ANTI-RACISM IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION

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Abstract

As an institution in one of the most racially diverse communities in the United States, Islamic schools are uniquely positioned to incorporate multicultural anti-racism education. While the literature in multicultural anti-racism education is growing, to date there are no studies on multicultural and anti-bias education in Islamic schools. This exploratory study fills that gap and assesses the current needs. Trends in K-12 anti-bias education, interviews, and surveys with Islamic school teachers point to the ways in which MuslimARC’s pilot “All from Adam and Hawa” K-12 Islamic education program can serve as a model of introducing multicultural anti-bias curriculum.

In a YouTube video by MuslimARC entitled “Unfinished Business,”, Dawud Walid, the Executive Director of the Michigan chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR-Michigan) recounts how his child experienced racism at an Islamic school. His experience is not unique, as parents, students, and Islamic school educators across the United States and Canada share similar stories. According to Lipka (July 27, 2015), the Muslim community is the second most racially diverse religious community in the United States. As institutions of the Muslim Diaspora, Islamic schools operate within the intersections of Islamophobia - a global discourse that criminalizes Muslims - and anti-Black racism, which dehumanizes and criminalizes people of African descent. The internalization of model minority myth and the prevalence of ethnic chauvinism can and have lead to horizontal oppressions of marginalized communities. The Inter-Ethnic Relations Study (2015) published by MuslimARC surveyed over 500 Muslims across North America and found that 59% of Muslims reported they had been discriminated against in Muslim communities. 79% of Black-identified and mixed-race Muslims reported discrimination within their communities. Islamic schools often lack resources to develop anti-racism curriculum for weekend, afterschool, and full-time Islamic schools. MuslimARC’s “All from Adam and Hawa K-12” program offers new directions in teacher training and the introduction of multicultural anti-bias education in today’s schools by making thattraining flexible and accessible.

**Statement of Problem**

There are an estimated 2,106 mosques in the United States and 76% have weekend programs, totaling approximately 1600 education programs ([Bagby, 2012](http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/The-American-Mosque-Report-2.pdf)), 250 full time weekday Islamic schools, and an estimated 40,000 students enrolled in Islamic schools in the US ([Kari Huus, 2011](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/43331744/ns/us_news-life/t/islamic-schools-rise-us-struggle-acceptance/#.VYNZkWA7T_Q)). Muslim educators face many challenges to developing standards of multicultural and anti-bias curriculum in Islamic schools, from a lack of resources to resistance to dedicating instruction time to the topic of multicultural education. This is largely due to the nature of serving a marginalized and racially diverse population. However, the accounts by students, teachers, administrators, and parents point to the need for developing inclusive practices to serve this diverse community.

Drawing from interviews with Islamic school teachers, state of the art in K-12 and early education anti-bias education, and MuslimARC’s groundbreaking Inter-Ethnic Relations Study, this paper will outline trends in the field of anti-racism and offer ways in which Islamic School teachers can integrate anti-bias and anti-racism education in their curriculum. MuslimARC’s pilot “All from Adam and Hawa” teacher training program and lesson plans suggest new directions in incorporating anti-bias education. Ultimately, this paper aims to explore ways in which teachers and administrators can create spaces that embrace the pluralism of the American Muslim community in way that allows embodies Islam’s egalitarian ethos.

**Review of Literature**

Nations with a colonial past and history of racism discrimination, such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and even the United Nations mandate anti-racism education as part of the national curriculum. The United States, however, does not have a national curriculum. The landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which desegregated schools, highlights the role that social science plays in racial justice. As Zirkel and Cantor (2004) point out, *Brown* did not indicate how to create multicultural environments. Over the past 50 years, however, education practitioners and researchers have sought methods for creating multicultural environments where students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds can thrive. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects people from discrimination due to race, color, or national origin when a program receives federal assistance. states, “No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” All public schools, colleges and universities, as well as most private colleges and universities which also receive some assistance, are covered under Title VI. Teacher training programs offer courses in multicultural education and policies and funding also drive research into education outcomes. Islamic schools, which do not receive federal assistance, are not required to incorporate multicultural curriculum or staff development. Further, many teachers at weekend, afters chool, and even full time Islamic schools are not certified and unlikely to have studied multicultural anti-bias education

Anti-racism education has developed out of critiques of multicultural education. Multicultural education focused on intergroup harmony, education underachievement, individual prejudice, equality opportunity, celebration of diversity, and increasing pride through celebrating cultural heritage. Mansfield and Kehoe (1994) explain that anti-racism education, on the other hand, highlights intergroup equity, educational disadvantage, institutional racism, equality of outcome, unequal power relationships, and on cultivating critical analysis (p. 419). The Crossroads Anti-Racism training website cite Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Ed (2012), who write, “Anti-Bias, Anti-Racist (ABAR) Education supports all children’s full development in our multiracial, multilingual, multicultural world and gives them the tools to stand up to prejudice, stereotyping, bias, and eventually to institutional ‘isms’.”

