

Islam in the American Classroom

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Abstract: A growing American-born Muslim population warrants the attention of educators in schools across the U.S. Educating teachers about Islam will prepare them to address the needs of Muslim students. This paper discusses the rationale for improving awareness of Islam and provides basic concepts necessary for education of the Islamic culture.

After September 11, 2001, the magnifying lens zoomed in on Islam and the tone has not always been positive, nor has the information transmitted to the public through the various media sources always been accurate. As educators, we should not rely on the media to teach our students. However, most teachers lack the essential or basic knowledge to sufficiently conduct inquiry about Islam on behalf of their students. Mastrilli and Sardo-Brown (2002), who conducted a study to determine pre-service teachers' knowledge about Islam, concluded that many of the pre-service students lack rudimentary knowledge of the Islamic religion as well as the global nature and influence of Islam. In addition to their lack of knowledge, based on schema theory, their attitude and representation regarding Islam would impact how these future teachers dealt with student questions about the events of September 11, as well as their interaction with Muslim students.

Because Islam is the fastest growing religion in the West, over the next decade, the number of Muslim students in American classrooms will increase tremendously. It is imperative that teachers acquire knowledge of Islamic culture. Although some may argue that to educate teachers about Islam is a violation of the separation of church and state, I disagree: the concept of "religion" as defined in this society does not apply to Islam. Islam is a way of life, a culture. It governs every aspect of the Muslim's life. Moreover, Islamic influence on Western education is present in various disciplines from language to math and science, yet neither the American student nor the American teacher is aware of this. For these reasons, I would argue that educating teachers to Islam is not a conflict of separation between church and state. Rather, it is an obligation. Providing educational opportunities for teachers to learn about Islamic culture would allow them to facilitate a positive learning experience for Muslim students as well as for non-Muslim students. These educational opportunities are the responsibility of the institutions including universities and colleges. However, establishing teacher institutes where secondary and postsecondary teachers acquire knowledge of Islamic culture benefits both the veteran educator and beginning teacher. In addition, providing lecture series about Islam serves to educate professors and their students in the institutions of higher learning. In the case of Muslim students, they will not feel isolated or alienated in the classroom, which should improve their desire to learn. At the same time, non-Muslim students would have accurate facts to draw conclusions or form opinions about issues regarding Muslims. Moreover, dispelling misconceptions that are divisive and offensive is an additional benefit of teachers obtaining general knowledge of Islam.

Benefit to the Muslim Student

Teachers who are aware of Islamic culture and who develop pedagogy of difference (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991) can better understand Islam and Muslim students in their

classroom. Having this understanding allows teachers the opportunity to create a critical and meaningful learning environment. Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) argued that the process of developing a pedagogy of difference includes “more than a language in which students are given a context to engage the plurality of habits, practices, and experiences” (p. 130). Instead, developing a pedagogy of difference provides an opportunity for teachers and students to deepen their awareness. Moreover, developing this pedagogy enables teachers to deepen their understanding of their own political values regarding the discourse of the various others--in this case, Islam and Muslim students. In addition to allowing students’ voices to be heard, developing pedagogy of difference helps teachers to assist students in critically examining the historical and social forms that construct their lives.

Developing an awareness of Islam within the context of a pedagogy of difference will also enable teachers to assist Muslim students as they negotiate through the many obstacles of schooling. Not developing an awareness of Islamic culture can be detrimental to the goal of providing equality of education to all children. A case study of Muslim students in Canada (Zine, 2001) revealed the difficulties Muslim students and their parents faced in their schooling experience; low teacher expectation and misconception of Islamic culture created an atmosphere of isolation, alienation, and lack of trust in teachers and counselors. Because of low teacher expectation, Muslim students who wanted to attend college were placed in general level classes, instead of the rigorous college bound classes. This was the experience of Sajjad and Amal, two exceptionally bright and articulate students who were placed in general level classes. Their efforts to be reclassified were met with resistance. Sajjad explained, “I had no problems in school, but I kept waiting for a long time [to be placed in college bound classes] until I realized, ‘Hey you don’t have my interest in consideration’” (Zine, 2001, p. 14). Amal had a similar experience with a guidance counselor who “flowered up” the idea of taking general-level courses as being “less stressful and more fun” (Zine, 2001, p. 15). Fortunately, both students were able to recover from the misplacement but not without difficulty and struggle. Sajjad had to spend an extra two years completing the courses he needed for college. On the other hand, Amal’s problem was corrected early when another counselor, after examining her academic files, identified her as an advanced student and gave her proper placement.

