

Understanding Islam in the U.S. Classroom

A Guide for Elementary School Teachers

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Introduction

The blending of various ethnicities, cultures, religions, and languages in the United States has made our schools both diverse and complex. Even though the mission statements and visionary goals of U.S. schools often tout diversity as an asset to be celebrated, many individuals and groups face prejudice and discrimination because of their cultural and religious backgrounds.

These negative attitudes, including prejudice, form at an early age. Children at the elementary school level frequently develop negative perceptions about people who are different from themselves. Without an understanding of diverse cultures and their religious beliefs, both locally and around the world, young people are unable to grasp the issues that can impact their lives. This knowledge will assist their decision-making abilities now and in the future.

In order to help students understand different aspects of diversity and eradicate negative perceptions, the inclusion of “multicultural education” in elementary classrooms has become critical in the U.S. For example, in the wake of the twin towers tragedy on September 11, 2001, it became even more apparent that Islam is a highly misunderstood religion in the U.S.

It is important to understand that Islam, like other world religions, is comprised of a multiplicity of cultures, perspectives, and worldviews that are often overlooked in the minds of many whose perceptions have been influenced by acts of terror that are conducted by a few. In order to remove

negative stereotypes associated with Islam and its followers, educators must introduce and explain the common values associated with Islam in a manner that elementary-age children can understand.

The purpose of this article is to provide multiple strategies that can be used by elementary school educators to help students develop a greater understanding of Islam and its followers.

The Roots of Islam in the U.S.

Contrary to popular notions, the presence of Islam and practicing Muslims in the U.S. is not a recent phenomenon. These roots can be traced all the way back to the time of Columbus’ arrival in the New World (Mufti, 2004). The influx of Muslims continued in America during the slave trades, as many slaves who were brought to this country were followers of Islam.

Thus, from the very inception of the U.S. as a nation, the demographics of this country have not only been multicultural and multiracial, but multireligious as well. It is imperative, through the study of historical and cultural contexts, that our children understand what it means to live in a diverse and democratic country like the U.S. For elementary children, these age-appropriate contexts need to include awareness about the diversity of the beliefs and customs of people, not only globally but also within our own borders, and as they are reflected within each classroom. Among many key aspects of culture, awareness about diversity should include comprehension of different religious beliefs in order for students to understand the true meaning of democracy.

The importance of understanding various religions has been clearly articulated in a position statement of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). According to the NCSS (1990), “knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person, but is also abso-

lutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity.” This statement clearly reminds us of the importance of teaching about different religions in order for our children to become informed citizens.

Why Teach about Islam?

Islam is one of the fastest growing religions of the world, with over a billion adherents—representing about one fifth of the world’s population. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 2.6 million Muslims reside in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2011). However, some studies estimate the number of Muslims in the U.S. to be much higher (*New York Times*, January 27, 2011).

The Muslim population in the U.S. includes people who have immigrated here from many different countries as well as those Muslims who were already here and yet others who have converted to the Islamic faith. Throughout American history people from many different religions, including Islam, have lived together, making the U.S. one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world (Gomez, 1994; Huntington, 2004).

Recently Islam has become a highly misunderstood religion in the U.S., with many Americans holding inaccurate and negative perceptions about Islam and Muslims (Ayers & Reid, 2005; Gollnick & Chinn, 2009; Meacham, 2009). Such misunderstandings about Islam are in part the outgrowth of reporting on the unfortunate events of September 11, 2001, the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and events such as the Fort Hood shootings in Texas and the controversies about the Ground Zero Mosque in New York.

In addition, many of these negative perceptions have stemmed from the false and stereotypic portrayal of Islam by the popular media, as well as by some religious and political leaders (Meacham, 2009).

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Moore (2006a) succinctly pointed out that negative perceptions such as these underscore the importance of teaching about Islam and Muslims in American classrooms. In order to eliminate the negative perceptions about Islam, it is necessary to address this topic early in children's lives. This is most effective in the elementary grades. Children at that age are beginning to develop perceptions about people who are different from themselves and starting to acquire their prejudices from various sources (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2006).

