal locations of education. In conversation with Joe, the Tonkin Gulf distortions that facilitated consent to the Vietnam War had direct connections with the public relations’ fabricated account from a tearful 15 year old girl of having witnessed Iraqi soldiers killing Kuwaiti babies by pulling them from their incubators and tossing them onto the hospital floor. Why, we would discuss, was little learned from one moment in history and not transposed to the present?

Although he was fascinated with the way such knowledge was constructed, he never overlooked the ultimate purpose of his research: to reduce human suffering. Little escaped Joe’s attention of how knowledge and consciousness were produced and served to function as a means to either alleviate or add to human suffering. From the manner in which the conquest of the Americas was taught in North American schools to the seemingly trivial Geico, “so easy a caveman can do it” advertising campaigns, with the punch line that *some people* are ridiculously oversensitive to stereotypes in the media was a slogan he could easily connect as complacency towards marginalization and oppression. “Christopher,” he said, “I’m *fascinated* by those commercials.” Everything for Joe held possibility as a teachable moment; where something, for better or worse, could be “learned” and it was those “why” questions of what was being taught, either overtly or covertly, that would engage him deep in dialogue. Ever and always present, was his concern with how such knowledge affected people.
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Post 9/11, the often hidden curriculum that has long existed in Western schools with regard to the Middle East, Islam, and Muslims became an important area of research and writing for Joe. The Miseducation of the West: The Hidden Curriculum of Western-Muslim Relations (2004) a book he co-edited with Shirley Steinberg, primarily examined the covert manners in which both formal and non-formal locations of education contributed to the acceptance in the Western consciousness of a backwards, monolithic, Muslim East where they were in need of civilization, by whatever means necessary. It is important to mention that the Miseducation of the West was being developed prior to the second invasion of Iraq, in a climate where statements like, “you’re either with us, or against us”, were politically the norm and anything else was politically risky. Whatever the risk, again ever present was Joe’s concern for people. Already influenced by Joe’s work, through a simple stroke of luck, I (Christopher) was asked to contribute a chapter to the Miseducation of the West and wrote of my experiences as an elementary aged student of Iranian descent in an overwhelmingly White, Christian suburb of Canada. I was humbled that Joe had asked me to contribute and he was humbled that his work had not only made me a better teacher, but answered so many questions of my own experiences as a minority in schools. A few years later, sitting on those steps at McGill, I asked Joe what his plans were to follow up Miseducation of the West and he responded, “What do you think we should do next?” This book, Muslim Voices in School, is the product of that discussion. This book was mostly conceptualized in that conversation, as a natural progression from the Miseducation of the West, where a diversity of Muslim and Middle Eastern voices representing a diversity of perspectives, perhaps as a professor, teacher, student or parent contribute their scholarly voices about the experience of Muslim youth and schooling in the West.

It is important for us to also note that Joe’s allyship was not limited to his scholarly production. In the early stages of this book’s development, I (Özlem) communicated with Joe primarily over email, me in Vancouver and he in Montréal. In one particularly relevant exchange, I shared my concerns about speaking “for” (or being perceived to speak for) all Muslims, and the ease with which even relatively tame work was misunderstood and even assaulted by academics (as mere opinion and not scholarship), and also by non-academics (as anti-government, anti-nation propaganda). I told Joe that my name had been posted on a conservative watchdog style “here are the Muslim lovers” hate blog that included a multitude of (specific and violent) allusions against me and (more so) a colleague I had worked with. I wrote to Joe, “As a new academic, I’m pushed to publish in academic journals, yet I also see how important it is for us to speak to the broader public, yet the costs are so high. How can these bloggers rationalize guarding their own anonymity so closely with mysterious user names like, “wisconsin republican” or “stake of the oppressor”, not signing names to their hate speech, while simultaneously using the web to dig deep into our lives to find evidence of our radicality, including my colleague’s wedding photos posted online for friends??”

This event was disturbing and frightening because as public scholars we could not hide behind anonymity. It was also personally disturbing because a year earlier
I had received threatening letters through campus mail for a different publication. I could feel myself frightened in to conformity and had inadvertently stepped in to knowing another way in which power circulates and manages any critique (however openly expressed). Joe was no stranger to these realities of doing critical work. He himself endured criticisms that would crush many and that walked a wobbly professional/personal line. In response to my frustration and fears as a novice doing counter-hegemonic work, he bore witness, “it’s overwhelming. when i talk to most people from dominant cultural backgrounds, even those who think of themselves as progressive, they don’t get that these things happen and the pain they cause. Sometimes such ignorance just overwhelms me. so, i do understand. know that i am an ally and will always attempt to do whatever i can. we’ll keep on fighting.”

Joe ended his email with his familiar valediction, “In solidarity.” To Joe, “in solidarity” was anything but a slogan. The weaving together of the personal with the pedagogical, challenging the artificial disconnect of scholarship from “real life” were central commitments in Joe’s work. In his last book, he wrote (2008):

[C]riticality does not promiscuously choose theories to add to the bricolage of critical theories. It is highly suspicious of theories that fail to understand the malevolent workings of power, that fail to critique the blinders of Eurocentrism, that cultivate an elitism of insiders and outsiders (“we understand Foucault and you don’t”), and that fail to discern global system of inequity supported by diverse forms of hegemony and violence. It is uninterested in any theory – no matter how fashionable – that does not directly address the needs of victims of oppression and the suffering they must endure. (p. 28).

This stance wasn’t about propaganda or popularity – for he moved with ease in and beyond the spectrum of discourses from the most sophisticated academic ones to the most sophisticated “down home”. What he believed was that any criticality must be in the service of more than itself. It must be engaged with exposing the institutional and historical structures that have held the status quo in place, and that it must connect to the lives of the oppressed. As another scholar whom Joe admired, Edward Said (1996) wrote, our role as critical scholars is to confront orthodoxy and dogma, and “to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (p. 11). Joe’s work was embedded in these theoretical and personal commitments.

With *Muslim Voices in School*, he was always supportive, he enjoyed hearing about the development of each chapter and about the authors who have contributed their work to this collection. Eager to submit the completed manuscript to Joe and Shirley for their review, we were dotting the final “i”s and crossing the last “t”s in December. On December 19, 2008, while on vacation in Jamaica, Joe suffered a heart attack and died. If he were still alive, he more than most would have appreciated this collection, and the chapter authors’ collective desire to imagine what could be in school where it is all too common not to ask the why questions.

For a man who committed his scholarship and his life to contribute to easing the suffering of others and who passionately believed in the possibilities that schools hold to contribute to what could be, we dedicate this book to Joe, a colleague, friend, and mentor, a brother and an ally to Muslims and the people of the Middle-
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East. We miss him deeply and hope that this book captures the spirit of his dedication and helps to move another step forward in our collective work to harness scholarship to serve the betterment of humanity and the end to human suffering.

In solidarity…

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PART 1:
VOICES & EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM STUDENTS IN THE K-12 SCHOOL YEARS
TESTING THE COURAGE OF THEIR CONVICTIONS

Mona M. Abo-Zena, Barbara Sahli and Christina Safiya Tobias-Nahi

Muslim Youth Respond to Stereotyping, Hostility, and Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Anti-Muslim sentiment and discrimination targeting Muslims are on the rise, and school communities are not immune. While school systems strive to prepare students for responsible social and civic participation by promoting respect for diversity, educators often struggle to determine whether Muslims’ beliefs conflict with Western values. This conflict may seem particularly volatile given the U.S.-led “War on Terror” and post 9/11 tensions that repeatedly link Islam, and Muslims in general, with terrorism. The underlying narrative presumes that Muslims and their values are rightly deserving of disdain, mistrust, and fear. This presumption places the burden on individual Muslims to disavow the actions and rhetoric of terrorists, or risk being viewed as supporting them.

Muslim youth are not exempt from this burden. Faced with misunderstanding and at times hostility, some Muslim youth try to defend themselves and their faith by explaining what they understand to be the principles of Islam to their teachers and peers. Others try to disassociate themselves from the generalized blame by attempting to conceal their Muslim identity. Still others experience dissonance between the values and behaviors of their families and those of their peers. Tensions and misunderstandings are further compounded by the difficulty in untangling myths about Islam and Muslims from realities. The dearth of diverse mainstream Muslim voices to receive attention highlights the need to explore the narratives of ordinary Muslims, particularly those of youth.

As Muslims working in educational settings and witnessing these escalating burdens that children and youth face, we recognize that the challenges did not begin on September 11, 2001. Even in our own lifetimes, we have witnessed and ourselves experienced the challenges of simply “being” Muslim. Our differing experiences and locations give us each a unique professional and personal point of entry into the topic.

Mona M. Abo-Zena is the daughter of Egyptian immigrants raised in a small town in Iowa. Growing up, I was keenly aware that being Muslim made me different from my peers. Like other individuals from non-dominant social groups, I still catch myself doubting my own professional worthiness. My own experiences with marginalization led to my commitment to critical multicultural scholarship.
and practice as a way to create inclusive school environments for all youth. As a
teacher and administrator in both public and Islamic schools, I realized that I
finally had the opportunity to validate the young girl who had been embarrassed to
speak Arabic in public, and who guiltily mouthed the words to Christmas carols
during music class. Through the use of diverse materials and the design of
alternative classroom experiences, I have tried to create learning environments
that recognize every individual in the learning community and emphasize both the
limitations and opportunities surrounding feeling marginalized.

Barbara Sahli is an American-born convert to Islam. From this perspective, I
learned first-hand that fortitude is needed to reveal oneself as a practicing Muslim
in a society that often holds negative connotations of Islam and Muslims. My inner
journey towards Islam in adulthood was tempered by the knowledge that others
would misunderstand. My decision to accept Islam strained family relationships
and altered some professional ones. Being Muslim was akin to being an alien, a
traitor. Years later, I made the choice to wear a hijab after prolonged internal
deliberation. While I viewed it as an outward sign of my inner conviction, I
understood that others would view my dress not as a sign of strength but of
weakness. I realized wistfully that I would never again be “anonymous”—able to
slip inconspicuously into a gathering and blend into the crowd. I knew that now I
would stand out, be noticed, be known (or presumed to be known). Sometimes this
was an advantage, as when curious individuals felt comfortable enough to
approach me to ask questions about Islam, which I welcomed. At other times, in the
supermarket, behind the wheel, or walking in the park, I occasionally received
startled expressions, hostile gestures, or hateful glances. Frequently, strangers ask
where I’m from, and my reply of “America” is usually greeted with, “Yes, but
where are you really from?” To be a Muslim in America is to be perceived as an
outsider, even if this is one’s homeland.