Nonetheless, this experience left Amal thinking that the counselor did not want her to succeed and that she was being judged on her appearance (Zine, 2001). Sajjad and Amal experienced “marginalization,” defined by Powell (2001) as a practice that conveys to some students that “they are not quite as significant as others, and hence they are ‘pushed to the margins’---they are forced to remain outside the mainstream culture within the school” (p. 87). These examples of student experiences clearly demonstrate an undeveloped pedagogy of difference in the Canadian school system. As evident in this case study, when teachers have low expectation of racial and ethnic minoritized youth, it can lead to negative evaluation and bias in assessment of those students as well as underachievement by those youth. Moreover, from the experience of these Muslim students within the Canadian school system, Zine (2001) concluded that these low expectations were “the result of negative racialized stereotypes and negative assumptions about Islam” (p.15). Because Muslim students are a representation of various ethnic and cultural groups, they fall into the category of “minority.” Invariably, it is the minority student who is marginalized. “Marginalization is always divisive; it establishes criteria that separate the ‘insiders’ from the ‘outsiders’ along class lines” (Powell, 2001, p. 98). To avoid incidents in our school systems similar to those experienced by the students in Canada, an effort

must be made to educate teachers in the Islamic culture. “When differences are understood, they form a base for learning; when they are not, they create a barrier to learning” (Zine, 2001, p.17).

Benefit to All Students

Non-Muslim students can benefit as well from teachers who are aware of Islamic culture. A teacher possessing this skill can facilitate a learning environment that is stimulating, enriching and conducive to intellectual cultural exchange. Unifying ideas can develop from dialogue and discourse in a classroom that operates in an open atmosphere, where everyone is valued. Powell (2001) stated that teaching is about *relationship*, “a process of interaction, of give and take, of connecting with our students” (p. 137). A teacher educated in Islamic culture within the context of pedagogy of difference can create a community of learners that invites an examination of their bias and assumptions held about the world. This is similar to Powell’s description of the multicultural curriculum, which affirms and validates: “It creates community out of conflict....In this way, curriculum that is multicultural can potentially unite; for unity comes from acknowledging our common humanity, our common destiny, our common purpose” (p. 199). Likewise, teachers having knowledge of Islam can potentially unite students in recognizing the commonality that exists amidst all the differences.

Knowledge of Islamic Culture

In order to dispel existing misconceptions, educators must possess certain basic information about Islam and enable them to guide students in their inquiry about Islam. In this section, I will discuss basic information that will include definitions of Islam, the life of Muhammad, Prophet Muhammad, Prophet, the central beliefs of Islam, the five pillars of Islam, the role of the *Qur’an* in Islam, and the Islamic philosophy of education.

Definitions

Islam

Islam is an Arabic word; when translated, it means *submission, surrender and obedience*, a complete submission and obedience to Allah. The term also means “*peace and security*, which signifies that one can achieve real peace of body and mind only through submission and obedience to Allah” (Mawdudi, 1980, p.17). *Allah* is the Arabic term equivalent to the English term for God, the “supreme being” and the only One worthy of worship. The *Quran* is the Book revealed to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and is believed by Muslims to be the exact word of God (Mawdudi, 1980, p. 75).

The Life of Muhammad

Because there are many misconceptions about the role of Muhammad the Prophet and how Muslims view him, knowledge about the Prophet is vital to educating teachers about Islam. A common misconception is that Muslims worship the Prophet. Additionally, some refer to Muslims as “Muhammadans.” These statements are incorrect and offensive to Muslim students. Although Muslims revere Muhammad (pbuh), worship is reserved for God alone.

Prophet Muhammad

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is recognized as a messenger of God who brought the word of God to humanity. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was born in 569 or 570 C.E. in the Arabian city of Mecca (Reagan, 2000). Because his father and mother died when he was young, his grandfather and uncle raised him. He was very spiritual and spent a great deal of his time alone in the cave engaged in prayer and meditation. At age forty, during one of his retreats, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that God had chosen him to be His messenger to all mankind (Reagan, 2000, p.183). His first command from Allah was to read: “Read in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created- (2) created man out of a germ-cell! (3)Read- for thy Sustainer

is the Most Bountiful One (4) who taught [man] the use of the pen-(5) taught man what he did not know!” (*Qur’an, Chapter 95:1-5*). Note that although the Prophet (pbuh) himself was unlettered; the first revelation revealed to the Prophet addressed reading, evidence that education is a major focus of Islam.

Prophet

[Prophet] “Muhammad began to publicly proclaim God’s revelation. His message was simple and clear: ‘the belief in One Transcendent God, in Resurrection and the Last Judgment’” (Reagan, 2000, p. 184). However, the pagan Arabs did not embrace this message with open arms. Thus, the Meccan leaders, who saw him as a threat to their way of life, persecuted the Prophet and his followers. To escape the hostile environment, on two separate occasions, the Prophet (pubh) encouraged his followers to seek asylum in the Christian country Abyssinia (now Ethiopia). Eventually, after 13 years of Meccan oppression, Prophet Muhammad (pubh) and his followers migrated to Medina where he established a Muslim community. Over the next ten years, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) continued to receive revelation and spread Islam over the region. He taught the revelation that he received from God to men and women.

