Using (Counter)stories to (Re)shape Our Communities and World(s)

Amanah Eljaji

Abstract

Drawing upon my experience as a Canadian Muslim woman, scholar, educator, and mother, I share and inquire into my stories of experiences alongside youth. Thinking narratively, I weave my experiences using and teaching with/about single stories and counterstories alongside students to (re)shape the multiplicity of our selves, relationships, and communities. This article will provide windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors into my school and familial curriculum-making experiences alongside Muslim youth. I hope that it will also provide insights into the experiences of diverse Muslim children, youth, and caregivers/families.

We Are Story(ies)

> *We are all story. That's what my people say. From the moment we enter this physical reality to the moment we depart again as spirit, we are energy moving forward to the fullest possible expression of ourselves. All the intrepid spirits who come to this reality make that same journey. In this we are joined. We are one. We are, in the end, one story, one song, one spirit, one soul. This is what my people say. ~ Richard Wagamese (2011, p. 1)*

Wagamese's words inspire me to consider, share, and inquire into my stories of teaching and learning as a way to inspire others to do the same. Maybe then we can attain "the fullest possible expression of ourselves" and ultimately change the world, "one story, one song, one spirt" at a time.

Fig. 1: I will be threading students' artwork throughout this paper (with their permission). This piece, for me, speaks to the importance of attending to students' experiences and stories they carry.

You tell me your story and I'll tell you mine
As we learn to walk together in good ways
Children, family and community hand in hand
Where family stories to live by bump against my school stories
I am transported to my younger self trying to figure out
who I was, what my goals were and what kind of person I was becoming?

My narrative, my name, my identity
It was mine and only mine now
For so long, I felt like I was part of both worlds, yet part of neither
tensions of living in two differing curriculum-making worlds
is not limited to myself
but the very students I teach every year
who struggle with their own identity
time to attend to embodied tensions

Gifted with the lives of youth
As they are an "amanah"
"Amanah" in Arabic means fulfilling or upholding a trust
As my students call me Ms. Amanah,
I am constantly reminded of my moral responsibility
I can only do this by attending to their experiences
and the stories that they carry in their being
so that they will not be misunderstood
in my journey of teaching and learning

One of the first stories as a student that I carry with me was when I was around six years old in grade one. I remember desperately wanting to be Ukrainian, as I lived in Two Hills, which is a small town in northeast Alberta that has a predominantly Ukrainian population. Even from my earliest moments, I didn't understand why my family spoke Arabic, and not Ukrainian, ate fatayer (meat pies) and tabbouleh, and not pierogies, celebrated Eid, and not Easter with pysanky. All I knew was that I was different from everyone, but I longed to be the same. I wonder why I so desperately wanted to be like everyone else? Was it just because of the community I was immersed in, or were there other factors? At that age, I was unable to "realize that there cannot be a single standard of humanness or attainment or propriety when it comes to taking a perspective on the world" (Greene, 1993, p. 212). I just wanted to be like everyone; so much so that I remember when we were painting life-size drawings of ourselves in grade one, I painted myself to look like a Ukrainian folk dancer, rather than a traditional Arabic dabke folk dancer, or even a belly dancer, which was more familiar to me.

This reminds me of Greene's (1993) sense of Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* who desperately wanted to have blue eyes like Shirley Temple, "since the culture has imposed on her the idea that only someone blue-eyed partakes in the human reality" to illustrate the power of "official stories (or master narratives) in dominating consciousness" (Greene, 1993, p. 219) The influence that culture imposed on Pecola Breedlove is very much relevant today in my world. As I try to help raise confident Muslim children and youth, including my own and those I teach in a private Islamic school, I understand

that Muslims feel anguish with Islamophobia just as other communities in (Canadian) history and in the present face discrimination and prejudice.