Christina Safiya Tobias-Nahi is an American who converted to Islam in France
over a decade ago while pursuing a graduate degree. There, I witnessed the furor
over the l’affaire du foulard or the state ban against wearing the hijab in public
schools and watched as a handful of young women decided to study on their own
rather than be forced to give up their religious convictions. Similarly going
through my own debate about whether to don the veil given how others might view
me, I was inspired by these young women who were willing to forgo a formal
diploma at whatever risk to their future careers, believing that ultimate success is
not bestowed by others (teachers, employers) but by their Creator. At the same
time, I was frustrated that a state would so readily marginalize some of its
members simply for their religious dress. Like other freedom fighters before and
since, they resisted the injustice and took a stand. The outcome of their decision is
still unresolved, and the tensions still persist, both in France and in other countries
including the United States.
SOCIO-CULTURAL FRAME OF ISLAM IN AMERICA

Like other youth, Muslim youth vary in terms of the salience of religious beliefs and practices in their lives. Further, the various national and ethno-cultural origins of Muslim youth, whether indigenous, immigrant, or refugee, give rise to cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, and socio-economic variation. The history of Islam in the United States is documented to have appeared during the time of slavery when a percentage of Africans captured and taken aboard slave ships were Muslim (Austin, 1997; Diouf, 1998; Alford, 2007). While there is evidence of isolated Muslim slaves maintaining their religious practice, the institution of slavery inhibited the free practice of religion and establishment of religious communities. Subsequent to such beginnings, voluntary immigrants of Muslim heritage started entering the United States during the late 19th century, largely from the Levant, which today includes Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon (Haddad, 1987). After a decline in the practice of Islam by freed slaves, there was an Islamic resurgence among African Americans in the 1960s led by prominent Muslims such as Malcolm X. Simultaneously, the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 marked an influx of Muslim immigrants, which transformed the American landscape with respect to religion (Eck, 2002). In addition to earlier waves of immigrants and their extended families, the largest percentage of Muslims in Western countries is comprised of relatively recent immigrants who represent more than 100 countries of origin. Understanding the plurality of Muslim history and experiences in the United States adds a nuanced dimension to the perceived homogeneity of Islamic history, beliefs, and practices. Muslims have some shared identifications based on religion, but also represent a tremendous racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity (Sirin & Balsano, 2007).

Like other ethnic or racial minority youth who must respond, either internally or externally, to negative images about their group (c.f. Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990), Muslim youth face qualitatively different identity tasks than do many of their peers. Feelings of defensiveness and of being under attack or scrutiny because of their religion are widely considered to be part of the fabric of a Muslim youth’s life experiences, and thus this psychological dimension and fear of being an outcast is an aspect of their lives within the school context (Kahf, 2006; Beshir, 2004; Zine, 2001). Hostile behavior and bullying in school settings is a common reality for Muslim students, evidenced by incidents of discrimination that have occurred nationwide in the classroom, in the cafeteria, during extra-curricular activities, and on the school bus, where the perpetrators have been not only students, but also teachers and other school personnel.²

THE CONTEXT OF FEATURED YOUTH NARRATIVES

This chapter shares and studies the narratives of personal courage written by Muslim sixth graders as part of the Max Warburg Courage Curriculum³, a regional competition for public and private schools in the greater Boston area. The humanities program memorializes Max Warburg, a sixth grader who exemplified courage as he lived with and died from leukemia in 1991. The program encourages
students to recognize examples of courage in their own lives. The curriculum includes a selection of novels that illustrate the courage of young protagonists, some of whom faced racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination (e.g., *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*, and *Number the Stars*) and culminates with students drafting their own personal narratives of courage. Students are particularly motivated by the fact that one narrative from each participating school will be published in the annual collection of essays, featuring a portrait of each young author. Finally, all students whose essays are published, along with their teachers and parents, are hosted at a gala luncheon held in a hotel banquet hall with guest speakers including the Mayor of Boston.

As with any curriculum, the degree to which any given teacher follows it or incorporates it into the classroom environment varies. Having taught this unit for several years at an Islamic school, one of us (Sahli) noted the enthusiasm with which students approached this particular writing assignment. Indeed, students produced their best writing for this project, perhaps because the personal narratives gave them permission to consider examples of courage in their own lives – examples that often go unnoted, but that nonetheless require considerable inner strength. Her introduction to the writing process began with a discussion of the meaning of courage and emphasized that true courage did not require a superhero, but rather it could be exhibited by ordinary individuals who overcome their fears in their daily lives. She modeled her own “courage” by sharing her personal story of deciding to wear the hijab despite the negative reaction of others. Students brainstormed other examples of courage, such as standing up for a friend who was being teased, facing a fear, or fasting during Ramadan while in public school. After listing several ideas for examples of their own personal courage, each student selected a focus and drafted her or his narrative. Through peer editing and teacher conferencing, each essay went through multiple revisions in order to fine-tune vivid word choice, supporting details, and sentence fluency. All the finished essays were placed on display at school and reflected the students’ hard work and pride in the endeavor.

Some students chose topics that reflect experiences common to a broad spectrum of youth, such as dealing with the death of a family member or overcoming shyness. Others highlighted aspects of their experiences as Muslims, such as responding to stereotyping and being characterized as “other” because of their belonging to a marginalized group. In order to draw the marginalized voices to the center, this chapter features essays describing how youth respond to alienation and includes published and unpublished narratives of Muslim students from both Islamic and public school settings. The stories highlight the diversity of Muslim youth voices and introduce native born, immigrant origin, and refugee youth from at least seven countries spanning three continents. While their voices reflect the hybrid nature of their backgrounds, they share an important similarity: through a range of behaviors, these students publicly and actively self-identify as Muslim. Consequently, the narratives provide an opportunity to consider the meaning of religious practices to those who observe them. Furthermore, the students’ voices starkly reveal how some Muslim students negotiate their religious
identity and religious practice in a context that often includes explicit or subtle themes of misunderstanding, fear, and marginalization. The stories of stigmatization may be a result of religious discrimination, or because of one’s race or ethnicity, or when a youth’s religious practices distinguish him or her from non-Muslim peers. This chapter reflects on what narratives may mean to the youth themselves given the stories that they choose to share.

“We construct our identity through the stories we choose to tell about ourselves. Stories reach across culture and establish meaning. Stories form a language beneath our other languages. They place authority in the heart of the listener. Stories help us locate ourselves in time and place” (Storytellers and Listeners for Peace and Healing, 2008).

Finally, the chapter concludes with practical suggestions on an individual, classroom and school or policy level.

FEELING MARGINALIZED BY RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

While an individual Muslim youth’s responses to negative images about Islam may vary according to a number of factors (e.g., level of religious commitment, quality of friendships and family support), youth who are faced with negative portrayals seek to develop adaptive responses where they utilize their personal resources of resilience to meet the challenges of the context (Lerner, 2002).

Sixth-grader Jelani tells the story of being caught in a quandary where he is at once confused and terrorized by the 9/11 attacks, but at the same time feels compelled to prove his religion’s innocence:

...Before September 11th, I remember my mother and other Muslims talking about the Oklahoma City bombing. They held their breath hoping and praying that Muslims were not involved. Immediately, Muslims were unjustly targeted. After the arrest of Timothy McVeigh the Muslim community was relieved.

However, September 11th proved to be something different...I wanted to keep using the word horrible because horror is what I felt. I kept on thinking how evil; whoever did this thing was evil. Then I found out that the people who perpetrated this evil claimed Islam (the religion Muslims follow) as their way of life. Islam–this beautiful religion, the way I have lived and known the world all of my life, was being charged with the taking of thousands of innocent lives....

For us Muslims, this act of violence was a heavy burden to carry, knowing that people now saw me and the rest of the Muslims as targets for anger, targets for revenge, and targets for retaliation. I knew that people gave me dirty looks and yelled hateful things and sometimes even killed people who wore clothes that represented the Muslim religion or appeared to be from Middle Eastern descent; it was from their own ignorance they reacted this way.
The Muslims in America could not let the portrayals of hatred stop them and I couldn’t let it stop me! It just wasn’t the same life as it was before. It took courage just to walk out of the house. One day I was walking down a street in my neighborhood when a car started to follow me. I didn’t let that scare me. I just kept on walking. I glanced and the person driving glanced away. Then all of a sudden I heard a glass bottle break right behind me; then the car drove off. I wasn’t hurt, but I was terrified! I knew I couldn’t give into that fear. I wasn’t going to let anybody’s ignorance affect me.

People yelling hateful things don’t [sic] affect me like it did a couple weeks after the attacks. Most people got it through their heads that the people who crashed the planes into what was once the World Trade Center and some of the Pentagon building did not represent the principles of Islam…I have to be courageous to be a Muslim in America.”

Jelani Lynch, 6th grade male, public school, 2002

Educators in mainstream institutions would generally agree that it is problematic for students of minority religious, ethnic, or cultural groups to be spotlighted to speak for or otherwise justify what “their group” thinks or what members of their group do. There is acknowledgment of the tremendous diversity within the group and the potentially harmful effects of such spotlighting on the children. But in reality, particularly after 9/11, many Muslim youth have been asked to explain the motivation for the attacks, as though they could speak for the perpetrators of terror. As Jelani’s story recounts, his mother and her friends held their breath, knowing that if the perpetrators were Muslim, they would be held to account. It is common for many Muslims to feel ‘guilty by association’ because often Islam is implicated as part of the problem. Although current events often reference abhorrent acts committed by individuals belonging to all kinds of groups, basic fairness generally prevents holding an entire group responsible for the actions of individual members. To cite a well-known example, the sex abuse scandal within the Catholic Church did not result in a broad backlash of hatred towards ordinary Catholics or even towards all priests. Blame was placed squarely on those priests who committed the acts and on those in authority who covered up the crimes and allowed them to continue. Faithful Catholics who were outraged and pained by the crimes did not have their pain compounded by a barrage of attacks on their religion and their persons or the ensuing slander, surveillance, and suspicion that Muslims have faced.