Without being taught accurate perceptions about local and global diversity, these young people will be unable to comprehend issues that may affect them later in life (Merryfield, 2004). Furthermore, having children form accurate understandings surrounding the beliefs and customs of Islam will contribute to the national interests of the U.S. (Nord & Hayes, 1998). Without multicultural education that accurately informs children, we risk depriving children of the opportunities to understand and adequately communicate with 23% of the world's population who are practicing Muslims.

Teachable Moments

Most of the classrooms in U.S. schools mirror the diverse make-up of our contemporary society. Like society, the typical classroom is comprised of students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as students from different religious backgrounds.

Among these diverse religions found in American classrooms, students from the Islamic faith may follow very strict dress codes or dietary restrictions. For example, a female student may come to school wearing a head covering. A Muslim student may not eat anything at the cafeteria because the food items on that day contain pork (which is prohibited for Muslims). Or a student may abstain from eating because he or she may be fasting during the month of Ramadan.

Such behaviors of Muslim students may generate curiosity among other students. Non-Muslim students may wonder "Why is that girl covering her hair with a scarf?" or "Why is that student not eating pepperoni pizza?" Or "Why is that student not eating lunch?" These are appropriate questions for elementary school children to ponder.

Questions like these provide teachable moments for teachers. These are opportu-

nities to open up discussion about Islam. As Nord and Haynes (1998) have pointed out, "teachers should discuss religion whenever it 'naturally' comes up."

For many educators, however, addressing issues pertaining to any religion may be a challenge. Teachers have to be cognizant of issues related to the First Amendment, the separation of church and state, and the need to carefully respect the feelings and privacy of all students. The First Amendment, however, does not prohibit teaching about religion as long as such instruction is not in the form of indoctrination.

There are some informative and non-biased approaches that can be utilized to initiate discussions of Islam in a classroom. The following strategies are presented to provide some ideas for teachers as they seek to address the topic of Islam with their elementary-age students.

The Concept of Similarities

According to the latest available U.S. Census data, the majority of the people in the U.S. practice Christianity. Therefore, in the classroom I suggest starting by comparing religious concepts that are similar between Islam and Christianity. Educators can expand this comparative concept to other religions that may be prevalent in their classrooms.

There are many similarities in the basic principles that are shared by Islam and Christianity. Instead of addressing differences, educators can initiate classroom conversation by pointing out the similarities between these religions. It is also important to remember that children tend to be more receptive when they can relate to the similarities rather than differences among concepts and people.

Teachers can begin by guiding students to think about the basic concepts or beliefs of Christianity (or Islam) and then put their thoughts in writing. Teachers can then collect these writings and identify some common ideas and beliefs that have been reflected across the classroom.

For example, some of the basic principles of Christianity that children may identify with could be: belief in one God, belief in Jesus Christ, belief in the concept of heaven, following the teachings of the Christian holy book (the *Bible*), offering prayers, giving and charity, and fasting (during Lent). Children may also refer to specific biblical stories about Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Noah. Several religious denominations in the U.S. (for example,

Mennonite, Mormon, Lutheran, Baptist etc.) have practices in which women cover their heads using bonnets or other head coverings.

After compiling such a list of general basic beliefs of Christianity, teachers can then compare these with the basic beliefs of Islam. When comparing the two religions, teachers can point out the following basic concepts of Islam. Muslims believe in one God (Muslims refer to God as Allah); Muslims consider Muhammad, Jesus, Abraham, Moses, and Noah to all be prophets of God who came to guide people; Muslims also believe in the concept of heaven and hell and follow the teachings from their holy book (the *Quran*); they pray several times a day; giving and charity (called Zakat); and fast for thirty days during the month of Ramadan. Many Muslim women, though not all, cover their heads with scarves called Hijab.