Through my position as a grade nine teacher in Social Studies and Language Arts, I have been fortunate to retell the stories of people who have been discriminated and marginalized, including those of Japanese Canadians, Chinese Canadians, Ukrainian Canadians, Uyghurs in China, Black Americans, Palestinians, and, most importantly right now, Indigenous communities that are still grappling with the effects of forced assimilation into what was referred to as "Canadian culture." However, this "Canadian culture" and our lives and their pathways are not fixed in time or place; instead they are shaped and continually reshaped by the stories I and others live by, with, and in (Saleh, 2019). How we understand, share, and think with the stories of our and one another's lives matters.

As I am awakened to the layers of my own stories, I continue to write and rewrite, live and relive, tell and retell through a "metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, with temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along a second dimension, and place along a third" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). I have come to recognize that my identity is undergoing constant reinvention fueled in part by the human need for understanding. This is especially evident in our struggle to live and relive, tell and retell the colonial roots of our Canadian narrative, and upon closer reflection, how I am learning to re-envision the stories I tell about myself. I used to frame my thinking of experience and story as fixed just as I teach a short story and Freytag's Pyramid (plot diagram with exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution). I was unable to see past the traditional borders of a story. That is, until I learned to inquire into my own stories and engage in conversations with stories, for "it is in the inquiry, in our conversations with each other, with texts, with situations, and with other stories that we can come to retelling our stories and to reliving them" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 251).

Fig. 2: This mural speaks to this students' belief in the need for spaces for world travelling.

As I traveled into my narratives, travelling inward, outward, backward, forward, and situated within place, I began to inquire into the present, past, and future of who I am and who I am becoming in the worlds I inhabit as a mother, daughter, teacher, sister, friend, and student. Lugones (1987) referred to the fluidity and multiplicity of identity as "a plurality of selves" (p. 14) and how my inquiry has shown me my multiple selves are in "world travelling" in all teaching and learning environments.

Saleh (2019) further shaped my understanding of world travelling when she wrote about how Lugones (1987) makes her evaluate who she is, who she has been, and who she is becoming in the worlds she inhabits. Lugones reminds me that world travelling can occur with varying levels of ease. While I acquired the ability to travel to, within, and among the worlds I inhabit, there have, at times, been worlds where I was constructed in ways that did not fit my construction of myself and where I felt misunderstood (Saleh, 2019, p. 3).

Like Saleh, many Muslims can relate to the notion of being misunderstood. This sentiment is eloquently found in Yusuf / Cat Stevens' cover of the song, "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," which I regularly play in my classroom: "But I'm just a soul whose intentions are good/Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood" (Benjamin et al., 1964). Maybe I played it too much, as it inspired a student to create a breathtaking piece of art based on the song. This song helps me to think and wonder as I imagine possibilities for (re)shaping our communities and world(s) (Lugones, 1987) and walking in good ways alongside others (Young, 2005). As the next section makes clear, it was particularly salient as I recently engaged in an inquiry journey with a group of youth in grade nine.

Fig. 3: This canvas was gifted to me by a student at the end of the year.

Awakening to Single Stories

What happens when we only hear one story about a particular person, people, place, and/or situation? If we only hear about a person, people, place, or situation from one point of view, we risk accepting one experience as the whole truth. We face the danger of a single story (Adichie, 2009). Adichie asserted, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." Instead, she suggests, we must seek diverse perspectives—particularly the importance of telling the stories only we can tell about our experiences, hopes, and fears, because doing so helps break down the power of dominant stories and stereotypes.

Therefore, "what better way to grapple with making sense of our rapidly changing world than through the study of stories?" (Casey, 1995, p. 240). This story begins where my journey of formal teaching began, at Edmonton Islamic Academy (EIA)—a place that is a companion of my heart and mind (Basso, 1996). I want to share some of my experiences at EIA because it is mainly the place where my narrative inquiry of who I am, who I have been, and who I am becoming as a teacher (and ongoing learner), is composed. The EIA was established in 1987, in the basement of the Al-Rashid Mosque with only 21 students. Today, more than 1,200 students attend from Preschool to Grade 12.