While Jelani’s narrative indicates that he found the courage to deal with religious discrimination, not all youth have such positive outcomes. Consider the tragic story retold on National Public Radio (NPR) of a fourth grade Muslim girl who was deeply traumatized after her teacher presented an inflammatory book to ‘educate’ the class about the 9/11 tragedy. The young Muslim girl relates how her classmates’ attitudes towards her changed: “They all saw me as a different person—like before reading the book [they thought] I was just a normal child and then [after reading it, they thought] I turned into an Islamic extremist who hated the world and wanted to kill everybody…. All my friends were starting to question me— "Why
does your mom wear that on her head?” ‘Are you sure you’re really not related to him’ [Osama bin Laden]?” Students began taunting her, calling her “loser Muslim” and “Osama.” The young girl was so traumatized by the situation that she suffered deep harm; her father’s inability to cope with his daughter’s devastating encounter with prejudice led to the eventual breakdown of the family unit. This story is an extreme example of the effect classroom marginalization can have on a student’s identity.

Muslim youth may feel marginalized simply because they are Muslim. If they are teased by their peers because they are Muslim, or because they are not Christian they may in turn feel ashamed of their religion or internalize a negative religious group image. Even more extreme, they may disassociate from outward demonstrations of religious practice in order to minimize the apparent differences between themselves and their non-Muslim peers. Muslim youth may feel pressured to keep secret, deny or even abandon their Muslim faith in an attempt to blend in. Perhaps as a coping mechanism, some youth may adopt practices or behaviors that they (or their families or religious communities) feel are not in line with Islam. Such responses to religious pressure and discrimination are explored in a large scale study of religion in the lives of adolescents in the U.S. where Smith and Denton (2005) found that religious minority youth are more likely than peers from mainstream religions to incorporate aspects of other religions into their own values.

While such openness to religious pluralism may be considered a “normal” part of religious exploration in the U.S. context, such scenarios put Muslim youth, and other religious minority youth at risk because for them, the norms at home may conflict with the norms at school. How does one develop a sense of coherence and stability when “fitting in” at home and school may require opposite or different actions? One author (Abo-Zena) states, *I recall telling my kindergarten teachers that my parents would be upset if I touched the piglet that for some reason was a guest in our classroom. The teacher reassured me that it would be fine. At home, my mother and I shared the routine conversation about what I had done at school. I can still hear the disgust in my mother’s voice as she repeatedly told me to wash my hands. Unlike the promises of my teachers (whom I trusted unconditionally), it was not fine (at home) to have touched the piglet. Although the subject of contention varied throughout my childhood, the central theme remained: what was “normal” at school was not “normal” at home, and vice versa.*

While there are Muslim youth who maintain high levels of religious commitment, it is important to note that even they extend a large amount of energy to process the overall negative appraisals of their religious group. Even though Jelani reports rebounding after experiencing religious discrimination, we must remember the countless youth who face similar challenges, but whose stories have less fortunate endings.

**MARGINALIZED BY IMMIGRANT STATUS, RACE, AND RELIGION**

The various images used to describe the assimilation process for U.S. immigrants (e.g. melting pot, salad bowl, mosaic) outline the task for the immigrant and the
host community; the “melting pot” implies a degree of cultural heritage loss, but it does not explain the fate of those who cannot or choose not to “melt.” Immigrants who are religious minorities may also be racial minorities or have cultural values and behaviors that seem divergent from some mainstream values and behaviors, further heightening their sense of being outsiders. Consider Adam’s writing on how he dealt with immigration status, race, and being Muslim:

…In the first grade, I was not a person who spoke English that well. I spoke my native language, Somali. In my class, I was the only person that was from Africa. I did not want people to dislike me because of the country I was from or because of my religion, so I did not say anything. The fear of being an outcast was overwhelming.

One day, I thought that enough was enough. I announced it to everyone in my class. I told them that I was a Somali and a Muslim and that I was proud of it. Some kids did not know what a Muslim or a Somali was, due to their limited knowledge of the world.

I want people to say, “I don’t care what you say or where you’re from because I will still love you.”

Adam N. Farah, 6th grade male, public school, 2006

Adam’s fear of being without close friends and generally disliked because of his religion and being from Somalia could negatively impact his school performance through underperformance (Steele, 1997) and his inability to make and maintain friends, a key element of social adjustment (Paley, 1992; Tobias-Nahi & Garfield, 2007). Adam’s narrative reveals that while his emerging English language skills may have been perceived as a deficit by his classmates and teacher, he recognized his knowledge base exceeded that of the peers who, as he says, “had little knowledge of the world”; he had fluency in another language and knowledge about aspects of the world that his classmates lacked. While they may have dismissed him and isolated him due to his inferior English skills, his announcement to the class about his religious and ethnic identity was a brave proclamation that demonstrated self-esteem impressive for a first grader. It is also noteworthy that when asked to narrate a story of personal courage as a sixth grader, Adam recalled this formative experience from five years earlier. In his young life, this makes the point startlingly clear how significant these moments of identity challenge and articulation are.

Particularly for the immigrant child, the uprooting experience and journey to the new home are important aspects of the personal narrative that contain intricate details about challenges and opportunities the child and family face (Igoa, 1995). While the current school climate characterized by high-stakes testing evaluates proficiency through standardized tests, schools and their assessment measures seem not to value the real-world skills and character possessed by many of the students (e.g., proficiency in languages other than English, strength developed in dealing with a traumatic situation). While Adam’s story highlights the negotiation
of identity in a new location, Kowsar shares a “coming to America” story punctuated with violence and disruption:

I showed courage the time I left my country. It is not easy leaving your home but I had to because of a war between my country, Somalia, and another country. Many people died and their homes were destroyed.

It all began in 1990 when my family and I were eating dinner. We heard a gunshot. We all ran in one room, looked out the window, and saw people running. My father said we had to leave. We packed the important things we needed and we left the house. At that time my mother was pregnant. I had to stay strong for my younger sister and brothers. We walked far into the woods. That night, we slept in a little cave. About a week later we came to a place called Kenya. We stayed there with my grandfather. I thought we were going back to Somalia.

After a year my father said we had to go to America. I was sad leaving my country and my friends, but I knew it was for the best and I didn’t want my younger sister and brothers to feel sad too. It took a lot of courage to be strong.

*Kowsar Haji, 6th grade female, public school, 1999*

Kowsar’s identity as a Muslim can be assumed by noting her name and nation of origin, and observing her photograph published alongside her essay where she dons the hijab. Instead of explicitly discussing her identity as a Muslim, though, Kowsar’s narrative focuses on other key contextual circumstances. A war in her native country of Somalia forces her family to become refugees and they had to relocate at least twice. Being the oldest, Kowsar not only had to deal with her own abrupt dislocation, but had to lead her younger siblings and assist her parents during a transition phase that took years. The adjustment to living in a new land included the need to master another language. While both immigrant and refugee students share the challenges of adapting to a new country and the likely separation from extended family, refugee youth have additional challenges that often include exposure to war and other violence and a likely long-term, if not permanent, separation from their native land and sometimes their nuclear and extended family. Unlike immigrant peers who are able to maintain heritage language and other aspects of culture as well as personal relationships during regular or occasional travel to their homeland, refugee youth are largely cut off from travel to their native country and are more likely to experience downward socio-economic mobility than immigrant peers (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Kowsar’s narrative resists prevailing assumptions that characterize refugees as helpless, pitiable figures in a state of loss. Instead she shows the sacrifice and strength needed to endure a violent disruption of her life.
FEELING MARGINALIZED BY PUBLIC AND “DIFFERENT” RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Students who strive to maintain their religious identity and practice in a non-Muslim country negotiate a balance between their beliefs and what is considered normative in broader society. Ritual prayer, one of the pillars of Islam, is performed five times per day at designated time windows that correspond to the position of the sun. In this way, a practicing Muslim’s routine is punctuated by brief intervals of prayer throughout the day. Because Osama’s family believes that prayer at its designated time is a priority, he regularly takes 5 to 10 minutes to perform prayer in any permissible place that includes home, school, the mosque, or a public place.

In his essay written in early 2001, Osama describes his adherence to the prayer schedule as an obligation to keep an appointment with the Creator:

Imagine having a meeting with the President of the United States. Would you be late? Of course not. Well I had a meeting with the Creator of the Universe. Being Muslim means you have a different life than most people. You have to pray five times a day. When you pray to Allah (the Arabic word for the one God) you wouldn’t want to miss that meeting.

Once I got into a situation when the time of the meeting came and I didn’t think I could make it. My family was going to Canada and the time for prayer came. My dad stopped at a rest area with a gas station and a restaurant. After lunch, I went to the bathroom to make wudu. (Wudu means washing up in a special way to become clean for prayer.) While I was making wudu, eyes were on me longer than they needed to be. I felt uncomfortable because I knew that behind my back people were thinking, “Who is this maniac washing so strangely?” I couldn’t wait to leave the bathroom, so I quickly finished washing.

Then the hard part came. I would have to pray in front of everyone. My dad told me to pray in the Arcade room. I knew that’s the place all the kids would be. I went in and there were some kids playing. I tried thinking of things I could do to avoid praying in front of them. I could go and lie to my dad and say I prayed, or not pray and not tell my dad, or pray in the car. But I knew I had to pray so I pushed all those sneaky thoughts away and started praying. One kid stared at me for a while. I thought he must have been thinking, “Who is this crazy kid bowing to an arcade game?” I couldn’t stand it any longer. I wanted to stop and run out of the room, but my conscience kept telling me to keep at it. Knowing I had to pray kept me from breaking away. After a while, the kid was losing interest in me and started focusing on his game. This gave me a big boost in trying to complete my prayer.

As I finished praying I learned that I could pray anywhere, even if someone was watching me. If I find myself in that situation again, I would know what to do. I learned that praying to Allah is much more important than worrying about what other people think.