This comparative activity has also been used with students enrolled in a multicultural education course at a public university. The majority of these students were pursuing careers as elementary school teachers and were surprised to discover so many similarities between Islam and Christianity. Students even expressed disappointment that they were not exposed to this knowledge earlier in their lives.

Exposing elementary school children to a positive and non-biased learning environment early in their lives can enhance tolerance and awareness of other's beliefs. Furthermore, educators can also invite to the classroom a practicing Muslim from the community to answer additional questions raised by these curious young minds in order to better understand Islam.

The Concept of Diversity

The classroom discussion need not be limited to the basic principles of Islam. Rather it can be extended to other areas. Some teachers may not feel comfortable addressing the specific beliefs and principles of the religion, or they may not feel knowledgeable enough to talk about the fundamentals of Islamic faith. For these educators, focusing on the diversity within Muslim cultures might be a better path toward fostering an understanding of Islam in their classrooms. Educators might also find this approach to be more acceptable to parents who might have strong views on the topic.

Many Americans associate Islam with Arabs, or people originating from the Middle East. Muslims are thought to be a

monolithic entity, all originating from the Middle East. Such a perception is highly inaccurate. Muslims are as diverse as any other population within the U.S. Muslims originate from many nationalities on many continents, speak many different languages, have diverse socioeconomic statuses, and are represented by diverse cultural backgrounds. The common bonds among Muslims are the teaching from the Holy Book (*Quran*) and the teachings of Prophet Mohammad. In this sense, one may conclude that “Muslims share a common Islamic culture, focusing on shared principles and values” (CIE, 1995). However, in terms of ethnicity, regions, and customs, Muslims vary widely when it comes to cultural traditions such as language, food, clothing, social etiquettes, etc.

According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2010), Muslims represent an estimated 1.57 billion of the world’s population. Other sources suggest the number to be between 1.6 to 1.8 billion. Regardless of the actual number, it is clear that Muslims occupy a significant percentage of the world’s total population of seven billion people.

However, only 20% of Muslims are Arabs or originate from the Middle East (the Pew Forum, 2010). The vast majority of Muslims live outside of the Middle East. In fact, Indonesia has the world’s largest concentration of Muslims in the world and Indonesia’s native language is not Arabic. The diversity among Muslims was captured in a single phrase by Findley (2001), “Islam is a universal, multicultural, and multiracial religion.”

Understanding the diversity within Islam can help students in elementary schools realize that Muslims are no different than other Americans who are also diverse in terms of ethnicity, geographic locations, languages, and customs. As in the previous approach or strategy, teachers can invite Muslims from various ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds from the community into the classroom to help students see the diverse nature of Muslims within our society.

Contributors and Their Contributions

A third approach or strategy focuses on the historical contributions made by scholars from the Muslim world in various fields or disciplines. This strategy may be particularly suitable for teachers who are expert in their respective discipline and may therefore feel more comfortable

using this approach rather than focusing on similarities or diversity. However, this approach may require teachers to do some research in order to gather information about the contributions of Muslim scholars. To help with this process, some references will be cited in this section which can be used as a springboard for further research.

Similar to the socio-economic diversity seen among the Muslim population, the contributions of Muslim scholars in various fields are also diverse in nature. An introduction to Islam can be initiated by acknowledging the accomplishments and contributions made by scholars who happen to be of the Islamic faith. Few Americans are aware of Muslim intellectual accomplishments in the areas of science, mathematics, and medicine.

Mathematics and the Concept of “Zero”

The contributions of Muslims in these fields have been portrayed by Bruce Reichert (1993) in an article entitled “Not All of Those Giants Were European.” Reichert described how Muslim scholars enhanced knowledge in the subject areas of Earth Science, Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, and Medicine. For example, while discussing the contributions of Muslims in the field of mathematics, Reichert explained how the concept of “zero” came to the Western world from Arab Muslims.

Similarly, the introduction of “zero” to the Western world was highlighted by Ali Abdullah Al-Daffa’ (1977) in a book titled *The Muslim Contribution to Mathematics*. Daffa’ pointed out that “this specific invention marks one of the significant turning points in the development of Mathematics.”