For me, what really makes the EIA stand out is that it is a place where hundreds of Muslim students, teachers, and school staff start the day alongside our non-Muslim colleagues with a school-wide morning assembly, making supplications to ask our Creator to protect us.

Fig. 4: School-wide morning assembly is held every morning to share any important news and recite supplications. Please note that this photo was taken before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the afternoon we meet again with our hearts and heads bowed to the ground to our Creator in one of the five prescribed prayers of the day. As I bow my head in prayer every day, I think about the peace and

beauty of this daily congregational practice and experience, and I wonder about how the dominant narratives about Muslims have shaped the lives and experiences of the diverse Muslim students I come alongside every day.

Fig. 5: Students praying the afternoon prayer known as Salat al Dhur in Arabic. Note: This photo was taken pre-COVID-19.

Bumping Up Against Single Stories as a Teacher and Narrative Inquirer

Drawing upon my experience as a Canadian Muslim woman, scholar, educator, and mother, I now show my autobiographical narrative inquiry into my experiences alongside Muslim youth at the EIA. Over time, my life experiences and experiences in education have made "no single story" the theme of my grade nine language arts and social studies classes for the last five years. It never fails to surprise me the ways that students make sense of their experiences through Adichie's (2009) "The Danger of a Single Story."

However, for the last four years, I decided to be more mindful of the questions I asked students before viewing Adichie's TED Talk. I asked all grade nine students the same question as a previewing activity: "What is the story of a Muslim?" After 10 to 15 minutes of students sharing their ideas, I recorded their answers on the whiteboard. In this process, as described by Connelly and Clandinin (1988), students were drawing on their "personal practical knowledge," that is, their personal knowledge and experiences as knowing beings which supported them to reconstruct their past situations and future intentions as they inquired into the "exigencies" of their present situations.

Fig. 6: Student answers recorded on the whiteboard to the question, "What is the story of a Muslim?"

With great shock, I began to notice the major trend of the storyline the students were following. I realized that the words were getting more negative as we continued, and that the students were struggling to think of any positive words. I began to wonder why their "personal practical knowledge" would have such a negative single story of Muslims since they were Muslims themselves. The mind map that we ended up with included words such as terrible, violent, extremists, oppression of women, and heartbreakingly, terrorists. In response, I gave students time to reflect on their words and expressed that they could put an X through any words they felt were irrelevant or inappropriate. Upon closer inspection of the above photo of the whiteboard, one can see that none of the words were crossed out as not even one student believed any of the words were irrelevant or inappropriate.

As I startlingly began to notice the trend of the storyline the students were following, I simultaneously became deeply troubled and I tried to travel to their worlds. Once again, I refer to Lugones' (1987) concept of "travelling to someone's 'world' as a way of identifying with them," and "understanding what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes" (p. 17). As I attempted to travel to their worlds of possible personal, social, institutional, cultural, and familial stories, I wondered how else I could better understand how they storied Muslims and, more importantly, themselves. I realized that I "need to stay wakeful to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space" (Huber et al., 2013, p. 227). Only if I stayed wakeful to the "temporal, social, and place dimensions and interactions within and among all of the stories, all of the personal, social, institutional, cultural, familial, and linguistic experiences lived out" (p. 227), would I be able to imagine some sort of narrative coherence (Carr, 1986) to the plotlines they seemed to be naming and following.

The students were generally around 14 years old. As a result, they were born after the horrific events of the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001. Shortly after, the United States began the "War on Terror," which led to an increase in Islamophobia (fear or hatred of Islam) across the globe. This increase in Islamophobia was, in turn, reflected in the way media outlets addressed and stereotyped Muslim populations. While some deliberately framed Islamic coverage positively in an attempt to counter Islamophobia, many of the portrayals of Muslims contributed to the formation of harmful Islamic media stereotypes (Gudel, 2002). These harmful Islamic media stereotypes created a new dominant narrative of Muslims, a deficit and dangerous narrative that seemed very alive in the minds and hearts of the students.