Osama Duwaji, 6th grade male, Islamic school, 2001
In his story, Osama faces a difficult moral choice. After an initial struggle, he pushes past his conflict between following his beliefs and his awareness that observers may not only scrutinize his actions but also ostracize him. Since 9/11, the unfortunate linkage of terrorism with religious practices has affected ordinary Muslims. Misunderstandings arise, as in the well-publicized incident of six imams who prayed at the airport before boarding their plane and aroused the fear of some fellow passengers, resulting in their removal from the flight (Conlon, 2006). Muslim youth, particularly males with identifiable Muslim names or beards and females who veil, experience marginalization caused by hate speech such as being told to “go back to your country.” Osama recounted his trip to the public library weeks after the 9/11 attacks. After he routinely provided the librarian his library card, she noted his name and, perhaps involuntarily, gave him an apprehensive look. Osama concluded that this is not a good time to be named Osama. He and other Muslim youth have already been socialized to realize that others see them as threatening. How do adult caregivers begin to erase or replace the negative images being internalized?

Further, like parents of racial minority children (McLoyd, Hill, & Dodge; 2005/2007), parents of Muslim children must navigate issues such as cultural socialization and preparation for bias so that their children are equipped to deal with the unfortunate realities of religious and ethnic profiling and surveillance. One author, (Abo-Zena) recalls listening to an NPR feature about Muslims with her then five year old son. My son perked up when he heard the radio announcer refer to Muslims and asked me what the story was about. I hesitated before answering. How much should I share with such a young boy? I worried that he might have picked up on the negative tone of the broadcast, whether or not either of us were ready for the conversation. If I didn’t answer him explicitly and reflect the tone of the story, how would my son interpret feeling that I was evading him and his questions? I heard myself answer that, “Some people don’t like Muslims very much.” When he asked why, I replied that most probably don’t know much about us, so we’ll have to show people that we are good. Unfair as it is, I have to prepare my children for the reality that our humanity is not assumed, and we have to work actively to persuade others of it.

Because of fears of being the victim of a religious hate crime or of being targeted due to increased surveillance or religious and ethnic profiling, Muslim youth are challenged to maintain the basic practices of the religion, as Munther illustrates:

It was a few weeks after September 11, 2001 and my family was going shopping in the ...mall.... While we were walking, I saw everyone looking at us as if we were terrorists. You wouldn’t notice it at first, but every one who looked at us was pointing fists at us. One even mouthed a swear at me. My dad didn’t notice, but I did.

Then my dad stopped dead in his tracks because he remembered we had to pray. I was hoping that we could pray at home. Unfortunately, we went to pray next to the most popular store there. I felt as if I was trapped in the
middle of a circle and there was no way out. When we started praying, I felt the bare floor with my forehead. I was really scared. I thought that people were exchanging looks of fear and hatred, or thinking we had a gun or a knife. I was panic-stricken but I kept saying in my head, “I can survive this.” I knew I couldn’t move until I finished the prayer. Then finally the prayer was over. I felt as if there were crowds cheering. My dad noticed the happiness on my face and said, ‘That’s my boy.’

We headed home and it was the best day of my life because I showed a lot of courage by standing up for myself and doing what my religion tells me to do even though other people might not understand….

Munther El-Alami, 6th grade male, Islamic school, 2003

While Osama worries that others will view his ritual washing and prayer as strange, Munther is scared that others will interpret his prayer as a sign he is a terrorist, and feels physically threatened. It seems an oxymoron that prayer – a highly spiritual and meditative activity – could be viewed instead by onlookers as threatening and dangerous. But as the stories of both boys demonstrate, the meta-narratives associating Islam with terrorism, backwardness, and fear circulate broadly in mainstream U.S. society, such that the most “ordinary” of activities in a Muslim’s day are misconstrued as being “deviant” and frightening.

MARGINALIZED BY GENDER AND VEILING

As in many religious communities, the style of dress in Islam is mediated by cultural as well as regional norms with secular, practicing, and orthodox Muslims expressing a diversity of dress styles. For some Muslim females and males, modesty of dress and behavior are an integral part of their faith, each gender following particular guidelines for dress (al-Hilâlî & Khan, 1404). Because many in the West tend to judge Islamic dress in relation to Western norms (especially norms of gender relations) and separate from the broader and multiple contexts of Islam, adherents to Islamic dress guidelines are often interpreted within a framework of Western ideas about what Muslim dress (especially dress for women) means. Despite mainstream perceptions that all Muslim girls and women are forced by oppressive Muslim men to wear a scarf, the following narratives reveal a great deal of agency. Taking a principled stand with respect to one’s position and values is not without consequences, though. Afnan, for instance, details her choice in her decision to cover:

Courage is doing the right thing without fear and compromise. A short time after 9/11 many Muslims were afraid of expected discrimination and harassment as a consequence of biased media coverage. Some Muslims were too afraid to even go shopping, go to work, or to the mosque. Even worse, some Muslim women were afraid to wear their hijabs outside their homes. It was a painful, fearful time for Muslim individuals and families. During this time my mom started writing a book on hijab. Many times I overheard her
discussing book chapters with her friends about the importance, merit, and benefits of hijab. Her words attracted me and I believed in it more. I wanted to wear hijab, but I was hesitant. It took me three stages to reach my final decision. First, I asked my parents for their opinions, but they said that I was free to do what I wanted and they were not going to force the hijab on me. Second, I thought hard about it. I considered the benefits and the good deeds I would be rewarded, then of the disadvantages of how I would be treated in public. Finally, I made my decision; with courage and no hesitation, I decided on wearing the hijab. Nowadays, I feel very proud of myself that I made the right decision and was able to practice my religion with freedom and courage.

Afnan Nehela, 6th grade female, Islamic school, 2007

In contrast to the rational tone of Afnan’s story that recounts her deliberative process in making her decision, Amina tells the story of how she felt disempowered because of her experience with veiling in a public school and how this feeling changed in the supportive environment of an Islamic school setting:

It all started when I was in 3rd grade. I wore a hijab (a headscarf) to school one day and everyone stared at me. They kept asking me what I was wearing and why, so I never wore it again. It made me feel self-conscious. I wear it because it is for religious reasons. It shows modesty in my religion.

The next year I wore it in 4th grade in an Islamic school and I felt much better and I didn’t care about what people said about what I wore. Now I wear it everywhere I go and I wear it with confidence and I stick up for what I believe in.

Amina A. Zekeria, 6th grade female, Islamic school, 2007

For some Muslims like Amina, their manner of dress starkly marks them as a religious other. Although Islamic dress for women is an outward display of an internal faith decision, it is often misinterpreted by the West as a sign of oppression and generally perceived as something foreign and undesirable. Thus, it can make Muslim youth and their families the objects of alienation, glares, and suspicious glances, and sometimes even the targets of hateful speech and action. The girls who cover with whom we have worked discuss the countless questions of curiosity they field in order to justify their physical appearance:

“Do you have to wear that at home?”
“Don’t you get hot?”
“Do you wear that in the shower?”

While some questions may be asked with innocence, they exist in the context of epithets propagated by the media such as the Hollywood movie Towelhead (2008) based on the novel with the same title. While the content of the film and book were not the point of contention voiced by Muslims, there was opposition to the use of a slur as a title. As CAIR-LA Executive Director Hussam Ayloush said,
“Mainstreaming a bigoted term in this manner will only serve to legitimize and normalize anti-Muslim prejudice in our society” (CAIR, 2008).

The misunderstanding surrounding the veil may alienate Muslim girls from peers, particularly non-Muslim ones. Non-Muslim students who wish to befriend Muslim peers may struggle to reconcile their friendships with the often negative mainstream discourses they hear from their own parents and society around them. For example, Fatimah’s story illustrates how subtle and covert the process of alienation can be:

The way I show courage is by wearing my hijab (head scarf) full-time. A girl who wears her hijab full-time is called a Muhajaba. I became a Muhajaba in 2nd grade. Wearing a hijab was hard at first, but I got used to it. When I told my classmates that I wore my hijab full-time, they asked me why. They asked if I was hot with my hijab on. I replied that it was hot sometimes, but I want to please God.

Sometimes I participate in camps and educational programs with non-Muslims. The kids in these programs ask, “Why do you wear that rag on your head?” I tell them that it is not a rag, it is a scarf, and I wear it because of my religion. I am a Muslim. The kids respect me for being strong. In one science camp, I received an award for being a “Model Camper.” A Model Camper is one who has good behavior and treats others well.

Some of my friends’ mothers were attacked for wearing a hijab after the World Trade Center was bombed in September. Some of my friends who used to be Muhajabas stopped because their mothers were afraid for their safety. I had many thoughts about changing my mind, but I stuck with my decision. Obeying God is what gives me the courage to be a Muhajaba.

Fatimah Mahdee, 6th grade female, Islamic school, 2002

As these girls’ narratives reveal, wearing a hijab routinely provokes condescension, discrimination, fear, and anger, reactions which are not ordinarily directed toward the outward faith expressions of other religious groups. A possible explanation for the disparity in treatment may be that mainstream Westerners know little about Muslim females’ reasons for dressing modestly and covering their hair, but the reality is that they have received a great deal of negative messaging about the hijab. Unfortunately, the messages seem to convey themes of oppression, violence, and lack of choice. As one Muslim girl experienced, females who choose not to display themselves in public may encounter insults and resentment:

Last summer, I went to the zoo with my friends and we were all wearing hijab….I overheard a man who was working there saying, “They cover their heads because they’re ugly inside.” I was shocked and frightened. I just wanted to shout and yell at him that we don’t wear it because of that. Then I remembered that I chose to wear it even though I knew people would say ugly insults and do mean things (Tobias-Nahi & Garfield, 2007, p. 90).
Muslim females who cover confront assumptions about their weakness, oppression, lack of freedom and perceived lower status in Islam. Indeed, Westerners, and in particular, Western females, view Muslim women as “the archetypal oppressed woman in stark contrast to their own perceived liberation,” not recognizing or considering their own oppression (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2006, para. 3). Some examples of Western women’s oppression include how females still receive unequal pay for equal work, how they routinely confront sexual harassment in the workplace and in other social interactions, and how the fashion, media, and entertainment industries dictate norms about sexuality and physical attractiveness, promoting an unrealistic image of beauty that pressures women to appear ever-thinner, ever-younger, and ever-sexier. Alternately, many Muslims who cover report feeling liberated because they reserve their sexuality and beauty for their husbands and are free from uninvited sexual attention and obsession with appearance. Rather than allowing others to judge their physical appearance, they expect to be valued for their deeds, character, and intelligence. Thus, these narratives about the hijab actively counter and respond to discourse that is deeply engrained in popular society regarding gender and veiling.