Central Beliefs of Islam

Muslims believe in the Oneness of God, which is the most fundamental of all the beliefs. From a Muslim point of view, “the Oneness of God is the primordial religion taught by prophets of all faiths. Muhammad merely served to remind people of it” (Reagan, 2000, p. 184). Other beliefs include the angels, all of the prophets, all of the books of God, and life after death. As Islamic beliefs are discussed for a clear image of Islamic principles, it is important to note that although the Islamic systems are based on constant, unalterable and universal principles originating in Divine revelation, “the details of their application may be adjusted as necessary within the Islamic framework to fit existing needs and circumstances” (Reagan, 2000, p. 184). From the core beliefs, we look at the practice of those beliefs, which are outlined in the five pillars of Islam.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The pillars include profession of faith (the shahadah), prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. These practices are a way of life for Muslims. Once a declaration has been made to believe in the Oneness of God and accept the Messenger of God and His Books, then you are a fully-fledged Muslim only when your practice is consistent with your profession (Mawdudi, 1980, p. 87). Prayer (*salah*) is the second pillar. Muslims are obligated to pray five times a day, at daybreak (*fajr*), noon (*Zuhr*), mid-afternoon (*asr*), after the sunset (*maghrib*), and evening (*isha*). Before prayer a ritual ablution (*wudu’*), is normally done with water, which helps to prepare the individual for worship. The Muslim then faces Mecca and recites verses from the *Qur’an*. Prayer is performed both in congregation and individually. On Friday, the noon prayer is performed in congregation, and is called *salat-ul-Jumu’a*. The *imam*, the religious leader, delivers a lecture called the *Khutba*, and leads the congregational prayer. The third pillar is almsgiving (*zakah*), a non-voluntary donation to support the poor. Almsgiving is an obligation on every Muslim. Fasting is the fourth pillar. It is observed once a year during the month of Ramadan. At this time, all adult Muslims who are able are required to fast (*sawm*) from sunrise to sunset (Reagan, 2000, p. 187). The Islamic fasting requires the Muslim to practice total abstinence from any food particles passing through the mouth or nose, as well as drinks of any kind-- water, milk, juices, etc.--along with abstinence from sexual association during the day (Shu’aib, 1991, p. 16). The fifth pillar of Islam is the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. All Muslims who can afford to do so are obligated to make the pilgrimage at least once in their lifetimes.

The Role of the Qur'an in Islam

Muslims believe that the *Qur'an* is an unaltered, exact, literal transcription of the words of God Himself, precisely as they were given to Muhammad: "The Holy *Qur'an* is the only divinely-revealed scripture in the history of mankind which has been preserved to the present time in its exact original form" (Reagan, 2000, p. 187). Although translations of the *Qur'an* can be found in almost any language, most Muslims strive to read and learn the Arabic text because they consider these translations interpretations. The *Qur'an* addresses every aspect of a Muslim's life. From the *Qur'an*, the philosophy of education is developed. The nature of the *Qur'an* emphasizes literacy as an important religious obligation. The name of the *Qur'an* itself--- translated as "that which is to be read---entails a challenge to become literate (Reagan, 2000, p. 187).

The Islamic Philosophy of Education

For Muslims, knowledge (*ilm*) is a moral obligation; one must obtain it and then teach it to others. The authentic sources from which Muslims receive knowledge are the *Qur'an*, the holy text and the *Hadith*, sayings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The *Qur'an*, considered by Muslims to be *par excellence*, engenders the Muslim's attitude for knowledge and serves as the guiding force for obtaining it. Similar to the *Qur'an*, the *Hadith* also emphasizes the importance of knowledge for men and women. In Sahih Al- Bukhari, in the chapter on "Knowledge" the Prophet expressed that knowledge is not limited to men. Women are encouraged to acquire knowledge as well. In fact, the Prophet designated time to teach women (Al-Buhkari, 1976, p. 80).

Conclusion

America is strongest when all of its citizens are able to participate in the pursuit of an education. Educating America's children requires knowing who these children are, their social needs and what matters to them. The new "other" in our American school system is the Muslim children who are United States citizens---some first, second, third and fourth generation citizens. Some are converts to Islam. In the United States, Muslims number 5 million strong, and they are growing. The classroom reflects this growth; therefore, the impact of increased Muslim presence on the American classroom is inevitable. The educator should be prepared. "Basic knowledge of Islam is becoming essential for every American" (as cited in Reagan, 2000, p. 182). There is a need to re-examine the new "other" in the American classrooms (Reagan, 2000, p. 182). Are we prepared to address the needs of the Muslim child? We can be prepared by providing educational opportunities for teachers and administrators on all levels, and allowing teachers to examine their views concerning Muslims and Islam. We can further prepare by acknowledging the historical, political and social context that make up the experiences of the Muslim student, and how they view the world. Having knowledge of Islam will enable teachers and administrators to facilitate a learning environment that is positive, inclusive and embracing. Although "it takes a village to raise a child," it also takes a village to address the concerns that will impact the lives of students in the American classroom.

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