These negative stereotypes are significant, since these are what they have been bombarded with through various media outlets since birth. As Arsalan Iftikhar, an American lawyer and writer who blogs at TheMuslimGuy.com said, "When Hollywood dealt with Muslim characters it was completely one-dimensional" as we are portrayed as "seething terrorists, without any sort of humanizing attributes" (as cited in Burke, 2014, para.17). These stereotypes assume the marginalization of Muslims and neglect to consider the diversity of Muslim lives, experiences, and places. Unfortunately, it was commonplace that the students "have experienced the harm of shame at having their religion being used to justify violence" (Mattson, 2013, p. 4). Furthermore, they have been held responsible for the actions of the extremists, so every time someone mentioned a negative word, they did so with their heads lowered and voice saddened.

In Canadian school contexts, Amjad (2018) noted that, "some Muslim students [in her research] perceive most of their teachers not only as ineffective in combatting racism, discrimination and Islamophobia, but also as promoting injustice through their teaching methods and curriculum" (p. 327). Several others have written (and sounded the alarm) about Islamophobia in relation to schooling (see: Bakali, 2016; Elkassem et al., 2018; Hindy, 2016; Zine, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2012). How could my students, who are being educated in an Islamic school context, carry these stories so deeply within their bodies? Clearly, as educators, we all have work to do to ensure that all students, including Muslim students, feel fully accepted in all of who they are in our classrooms, schools, and communities.

Fig. 7: This watercolor represents the one-dimensional stereotype that is too often associated with Muslim men and women.

Adichie reminds us, "Show people as one thing and one thing only over and over again and that is what they become," and that is the consequence of the single story about a person, place, or issue. As a result, I asked students to reflect on our stories as Muslims as we watched Adichie's TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story." As they watched the first time, they were asked to watch and answer the following question: "What is a single story?" After viewing, I asked them what they understood the single story represented. The students understood it as a stereotype. Once they understood the basis of what a single story meant, they watched it again and filled out a listening comprehension worksheet. Then they went into small groups to share their thoughts.

After the small group discussions, we reflected on the idea of the single story. After much discussion, I asked the students to reflect on the idea of the single story and write a personal response to "The Danger of a Single Story," relating it to themselves, another text, and the world. It was my hope that through this reflective process the students would experience "telling, retelling, and reliving of the experiences and tacit knowing" (Huber et al., 2013, p. 228).

When the students came back with their personal responses a week later, I asked them to highlight their favorite part of their response. I then asked students to form small groups of two to four students. I asked

them to share their highlighted part or any other ideas because, after all, this was a work in progress, and is still a work in progress as we continue thinking with our stories even today.

Although all the student submissions moved me, there was some writing and reflection that really stood out. One student wrote: "When I was 12 years old, I had no experience of hate or prejudice but the fibres wrapped around my head were enough to label me as someone to be scared of, and open to be a victim of prejudice."

Another student wrote:

> It may be difficult to understand a religion that you only hear ferocious things from. Well as a Muslim since birth, I can confirm the peacefulness of Islam through my personal experience, knowledge, and faith. It's important for us to remember the truth behind what we believe in and the peace it truly represents, even if it is sometimes difficult to fully grasp your identity when there are so many outside forces trying to change what you believe of your identity. One poignant sentence that really stood out for me was: "Words spoken are dangers in themselves, but words not spoken are the greatest dangers of all."
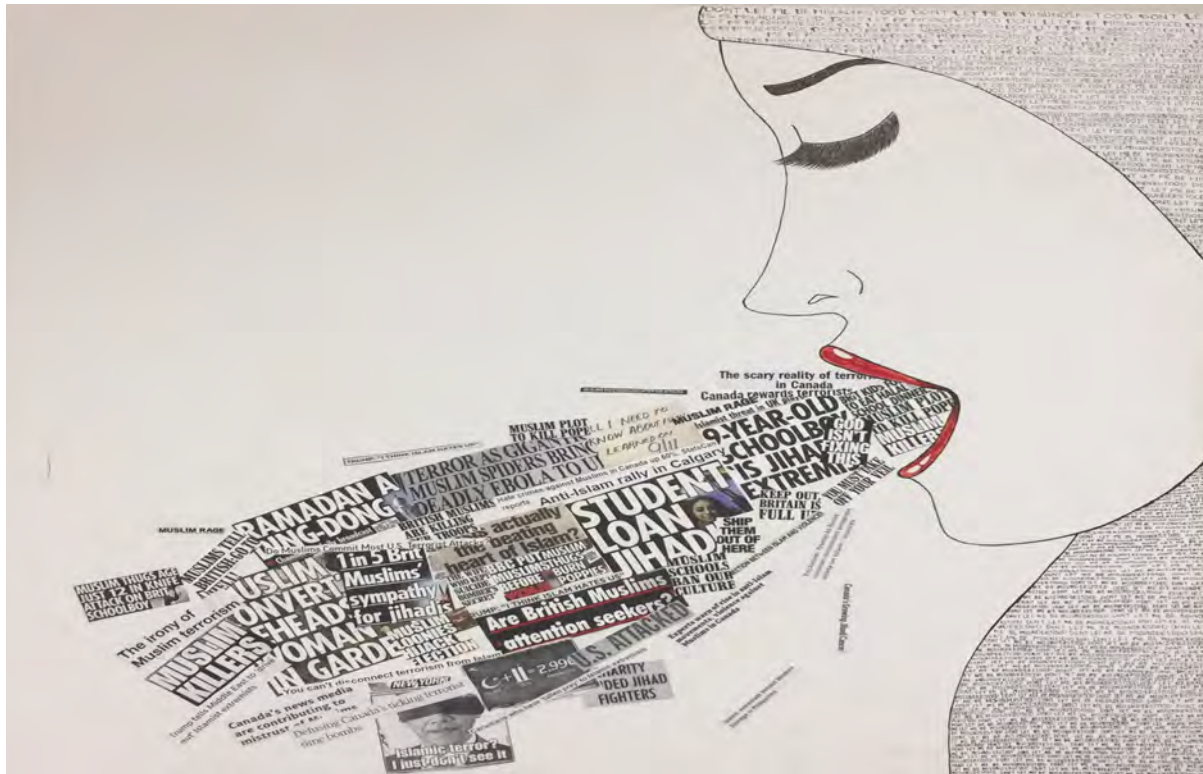

Fig. 8: This canvas represents the danger of single stories that students have learned to internalize and accept as a dominant narrative.

I realized that my students were living with a contradiction of the love they have for Islam in conjunction with the guilt and, even self-hatred, that dominant narratives have inspired. The idea of a violent, extremist, terrorist Muslim isn't foreign and has sadly made many Muslims—including my students—accept the fear of others towards Islam as their own fault. This is the danger of a single story, as it stems

from the concept of looking at a group from one point of view and judging them based on that . . . a story that can become internalized by members of that very group.

Yet there was hope, as one student wrote: "After listening to Adichie's talk, I captured three main lessons from it for myself: do not judge anything at all based on a single story, stories have power, and that stories can change anything."

It was through their responses that I also came to better understand what Huber et al. (2013) meant when they stated that, "each story, whether personal, social, institutional, cultural, familial, or linguistic, is alive, unfinished, and always in the making; stories continue to be composed" (p. 227). I knew then that we needed to continue composing our stories (and understandings of them) as we dealt with the trap and tensions of the single story of Muslims.

Fig. 9: This collage speaks to some of the competing and conflicting single stories this student feels she is living through.

Imagining Counterstories

At this point, I realized that we all needed to step outside the dominant and deficit stories of Muslims. I began to turn my attention toward the counterstories emerging in the students' stories of their lives. Thinking narratively is central in shaping counterstories (Lindemann Nelson, 1995) that disrupt dominant narratives. Lindemann Nelson describes counterstories as "narratives of resistance and insubordination that allow communities of choice to challenge and revise the paradigm stories the 'found' communities in which they are embedded" (p. 24).