Through more accurate and personal exchanges with the ‘other,’ encounters both inside and outside of school can be facilitated. One such illustrative narrative involves Ruqayya, a girl who loves sports but hesitated to participate because of her concerns about how others would react to her hijab. She explains:

…”Every year when my mother registered my brothers for their teams, she would ask me if I wanted to play and I always said, “no” though I really wanted to play. You see, I have always gone to an Islamic school and all of my friends are Muslims.

I never really communicated with non-Muslims, so I was kind of nervous because sometimes people treat us badly because we look different. They would make fun of the way we dress and call us names. I thought that if I were to play on a soccer team with them, they would do the same. Also, I would have to get special permission [from the coach] so that I could wear pants instead of shorts and my headscarf, which is called a hijab.

This year when my mom asked me, I gathered up all the courage I could find and decided to try out for the team. The first day was really hard. I was nervous just walking up to the field. I expected to hear laughing and whispering behind my back. Instead, a few girls came over and said hello to me. I was too nervous to do more than whisper a response.

They asked a few questions about my religion, but that was OK. I went to practice a few times, and then realized that not all people treat Muslims badly. Some people can be very nice and friendly even if they are totally different. If I had not tried out for the team, I would not know how strong and courageous I could be.

Ruqayya El-Asmar, 6th grade female, Islamic school, 2004
By overcoming a reluctance to participate in new experiences for fear of the reactions of others, barriers can be broken down and there is potential for the positive development of Muslim and non-Muslim youth. Friendships that involve diverse religious and/or ethnic groups provide a solid foundation for the construction of allies who can support each other in addressing issues of civic equality. For example, in a series of incidents in Canada (Myers, 2007; Scott, 2007), referees prevented Muslim girls from playing soccer while wearing a hijab purportedly for safety reasons, although previously they had been allowed to play without incident. In response, the entire team and sometimes other teams in the league were willing to forfeit the match in protest of what the girls and their supportive coaches and parents recognized was a thinly disguised case of religious discrimination. Unlike passive types of learning, experiential knowledge and authentic interactions such as these are often powerfully instructive in creating empathy and providing meaningful lessons in character development (Sahli, Tobias-Nahi & Abo-Zena, 2009).

**AT THE MARGINS: WHETHER TO AFFIRM ONE'S MUSLIM IDENTITY**

Some Muslim youth may acknowledge their religious faith internally, but may think carefully about whether and when to reveal their faith to others. Muslims who are not recognizable as such have the option to decide whether to self-identify as Muslims, which is a choice that may be perceived as both a privilege and burden. The responses to negative images about Islam may lead to a variety of outcomes, including maladaptive responses where youth develop behaviors and approaches that are inconsistent and appear disingenuous because of feelings of shame or being conflicted (al Jabri, 1995; Zine, 2001). This is different from bicultural competence where youth generally develop different knowledge and skills for different contexts and can readily “switch” between settings maintaining a positive identification with both or all aspects of their social group membership (LaFramboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993) During the “carefree” days of summer, Yacob struggles with fears of social isolation and worries about violating his religious beliefs.

I was running though the woods when they spotted me. They started to chase me, so I ran off the trail. Thorny bushes scraped my bare arms and mosquitoes were eating me alive. I was lost and got stuck in a swamp. I was knee deep in water and couldn’t find my way out. How did I get into this situation? My parents had decided to send me to a YMCA summer camp. I hated the idea because I wanted to stay home and play Sony Playstation. It would be a change for me to be around people other than Muslims because I went to Muslim school.

When I got to the YMCA on my first day of camp, butterflies swarmed in my stomach. A thousand thoughts passed through my mind. I wondered if I would make friends. As I looked around the waiting room, it seemed like a big reunion. Most of the campers knew each other. When I got onto the bus, I felt like getting off, but I made sure to take care of my younger brother.
After arriving at camp, we started the day by playing manhunt. I was a little afraid because I did not know these woods. That’s how I got stuck in this swamp. When I managed to get out, I was covered in mud. I was afraid everyone was going to laugh at me. But they did not. They were curious about what had happened to me. After that I did not dread camp.

I made lots of friends over the summer. Then one day my friends asked me what religion I believed in. I felt like lying to them because I was afraid they might tease me. I found the courage by remembering that people should not lie about their religion. I was still the same person inside. I stuttered and told them, “I am Muslim.” Then they started to get interested and asked questions about Islam. Finally I realized camp was not so bad after all. I think it took courage for me to tell them what religion I believed because I could have just lied to them, but instead I told the truth.

Yacob Eid, 6th grade male, Islamic school, 2003

Parents, educators, and a range of public and private stakeholders share the imperative to create inclusive school and broader environments so that all youth find a welcoming and safe place to develop.

OTHER LAYERS OF VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY

Not all Muslim youth are forthcoming about their religious beliefs and values. Many Muslim youth are visible because their names, dress, or nation of origin “mark” them as Muslim, but their beliefs and practices may or may not be consistent with their ascribed identity. While research suggests that the importance of faith for youth tracks fairly closely with the importance of religion to the parents (Smith & Denton, 2005), there is limited discussion of inter-parent and intra-parent variability in religious practice, or parents who do not belong to the same religious tradition or denomination. Like youth of other religions, Muslim youth experience this variation and discontinuity within the nuclear family and beyond it. Other Muslim youth are difficult to identify (e.g., females who do not cover, students whose names and family histories are not associated strongly with Islam), and these youth may stress their Muslim identity selectively based on the context and other factors. Many other Muslim youth choose or feel forced to keep their Muslim identity invisible. Some may not have strong religious convictions, while others feel that being perceived as a practicing Muslim may put them at risk of being isolated or looked down upon. Finally, like other aspects of development, religious identity is a dynamic one and closely interwoven with other aspects of their context and identity, and thus shaped by the accumulation of experiences. As described by a researcher of minority youth development and schools, “Identity-building in cultural and social spaces is not a one-time process, but involves a continual negotiation and renegotiation between children and schools” (Nassir, 2004, p. 155) and other salient aspects of their social context.
SUGGESTED ACTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

While it is important to sustain an inclusive learning environment throughout the year, teachers could particularly reinforce the inclusiveness of the classroom at the start of the school year. With increasing numbers of immigrant and refugee students, the classroom has become a testing ground for contact between different cultures. Teachers could use multiple strategies to actively affirm and reflect the contributions and challenges that students and their families bring to the learning process. All levels of school context (e.g., classroom and school policy, curriculum, materials) could attend to the multiple levels of students’ identities; particular attention should be made to highlight backgrounds that may have been omitted from positive portrayals and include the language biography of students, aspects of race and ethnicity, family constellation, and a child’s “coming to America” story. In addition, inclusiveness should go beyond token or superficial acknowledgements of diversity that merely display the artifacts of different social or cultural groups and actively explore what the artifacts mean to the people who use them.

Furthermore, there is a clear need to work with teachers to examine their own lenses and assumptions so they are better equipped not only to deal proactively with their students, but also to guide students in the same critical self-reflection of their biases in order to “interrupt the perpetuation of inequality” that can occur when the sources of our knowledge and beliefs about others are left unexamined and unchallenged (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2006). Such approaches to the learning environment can occur through a multicultural and anti-bias curriculum, while setting a vigilant tone with zero-tolerance of actions and speech that threaten students physically or psychologically.

On a school or institutional level, educational contexts should strive to accommodate Muslim youth who wish to fulfill religious obligations while at school. School systems should consider adopting an inclusive religious accommodations policy (CAIR, 1999). This may include arrangements for modifications of physical education dress requirements, compliance with dietary laws in the breakfast and lunch program (e.g., putting an image of a pig on foods containing pork products in the lunch line so that emerging-literate children can easily identify food content), and accommodations for fasting students or those observing prayer. For students who wish to pray in school, parents and school staff are encouraged to meet to discuss provisions for adequate prayer space during the designated times. Within a study of world religions, teachers could make use of resources within the community by inviting practicing members of a faith tradition to help understand the religion in context.

In language arts and social studies curricular contexts, teachers can support students to critically analyze written and multimedia images. Consistent with tenets of multicultural educational standards, educators should select literature and class materials that provide inclusive role models for all children (Style, 1988). For example, an exploration of current events, religion, or gender images in the media may include how and why individuals of different faiths have represented their religion through dress historically and in contemporary times. Such discussions can help diffuse tensions before they erupt into verbal or physical confrontations.
Consequently, youth will have been prepared to recognize religious dress and behavior outside their religious tradition, making such future interactions less awkward for all participants.

CONCLUSION

Due to religious discrimination and a frequently ill-informed societal environment, Muslim youth, their families, and their support networks need to develop adaptive strategies to negotiate the constant barrage of myopic images and experiences that demonize Islam and Muslims. Given this state of affairs, it is not surprising, then, that the students mentioned in this chapter have reflected so eloquently on the theme of courage needed in their young lives just to be themselves. Their narratives illuminate that Muslim youth can challenge the dominant perception of Muslims as terrorist, fanatical, suspicious, backward, insular, anti-Western, antidemocracy, and of Muslim women as oppressed, submissive, powerless, abused, and uneducated. By resisting these unjust perceptions and replacing them with truer ones, Muslims can repair their damaged identities and be re-identified as morally worthy rather than contemptible (Nelson, 2001). Thus by telling their own stories, students can alter oppressive perceptions of Muslims, improve their own self-perceptions, and refuse to be further victimized and vilified.