Although some students may know that the number system used in the United States is identified as the Arabic Number System, very few know where the concept of “zero” came from. Many students perceive this to be another invention of the Western world, but that is not case. Highlighting this important contribution from Muslims in mathematics can help students to realize that Muslims come from all walks of life—ranging from ordinary people to great scholars.

The contributions of Muslims in other areas of mathematics have also been well documented (Daffa’, 1977; Reichert, 1993). Developments in the areas of algebra, geometry, and trigonometry can be traced to Muslim scholars. For example, in trigonometry, the functions of

‘sine,’ ‘cosine,’ and ‘tangent’ were developed by Muslim scholars “with Mohammed Ibn Jabir Batanni being considered ‘the father’ in this field of mathematics” (Daffa’, 1977).

Science and Medicine

Muslim scholars’ contributions to the body of scientific knowledge have also included Earth Science, Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, and Medicine. The origin of the word “Chemistry” came from the Arabic word “Alchemy.” Abu Musa Jabir Ibn Hayyam is known as the “Father of Arabic Chemistry.” According to Reichert (1993), “he is credited with discovering several chemical compounds, scientifically describing calcinations and reduction, and working on methods for evaporation, sublimations, and crystallization.”

Contributions of Muslims in Biomedical Science abound in the literature. Among many Muslim physicians, the most famous in the Western world is Ibn Sina, known popularly as Avicenna. Through Europe he established free hospitals and developed treatments for diseases using herbs, hot baths, and major surgeries (Faruqi, 2006). Ibn Sina’s famous book *The Canon of Medicine* was used widely in Europe’s medical schools (Beshore, 1998; Meyers, 1964). Like Ibn Sina, the similarly named Al-Razi Ibn Sina was also known for his famous books *Kitab al Shifa (Book of Healing)* and *Treatise on Smallpox and Measles* (Faruqi, 2006).

Al-Razi Ibn Sina’s contributions to mental health are highlighted in Faruqi’s article, where she noted,

... he established separate wards in hospitals for the mentally ill, thereby creating the means for clinical observations of these diseases. Al-Razi also included in his studies ideas involving human behavior. He was a pioneer in the field of psychology, thus removing the theories of demons and witchcraft associated with these diseases.

The contributions of Ibn Sina and Al-Razi Ibn Sina are just a few examples of Muslim accomplishments in the field of medicine. Contributions of other Muslim physicians can also be found in many journals and books.

The “Golden Age”

When Europeans were experiencing the Dark Ages, the advancement of the scientific world did not come to a standstill. During that period Muslim scholars were engaged in the development of

scientific knowledge which provided the groundwork for many academic fields. For Muslim scholars, instead of the Dark Ages, this period is known as the "Golden Age." Their contributions to many areas have been succinctly captured by Falagas, Zarkadoulia, and Samonis (2006) who note "the contemporary world owes much of its progress in all fields of human intellectual activity, including medicine, to Arabic culture, especially the advancements made during the Golden Age of Arabic-Islamic science."

Conclusion

In our current age of global interdependence, tolerance and understanding among people from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds is vital for human existence. However, before realizing the importance of tolerance and understanding from a global perspective, these characteristics must be taught and developed within each individual country's local perspective. This is particularly applicable for a country like the U.S. which is extremely diverse with respect to cultural and religious beliefs.

Among the many different religions that are practiced in the U.S, Islam has become a highly controversial and misunderstood faith. In order to promote a better understanding of the beliefs central to Islam, it is important for the American public to have a more accurate understanding of and appreciation for the followers of Islam. This can occur if children are taught early in their lives about Muslims and the religion of Islam.

The significance of learning about Islam was highlighted by James Moore (2006b) when he stated, "It is in the country's best interest to educate citizens about Islam." It is my strong conviction that it

must start at the elementary school level. My hope is that the issues and approaches described in this article will provide educators with a starting point toward building tolerance, understanding, and appreciation among and between people of non-Islamic faith and the followers of Islam.

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