Discussing this idea with the students, we realized that to change the story the world had of us, we had to "imagine other possibilities, restorying our own and our relational stories" (Huber et al., 2003, p. 344).

We were on the journey to "map out an alternative understanding of resistance on school landscapes" (Huber et al., 2004, p. 193) that involved the students and I co-making a narrative inquiry as pedagogy space, and through this negotiation possibly the potential remaking of our lives.

This was illustrated when we moved back into a large group discussion about the dangers of a single story and the tensions of their/our identity(ies) being negotiated. I then asked the students to consider three specific questions in our discussion:

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

What came next astounded me. The students wanted to create a new mind map in response to my original question, "What is the story of a Muslim?" They came up with a new name: "Muslims: Version 2.0 in Real Life." The students decided to co-create their own "counterstory…a narrative told within a chosen community that allows the teller the ability to reenter and reclaim full citizenship within the found community of place in which the teller lives" (Lindemann Nelson, 1995, p. 229).

Fig. 10: Whiteboard showing students' thought processes before and after watching Adichie's (2009) "The Danger of a Single Story."

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

These mind maps were a way for the students to map out their understanding and resistance of the dominant narrative. The mind maps were symbolic of their tensions and negotiations with the single dominant story of Muslims against their *lived* stories as Muslims. Through their "counterstory" they were imagining possibilities to (re)shape their communities and world(s), as they felt empowered to reenter and reclaim full control of their narrative and challenge the negative single stories of Muslims. The words of Adichie certainly resonated for students at this point. They realized: "Stories matter. Many stories

matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."

(Re)Presenting Counterstories

The grade nine students wanted to repair, empower, and humanize Muslims by disrupting the dominant story and creating their own stories. In the midst of becoming, they created their own personal counterstory constructions through different mediums. Words do not do justice in describing their multiple formats, such as writing stories and poems, prezis, trifolds, digital presentations, posters, canvas paintings, pencil drawings, cartoons, skits, 3D flowers, suitcases, and more. However, hopefully the images below and throughout this article give a sense of their beautiful resolve.
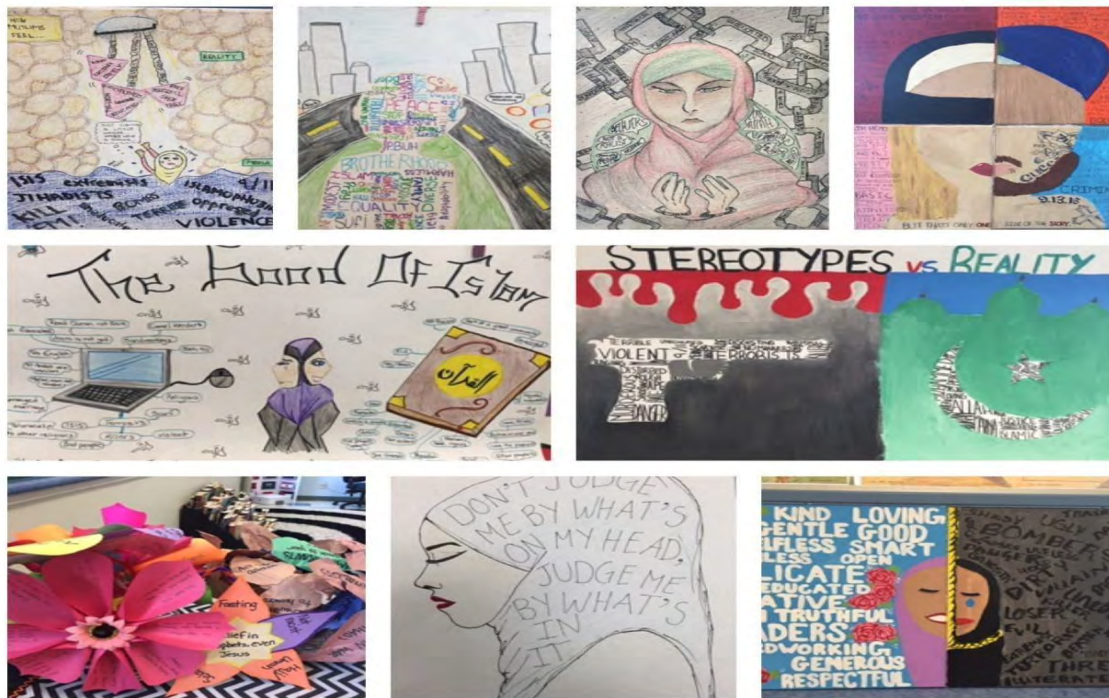