As authors, it has been liberating to incorporate our voices with the narratives of the students in order to counter the dominant narrative about Islam and claim the privileged position of telling our own stories. It is empowering to learn to use one’s voice to communicate externally what one is experiencing internally. To expect any racial, religious, or ethnic group to automatically rebound from such a negative climate reduces the urgency that stakeholders such as public officials and policy makers address the toxicity of certain perspectives, practices, and policies. Educators, in particular, are in an optimal position to bridge the distance between “us” and “them.” As long as there are disenfranchised groups, such advocacy in its many forms is needed. One effective strategy to strengthen bonds within communities and build bridges across communities is the use of narratives:

Stories connect us to each other. In ways that polemics and polls cannot, they can reveal our conflicts within ourselves and our vulnerabilities to each other. Stories can describe why certain choices are made and others are passed over, and they can reveal the colors of our emotions. Stories have the capacity to convert a line drawing into flesh, to dislodge the power of the presumption and prejudice (Bayoumi, 2008, p. 12).

Stories such as the narratives presented in this chapter can enable readers to identify both with those who are separated by barriers of race, class, culture, and religion, and also with contexts and situations to which they may bear witness yet until now have not responded. Words have substance and power. They wash over our consciousness and become part of our landscape. To neutralize the words that harm and humiliate, we must amplify the voices, stifled for too long, of those attempting to repair and restate their own identities. It is then up to those who
actively listen to respond with recognition, to readjust their own perceptions, and finally to share their newfound understanding with others.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

(1) What views, assumptions, feelings, or thoughts did you have about Muslim youths’ experiences that did not match the accounts in this chapter? What is the most surprising difference between your assumptions and the narratives of the youth? What are the most likely reasons for these differences?

(2) Which of the experiences in the narratives can you relate to, and which can’t you? Consider a time when you felt:
– different because of your (or your family’s) language, race, or ethnicity;
– different because of how you dress;
– wrongfully blamed or just guilty by association;
– even your parents could not understand what you are going through;
– afraid that if you told others something about yourself, they may reject you, but also felt uncomfortable about keeping a secret;
– proud or embarrassed by your family’s “coming to America” story?

(3) What experiences are unique to particular groups and which ones may be common across groups?

(4) What political and social conditions contribute to the mistreatment of particular social groups? How is this mistreatment both interpersonal (name calling, localized micro-aggressions) and also institutionally structured (laws and systems of control and monitoring)? How is it justified?

IF YOU LIKED THIS CHAPTER, YOU MAY ALSO ENJOY:


COURAGE OF THEIR CONVICTIONS


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NOTES

1 In the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama, who has family ties to Islam felt compelled to distance himself from the religion, so much so that on at least two occasions his staffers asked covered Muslim women to remove themselves from his proximity so their images would not appear in any campaign related photographs. See Smith, B. (2008, June 16). Muslims barred from picture at Obama event. Retrieved from http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0608/11168.html

2 The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported that 7% of all reported discrimination cases towards Muslims during 2006 occurred in schools (CAIR, 2006). This does not represent the countless unreported events of bullying or hostile behavior Muslim youth endure. Most examples included insensitivity or aggression by peers, as in the case where an Arab boy was found bound and locked in a closet in his New York elementary school (Marzulli, 2007) or when Somali girls were chased by their peers into a bathroom in a Boston high school and had their hijabs pulled off, leaving one student hospitalized (Vaishnav, 2001, Tobias-Nahi & Garfield, 2003, 2007). In the example where the Muslim girl was asked by her teacher to remove the hijab in front of her peers in the cafeteria, we see that even educators, the adults in charge of creating the space, may alienate Muslim youth and contribute to a hostile learning environment (CAIR CA, 2007). Consistent with other religious minorities, Muslim youth report frequent bullying in Western schools (Elsea & Mukhtar, 2000). In response to a report indicating that teachers acknowledge that attacks on Muslim students have risen, state and federal governments have developed specific measures to address faith bullies and incorporated them into general anti-bullying initiatives (Milne, 2006). Measures have included passage of the Safe Place to Learn Act (AB 394) that require California’s education department to play an active role in ensuring full and proper implementation of existing anti-discrimination laws that apply to schools (CAIR, 2007), and similar initiatives in other states.

3 http://www.maxcourage.org/home.php

4 Seven of the ten essays in the chapter were previously published as part of the Max Warburg courage curriculum. Here are the references to read their essays in their entirety:


According to the Qur’an, eating pork is *haram* (unlawful) because it is unclean or harmful (c.f. Qur’an 2:173, 6:145). Although touching a pig is not explicitly prohibited, some individuals may wish to avoid the animal altogether out of concerns that it is impure or unhygienic.

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INTEGRATING IDENTITIES

Muslim American Youth Confronting Challenges and Creating Change

IDENTITIES, CHALLENGES, AND CHANGE

In the context of post-9/11 America, stereotypes about Muslims have become commonplace and discrimination based on one’s religious and national background has become politically sanctioned (van Driel, 2004). Muslim youth growing up in this socio-political climate must contend with the reality that their identities—either those they consciously express or those that others project unto them—will also be contributing factors to the challenges they face in school and society. Identity formation is an on-going process that occurs throughout one’s life. Individuals actively construct and negotiate multiple and fluid identities in historically-situated, socio-cultural contexts (Rogoff, 2003). Rather than having static and fixed notions of what it means to be oneself, these identity formations and expressions change depending on the individual and the ways in which his or her race, ethnicity, religious or sectarian affiliation, gender, and socioeconomic status are valued and viewed within a specific context (Schachter, 2005; Yon, 2000).

One of the more common stereotypes about Muslims, which regained prominence after September 11, 2001, was that Muslim values and beliefs were in some manner inherently incompatible with Western cultures. In response to this, after September 11, 2001, I began to consciously portray my “American” identity along with my “Muslim” identity by coupling a hijab, the Muslim headscarf, with blue jeans and long-sleeve t-shirts. Prior to this, in an effort to maintain Islamic modesty, I typically wore my hijab with long dresses, ethnic Pakistani clothes, or the long dark overcoat associated with women in Saudi Arabia, called an abaya or burqa. My decision to change the way in which I expressed my multiple identities (a Muslim female, U.S. born citizen, second generation Pakistani-American) was a direct reflection of the political and social climate in post-9/11 America. Through clothing alone, I attempted to counter the stereotype that being a Muslim American was somehow an oxymoron. This example illustrates how identities are affected by the historical, political, and social contexts of an individual, and how identities are multiple, fluid, and context-specific.

Several challenges are also associated specifically with Muslim identities in North America. Some of these have been highlighted in the emerging research on Muslim experiences in North American schools. This literature reveals how stereotyping, systemic discrimination, and school cultures that are incongruent with....

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Muslim values and beliefs lead many Muslim students to experience alienation, marginalization, and a sense of “othering” (i.e. van Driel, 2004, Zine, 2001, chapters in this volume).

As one of the few Muslims in my public high school in Western New York, I relate personally to these findings, having experienced many of these emotions only a decade earlier. In particular, I often felt singled out by my teachers to represent the opinions of all Muslims regarding religious and political matters. I can remember numerous occasions, for example, when teachers asked me to talk about or formally present aspects of my Pakistani heritage or Muslim religion. At times, I welcomed this as an opportunity to educate my peers about my background, such as during “International Night” in elementary school; but there were also numerous occasions when the burden to educate my peers and teachers about Islam and “other” cultures was overwhelming, particularly as I myself struggled to make sense of the intricacies of religious teachings.

I never quite figured out the perfect way to respond to such requests, especially when made by teachers (as opposed to peers) at my school. Raised by immigrant parents who instilled a deep respect for teachers and for formal education, I felt it was somehow inappropriate to deny their requests. Instead, I attempted to push aside my insecurities and come to class with information and artefacts in hand. There is no doubt that I learned a lot about my cultural background and religious traditions through these experiences. Nevertheless, I also began to feel resentful of being singled out as “different” by teachers, even when I felt I was just as “American” as my White and African American peers.

Traditionally, theories of adolescence and identity formation have positioned youth as passive and helpless victims of their conflict-ridden surroundings (Damon, 2004). Yet reflecting on my own efforts to navigate these challenges, and based on my interactions with Muslim youth in various professional capacities over the past eight years, I am keenly aware that such projections are inaccurate. Instead, I have found that despite being troubled by their challenges, most Muslim youth are able to resist, encounter, or overcome their obstacles.

In this chapter, while I discuss some of the challenges Muslim youth face in their schooling contexts, my focus remains on their responses to these obstacles. I do this in an effort to steer away from traditional depictions of crisis-ridden adolescents and to illustrate how youth are actively involved in transforming the marginalizing factors in their environments. I conclude with an examination of contextual elements that have helped some youth successfully work through their challenges.

It is my hope that this discussion will give readers insight into the potential of youth to be active agents of change in their own lives and in society. I purposefully draw heavily on direct quotes from Muslim youth who are discussing both the challenges they face in their schooling contexts and also their responses to these obstacles. As religious and often ethnic/racial minorities, these youth are used to having to validate their views and experiences. Here, however, I attempt to provide a space in which their opinions are accepted as valid representations of their own lived experiences. I also hope to provide concrete ideas for educators to help create
and foster spaces in which youth have the opportunity to construct hybrid identities without being fearful of mockery, disrespect or disregard towards their religious or cultural backgrounds.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE RESEARCH

Between March 2006 and April 2007, I conducted a qualitative case study that explored the role of a youth program on the identity formation and adolescent development of its Muslim participants. The youth program is an interscholastic tournament of competitions and workshops held across the United States and Canada that aim to give participants a better understanding of Islam and Muslims. Although the tournament welcomes high school students of all backgrounds to partake in its activities, including non-Muslims, attendants are predominantly Sunni Muslims, second generation Americans, and of Arab, South Asian, and African descent.

Altogether, eight semi-structured individual interviews and sixteen semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted at the program’s regional and national tournaments held in Atlanta, Georgia, Houston, Texas and College Park, Maryland. There were seventy-six participants whose ethnic and sectarian composition mirrored that of the tournament population with an equal number of male and female participants. Focus groups were comprised of two to eight interviewees and were fifteen to seventy-five minutes long with the average lasting approximately forty minutes.