Fig. 11: Collage showing examples of student work that illustrate their counterstories through different mediums.

Clandinin and Connelly define "image" as a component of personal practical knowledge based on the narrative unity of an individual's life. "The calling forth of images from a history, from a narrative of experience" … opens potential for the images(s) "to guide us in making sense of future situations" (Clandinin, 1985, p. 363). As I thought about this important internal process, I was reminded of my six-year-old self who drew herself as a Ukrainian dancer. I came to realize that the image was like a "glue that melds together a person's diverse experiences, both personal and professional" (p. 379). Images of student work (Figure 11) illustrate "possibilities for imagining counterstories; stories that hold tremendous potential for educative reverberations in lives, in and outside schools" (Huber et al., 2013, p. 229).

Amplifying Our Voices and Stories

On this landscape, I hope, like my Muslim sister Muna Saleh, that "educators, researchers, and community members from within and across Muslim and other Canadian communities… will listen to, foreground, and amplify our voices rather than presuming to speak to, about, and/or for us" (Saleh, 2019, p. 288). But how do you do this? How we can amplify the voices of young Muslims was something that I had to really contemplate. This task is very difficult but important for me. However, it is important to articulate and increase understanding to amplify the voices of Muslim youth and children, through providing mirrors, as well as windows and sliding glass doors (Sims Bishop, 1990).

Fig. 12: Mural symbolizing the need to amplify the voices of young Muslims rather than presuming to speak to, about, and/or for them.

It is vital that we provide many mirrors for children and youth to see themselves, as well as windows through which other diverse worlds can be viewed. As educators, it is also important to be mindful about single stories of the Muslim experience. Muslims in literature are usually only seen in the context of Islamic communities, rather than in cross-cultural spaces and interactions. It is important that Islam is portrayed as a natural part of a child's life, rather than some exotic and foreign religion, and that it is only *one* part of their multi-layered identity, because what is excluded is often as telling as what is included. Sims Bishop (1990) asserted, "when children cannot find themselves reflected…, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part".

What I take away from this profound experience is that as an educator, I am learning as I co-compose my being and living curriculum with students, and co-compose my being and a lived/living curriculum with students in which we are each continuously in a process of becoming. Teaching and learning is a

fluid process which is unfinished; my guiding principle is to always engage in inquiry into "experience and to follow where it leads" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 188) as I continue to come alongside students, families, teachers, and administrators. As I have come alongside students in this way, I have experienced their deep acknowledgement that there are no single stories, and too their openness to world travel. I wonder, in the broader social contexts where the students are also composing their lives, if the people with whom they interact are also seeking to move beyond single stories of them, and to travel to their multiple and diverse worlds.

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Amanah Eljaji has 20 years of teaching and leadership experiences in Canadian and International school contexts. She began her journey teaching junior high Language Arts and Social Studies for eight years. Amanah then spent five years working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where she had the opportunity to work with students from diverse backgrounds. Eight years ago, she returned once again to Canada to serve as a Humanities Coordinator. Her passion for learning, stories, and counterstories led her to pursue and earn her Masters of Education at the University of Alberta.