Although participants were not asked to elaborate on how closely they followed Islamic practices and beliefs, through the course of the interviews, many indicated that they attempted to observe the five Muslim prayers on a daily basis, to fast during the lunar month of Ramadan, and to adhere to Islamic norms of intergender interaction. There were a minority of participants who revealed that they did not observe these religious practices on a daily basis, instead highlighting a social or political identity as Muslim.

The high level of adherence to Islamic practices and norms amongst my participant pool was unusual compared to the larger population of Muslim American youth, many of whom do not pray regularly, wear a hijab, or follow norms of gender segregation. On the other hand, given the context of the study, in which interviews were conducted at a tournament focused on Islam and Muslims, this is not surprising. Most importantly, it means that the data obtained for this study represents in large part the views of Muslim youth who are consciously striving to learn about and implement Islam in their daily lives.

EXPLORING CHALLENGES

In this section, I describe some of the challenges youth faced as Muslim students attending predominantly non-Muslim public and private schools in the U.S. Concurrently, I discuss how participants understood these challenges in relation to
their identities as Muslim Americans. I then explore some of the methods they used to work through the challenges and conflicts associated with these identities.

Challenges in School

Students in this study who chose to identify themselves as Muslims and those who were ascribed this identity from outside were plunged into various roles, challenges, and scenarios based on the connotations others associated with their Muslim identity. In many instances, the Muslim identity was ascribed to them due to their teachers’ and peers’ conflation of their ethnic and religious identities. In some cases, participants said that because they were identified as Muslims they were mistakenly presumed, particularly by their teachers, to have knowledge about Islamic religious practices, other countries and cultures. While some participants invited these reactions, others felt frustrated, annoyed, or concerned that being identified as a Muslim could hold such implications.

Rehan, a student of South Asian descent who attended public high school in Atlanta, described an experience he had when a teacher asked him to explain to the class “the five pillars of Islam.” He asked, rhetorically,

Why would I know [about the five pillars] and everybody else doesn’t know? I find that kind of, you know, kind of segregated type of thing, cause like she [the teacher] sees a brown guy and she assumes that I’m Muslim so I should know.

Rehan appeared to believe that the teacher conflated his South Asian ethnicity with a Sunni Muslim identity. However, Rehan did not adhere to traditional Islamic practices, and furthermore, as a Shia Ismaili, his belief system did not reside solely on the five pillars of Islam. Thus, the metanarrative that his teacher relied upon to construct her definition of Muslims revealed her perception of Muslims as a monolithic group, all of whom were devout worshippers and therefore suitable representatives and authorities of their religion. This perception overlooked the potential that her Muslim students could construct a social or political identity as a Muslim in the absence of adhering to Islam’s religious tenants. Moreover, it overlooked the fact that one could be an ethnic minority descending from a predominantly Muslim country yet not identify oneself as Muslim.

Rehan’s reference to feeling segregated in class was echoed by several other study participants as well. In particular, these participants felt that being identified by peers and teachers primarily through their religious or cultural backgrounds cast them as ‘others’ in their classroom and indicated that their identities as Americans were being overlooked. Madeeha, a female student who wore the hijab to her school in Raleigh, North Carolina explained,

People ask you, “In other cultures, [do] they do this?” and then he [the teacher] will be like, “Right!” I mean, I’ll be like, “I was born here all my life. I don’t know.”
Madeeha expressed frustration at the assumption that she was somehow an authentic spokesperson for “other cultures.” In order to expose the underlying assumption in her teacher and peers’ questions regarding ‘other cultures,’ she pointed out that she, like most of them, was born in the U.S., and therefore knew as much about these other cultures as they did.

On the other hand, particularly for female students such as Madeeha who wore a hijab to school, there was a sense of obligation to answer others’ questions about Islam, despite the assumptions of “otherness” that their inquiries implied. This is similar to findings in Zine’s (2006) study on Muslim females in Canada who wore a hijab to high school. She found that despite not always wanting to represent their community of Muslims, the young women recognized that their prosocial behaviour could confound others’ stereotypes of Muslims and in turn proactively assert a new and positive image of Islam.

An exchange between Madeeha, Samar, Zainab and Amani, all female students who wore the Muslim head scarf to their public and private schools in Raleigh, reveals the pressure they felt to respond accurately to questions, even when they were absurd or offensive:

Madeeha I mean we try to be morally open to like dawah [inviting people to Islam], but some questions, we don’t know how to answer. Like there’s one kid in my math class, he was like, “Oh yeah if you don’t wear your scarf, will you be like condemned, or what will happen to you?” And I was like, you know… I can’t decide, God will decide, and he was all confused.

Samar Yeah they don’t understand but–

Madeeha Yeah they wonder like why do people cover their whole faces and then, why don’t people just show their neck. And I was like, well people have like different levels of, you know, beliefs. And they don’t really understand.

Shaza So it sounds like people come to you all as though you’re authorities for Islam. Do you like that or does that bother you?

Zainab Sometimes it bothers me.

Madeeha We don’t always know what the best answer is.

Amani It puts pressure on you.

Zainab You don’t want to say the wrong answer.

Even though they were bothered by their peers’ questions, many felt that as one of the few Muslims in their schools they were obligated to inform people about their faith, which they acknowledged was misunderstood by many.

Central to all of my participants’ comments about the challenges and conflicts faced as Muslim American youth was the experience of being a religious minority in the United States and in school. The extent to which they practiced Islam had an
affect on, but was not always indicative of, the ways in which they experienced themselves as Muslims within these contexts. In other words, while being a Muslim typically held some religious connotation, it also took on social and political undertones as well.

As a result, many student interviewees who talked very little about practicing Islamic rituals still expressed concern about reactions they received from peers and teachers simply because of their perceived identity as Muslims. Their skin colour, ethnicity, and religion, which they explain were often conflated, were enough to trigger anti-Islamic, or Islamophobic, sentiments as they went about their daily lives. The identity of “Muslim” therefore became ascribed onto many youth participants by others despite a lack of outward religious expression, causing them in turn to respond and act on this identity in a social or political manner.

RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES

In this section, I discuss how some youth in this study used Islamic symbolism, jokes and humour, and Muslim peer groups and associations to help respond to and address several of their challenges. The examples I draw on reveal that as the youth worked through these challenges, they were also engaged in a constant (re)construction, (re)interpretation, and expression of their identities as Muslim Americans.

Islamic Symbolism

One of the most documented methods used by Muslim students in the U.S., Canada, or Great Britain to respond to their challenges includes the use of the hijab, which is a symbol well recognized as a marker of Muslim identity. For example, Dwyer (2000) found that several Muslim females in Great Britain were “able to construct an alternative identity through their dress, which challenged parental assumptions about appropriate attire but could also confound the expectations of others” (p. 481). The females in her study were able to resist static notions of what it meant to be both Muslim and British by projecting hybrid identities through their clothing, which involved wearing a hijab with traditional Western attire, such as jeans and long-sleeve t-shirts.

Many of the female participants in my study also talked about their use of hijab to respond to their challenges, including responding to stereotypes about Muslims, resisting peer pressure, and constructing a “Muslim space” for themselves in their schools. For example, despite the absurd questions they received about their religion and scarves, the five young women from Raleigh felt that the hijab gave them an opportunity to teach their peers about Islam. Interviewees who did not wear hijab also had their own ideas about how it helped Muslim females. Ansar, an African American male who attended a predominantly Black high school in Atlanta, discussed how males at his school had more respect for females who wore hijab than those who did not, stating “They don’t even try to mess with them.”
Bilal, who attended school in Atlanta as well, further explained:

They talk about other girls in their face and call them like all these bad names, all these bad names of girls getting around or whatever, but they won’t tell a Muslim that, not that I’ve ever seen, not a Muslim girl. They respect Muslim girls. They be like saying “What’s up” to them and whatever and just walk away cause they know, hey, keep your distance.

Ansar and Bilal’s statements illustrate how hijab helped females effectively convey that they were not interested in physical interactions with their male counterparts. The ability to do so further indicates their ability to create a “Muslim space” in which Islamic norms of modesty and intergender interaction were recognized and respected by even non-Muslim peers.

For Muslim males, there were similar benefits to using Islamic symbols to identify oneself as Muslim. For example, Ameen, an African American male from Atlanta who often wore a kufi, a cap sometimes worn by Muslim males, to school was quickly recognized as a Muslim by his peers. This made it easier for them to approach him with questions they had about Islam. Although some Muslim students would be uncomfortable with these questions, Ameen welcomed this as an opportunity to teach others in his school about Islam, something he felt passionate about.

Ansar also mentioned that by explicitly telling his peers that he was Muslim, some of them refrained from doing un-Islamic activities around him. He said,

Like I tell a lot of my friends I’m Muslim... and they be like “Oh, I’m not going to do this around you, you’re Muslim.”

As an African American, Ansar stated that most of his peers did not immediately identify him as a Muslim. Yet, instead of wearing a physical symbol to represent his Muslim identity, Ansar vocally declared his identity as a Muslim to many of his peers. Given the prior knowledge and assumptions they had about Islamic beliefs and practices, this pronunciation of faith gave his friends insight into the types of social activities he would not participate in, helping Ansar proactively resist common forms of peer pressure. In this instance, assumptions held by Ansar’s peers about Islamic practices worked in his favour, as he did not have to engage in lengthy explanations of his religion, which he indicated he was uncomfortable doing given his limited knowledge of Islam.

Jokes and Humor

Muslim students used jokes and humour in different ways to confront challenges they faced. While some used humour in witty ways to address stereotypes held by peers in their schools, some joked with non-Muslim peers in an attempt to avoid otherwise confrontational scenarios.

For example, when Iman, a high school student from Panama City, was asked if she was hot wearing her hijab and full-sleeve clothing, she answered her peers by saying, “I’m hot with or without these clothes.” This response helped Iman directly
answer the question she was asked while drawing on a pun—"being hot"—to overcome the stereotype that she could not be fashionable or attractive in hijab.

Rana, a high school senior in a public school in Atlanta, told her peers she was going to dress up as a terrorist for Halloween. After an awkward moment of silence from her peers, she laughed and told them she was just kidding. During her interview, she explained why she used such jokes with her peers, stating that it was an effective means of shattering stereotypes of Muslim students as serious, uptight, and/or extremist:

I mean like people still take it lightly if you joke, like take it as humour and people they see that you’re comfortable you know. They’re not going to think you’re this uptight religious girl whose extremist probably; you know, they’re not going to think like that.

Mustafa explained that he also made jokes about Islam and terrorism because:

We don’t want to hurt somebody, no we don’t want to fight. So like okay [if] someone was like “You’re a dirty Muslim,” I’m not going to be like “Yo, say that again and I’m going to punch you in your face.” No, I’m just going to… make fun of it, just play around with it.

Mustafa’s comments point out that joking was used by some as an alternative to responding violently to potentially offensive comments, muting and/or reducing the sting of the stereotypes from which the comments were derived.

The initiation and acceptance of these jokes by the Muslim participants in my study seemed to parallel a tactic similar to what Ajrouch (2004) found in her study on second generation Arab Americans. These students used the term “boater”—a word originally used decades earlier by White Americans to refer to Arab immigrants—to establish an “identity boundary” between themselves and Arab immigrants. This identity boundary emerged due to second generation Arab students’ desire to “make clear that although they may be Arab, they are different” from immigrant students who were not yet fully integrated into popular U.S. youth culture (p. 379). Thus, by using the term “boater,” they were able to simultaneously claim an ethnic identity that distinguished them from Caucasians while distancing themselves from Arab immigrants in order to assert their identification as Arab Americans.

Similarly, joking provided a safe way for Muslim students in this study to create their own “identity boundary” without purposefully perpetuating hurtful stereotypes about Muslims and/or their ethnic heritages. Instead, it allowed them to express identities as Muslims and ethnic minorities while concurrently conveying to their peers that they were sociable and friendly. Further, these jokes were shared by peers whom they knew and with whom they had established positive rapport. Given this context, it is possible that their jokes highlighted the absurdity of the stereotypes they drew upon, such as those regarding the inherently violent nature of Muslims, or the notion that all Muslims were terrorists.

Though their use of such stereotypes could also be interpreted by many as internalized racism, a topic discussed by several scholars regarding the use of the
“n” word amongst African Americans, the Muslim students in my study had clear reasons for why they chose humor to respond to potentially offensive remarks made by peers. Specifically, rather than feeling hopeless about the pervasiveness of stereotypes about Muslims in a post-9/11 society, they felt jokes and humor could create counter-images of Muslim Americans that were positive, friendly, and funny.

**Muslim Peer Groups and Associations**

In her study on Muslim students attending public schools in Toronto, Zine (2001) found that her participants differentiated themselves from peers of other faiths through their involvement in Islamic organizations, such as a Muslim Student Association (MSA), and Muslim-only peer-groups. By doing so, they were able to resist peer pressure that could have caused them to compromise elements of their faith.

This was a strategy that many of my study participants also relied upon to resist peer pressure, address stereotypes, and educate others about Islam. Specifically, one female student talked about the role of MSA in helping her and her Muslim peers respond to insults by peers who made negative comments about Islam and Muslims.

> When we’re in school and like say someone is saying something like bad about the Muslims or... maybe you get dirty looks for like wearing a scarf. But right then in MSA you come back and you report it to your [Association’s] president and the MSA [will] right then use it as an opportunity; we’ll make an open house at the masjid, or like we’ll go to the library and we’ll set up a display about the hijab.

Her explanation illustrates that the MSA was an organization that Muslim students could depend on for immediate and effective responses to Islamophobia, while having the benefit of being seen as a legitimate and “professional organization” by school officials and peers. In this manner, MSA helped many students transform potentially marginalizing factors in their schools while working to create a positive image for Muslims through organized efforts.

Other efforts included group-sponsored community service and organizing and participating in interfaith events. MSAs that put on such events helped create forums in which Muslim students could interact with peers of different faiths and openly but respectfully discuss their beliefs, opinions, and practices with one another. Lena and Maryam, two students from Atlanta high schools, felt that this helped them “break down barriers between the religions.” Thus, for many, being involved in their school’s MSA gave them the opportunity to formally educate their school and broader communities about what it meant to be a Muslim, in turn helping them proactively reduce the sense of mystification that surrounded their Muslim identities.

The president of an MSA at a public high school in Houston also talked about the benefits of being in an MSA. He stated:

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I go to a public school so there are a lot of non-Muslims that I’m surrounded with. So it’s really hard to integrate your Muslim self with your American self or whatever other culture you’re from because it’s so easy to give in to peer pressure and to do what your friends are doing... But MSA gives you a way to connect with the Muslim students in your school and it helps you to not have to hide yourself and you can just be who you are.

His statement explains how these associations helped Muslim youth become more confident in their beliefs and practices while providing a convenient source of peer support in the face of challenges associated with their religious identities.

HELPING YOUTH CONFRONT THEIR CHALLENGES

Given the nature of my study, participants often discussed the challenges they faced in their interactions with teachers and other school administrators. Yet, it was clear from talking to several of them that they felt that educators could play a positive role in their schooling experience as well.

For instance, Talal, who attended a suburban high school in Atlanta, discussed how his teacher explicitly told him he could leave class whenever he needed to for prayer. As a sophomore, he had already established a reputation that helped teachers trust him and respect his religious practices. His discussion revealed that his teachers helped prayer become an integrated part of his daily activities, allowing him to practice Islam without casting a spotlight on his differences.

The ability to respect students’ unique identities, practices, and beliefs without making them feel “different” from their peers was something several students desired. Samar, a student who went to high school in Raleigh, talked about how she felt when teachers stopped in the midst of a lesson to ask her to verify information being taught in class. Such actions, she said, made her feel awkward. She criticized, “it’s like they make separate rules for us and we’re so like different than everyone else.” As a practicing Muslim, Samar wore a hijab, and therefore projected her Muslim identity to others explicitly, but the act of an authority-figure highlighting this unnecessarily was unappreciated.

Instead, participants in this study seemed to value teachers who took time out before and after class to talk to students about concerns they had regarding course materials, assignments, or classroom interactions. Amani’s discussion of her own personal experience with a teacher who offended her and discussed it after class is illustrative of this:

Amani I remember this one incident where I’m taking this medicinal chemistry seminar and the teacher was like bringing out his laptop. And he had a little cover for it and he was like flipping around with the cover and it ended up on his head somehow. And then he goes like this [raising his hands above his head], like look at me. He’s a goofy type teacher. And then everyone started laughing, and I was kind of like, I was taken aback, because everybody started laughing. And after class he came to me and he
was like I hope that didn’t offend you. He was like, I realized that afterwards. I was like, I think it kind of did.

Shaza And did you tell that to him?

Amani Yeah. He was like okay, I’m sorry, I was out of line, blah blah blah… I’m actually glad that he came to me because, to be honest, I wouldn’t have the confidence to go up to him and say that was wrong.

Given their position of authority, it was difficult for some students to approach their teachers about concerns they had about course materials, assignments, and/or interactions with peers and teachers in class. Therefore, when teachers talked to students privately outside of class, students were often appreciative of their efforts.

Some student interviewees also talked about how they resolved initial challenges to establishing religious practices through the help of a supportive teacher. Basit explains that he was able to find someone in his school who supported his efforts to pray in school, and therefore helped him maintain his religious practice:

I told one of my other teachers [that another teacher told him learning was more important than prayer], and she said that if she says that again you tell me because she can get kicked out… [and] like if she wants to say something like that she needs to keep it to herself.

In this manner, though the immediate context of Basit’s classroom posed an obstacle for him, he was able to find a teacher willing to advocate on his behalf who could help him deal with the situation more effectively.

These brief examples provide some insight into how educators can help Muslim students practice their faith and assert their identities without feeling othered or marginalized in their schools, in turn facilitating the construction of strong hybrid identities as Muslim American youth. Importantly, however, there was no consensus amongst the participants in this study on how this should be done. On the contrary, many students gave ambiguous or conflicting responses to the specific ways that teachers could help them respond to their challenges as Muslim Americans. Still, the discussion points to the fact that while Muslim youth can work by themselves and with one another to respond to their challenges in school, the presence of a supportive and positive school culture can help reduce the occurrence of such problems to begin with. Further, educators who were conscious of the individual needs of their Muslim students and who helped make their religious beliefs and practices an integrated aspect of students’ schooling experiences appeared to be successful in helping students feel like integral members of their school community.

CREATING CHANGE

Crisis has often been thought of as a central aspect of adolescence and identity formation. For Muslim American youth, there have been systemic efforts to locate the crux of their crisis in the “clash of cultures” which is perceived to be inherent in their backgrounds as practicing members of the Islamic faith and residents of a
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democratic and secular United States. My own personal and professional experiences, including the results of this research, illustrate that Muslim youth in fact are actively involved in creating hybrid identities, or identities that are able to simultaneously represent their strong commitments as Muslims and Americans, without falling prey to inescapable predicaments. The combination of their personal drive, creativity, and resourcefulness has helped them resist and proactively address several of their challenges. Educators too have played an important role in helping youth create schooling environments that recognize and respect their religious and cultural backgrounds, in turn helping many create strong hybrid identities as Muslim American youth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

(1) Recall a time when you shifted the way in which you constructed or expressed your identity/ies due to a change in context. How did your altered identity/ies affect the way in which you were treated/perceived by others? How did it affect the way you felt about yourself?

(2) What specific insights did you glean from the chapter about how schools can be more inclusive of diverse students (Muslim students, but also encompassing other marginalized identity positions)? Consider what initiatives educators could take or implement on their own? What they could do collaboratively with students? What could be done at a classroom level? What could be done at a school-wide level?

(3) The students in this chapter responded differently to their teachers’, versus peers’, questions about Islam and Muslims. For example, Rehan was offended by his teacher’s request to talk about the five pillars of Islam, while Ameen invited the opportunity to teach his peers about his religious practices. What insights did the chapter provide about how educators can navigate how and when to approach their Muslim students about questions they or others have about Islam and Muslims?

IF YOU LIKED THIS CHAPTER, YOU MAY ALSO ENJOY:


NOTES

1 all names are pseudonyms

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