MuslimARC has chosen anti-racism education as a basis for its curriculum given the systemic racism present in the United States and the ethnic hegemonies that exist within American mosques and Islamic schools. Anti-Racism is defined as the ongoing process of dismantling racism. MuslimARC’s All from Adam and Hawa K-12 program covers early education, elementary, middle school, and high school curriculum with age appropriate lessons. It builds upon several approaches as a conceptual framework for anti-bias education. Anti-bias education is a growing and dynamic field, with academic studies, textbooks, and books geared towards teachers and administrators interested in improving the classroom. W*hat if All the Kids Were White (2011)*  provides guiding principles for early childhood anti-bias multicultural education geared towards White children. *Beyond Heroes and Holidays* (2009)provides strategies for educators in K-12 classrooms and for staff development. *Everyday Racism: Getting Real about Race in School* (2008) is a collection of essays that guides educators and administrators through complex issues surrounding race, identity, diversity, and learning environments. Taken together, these works are helpful for leading discussions among education practitioners, creating learning objectives, and developing strategies for issues that arise in the classroom and in school life. These three texts, however, do not offer curriculum guidelines or provide extensive examples for putting the ideas and principles into action. In contrast to the texts, online resources such as *Teaching For Tolerance* provides clear curriculum guides and even lesson plans for literature based anti-racism education. While these texts are useful, some Islamic school teachers have expressed the challenge of adapting online lessons into their curriculum. Educators have to search through websites for possible lesson plans and curriculum guides. Further, much of the anti-racism curriculum often focuses on a Black/White binary.

To date, there are no studies on anti-bias education within multiethnic Muslim settings. With diverse student populations and pressures due to overlapping Islamophobia, xenophobia, and anti-black racism, the Islamic school learning environment can provide a unique view into the efficacy of anti-bias education and its impact on student life.

**Methods**

With the dearth of literature on anti-bias in Islamic schools, an exploratory study is essential in determining the needs of multicultural and anti-racism education in Islamic schools in the United States. This study draws on the researcher’s experience teaching in Islamic schools, as well as two informal interviews and conversations with Islamic school teachers administrators, and an online survey with a small sample size of six participants. The first part of the survey measures asks participants to rate anti-bias education needs and the second part of the study is a self reported study aimed at measuring self-efficacy in incorporating anti-bias or anti-racist education in the classroom.

Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to complete a given task. In the field of education, self-efficacy is essential for teachers’ motivations to incorporate new and challenging teaching methods in the classroom (Bandura, 1994). Salvik and Salvik (2010) write: “Based on social cognitive theory teacher self-efficacy may be conceptualized as individual teachers' beliefs in their own ability to plan, organize, and carry out activities that are required to attain given educational goals” (p. 1059). Measures of self-efficacy can indicate the likelihood for teachers to integrate anti-bias and anti-racism education in the classroom. It aims to measure self-efficacy in four areas: 1) Instruction, 2) Classroom Practices, 3) Teacher Leadership, and 4) Family and Community Engagement.

Drawing on the *Teaching For Tolerance* list of domains, this study outlines MuslimARC’s anti-racism teacher training program and considers ways to develop it further. As an exploratory study, this research aimed to get a sense of teacher perceptions about the need for anti-bias education and to determine their sense of self-efficacy in four fields of anti-bias education: Instruction, Classroom Practices, Teacher Leadership, and Family and Community Involvement. As Jamilah Karim (2009) has pointed out, African-American Muslims are more likely to place their children in schools where South Asians or Arabs are the dominant group; however, South Asian and Arab Muslims are not likely to place their children in majority Black schools. This study is limited in that it has not analyzed the anti-bias education in the Clara Muhammad school system, the largest African-American private school system organized by Muslims within the Warith Deen Muhammad community.

**Assessing the Need**

MuslimARC is in the beginning stages of developing research around anti-bias education and outcomes. There are many possible areas to determine the efficacy of MuslimARC education curriculum. The first respondent was Nurah Petross, an educator in Michigan. Although Petross has not taken the online training, Petross has first-hand knowledge of the K-12 All from Adam and Hawa lesson plan format and the goals and aims of MuslimARC’s education curriculum development. Petross wrote, “I think Muslim ARC's education services provides relevant effective training and discourse, creating new lenses and space for inclusion and understanding, improved race relations and healthy social development throughout Muslim communities.” When asked whether MuslimARC education would be helpful, Petross responded, “We are an increasingly diverse umma but often lack necessary tools and understanding to bridge social and cultural gaps in order to prepare students to meet their full potential and responsibility in a global society.”

The second interview features Susan Smith, who has years of experience as a principal of an Islamic school. Smith explains:

The biggest issue is that most people and certainly educators in Islamic school are color blind and they don’t perceive and understand privilege. They may have an awareness of issues they face as Muslims, but in terms of racism, they say they are not racist. The fact that we live in a racist society and most of us carry biases [...] spills over into the classroom and it perpetuates students picking up and internalizing systemic racism and continued normalization of what is unacceptable for our sisters and brothers of color.

As Susan Smith indicates, the colorblind approach emphasizes sameness of the students. However, many Muslim congregations are multiethnic and within Muslim environments there are certain privileges afforded to students in the normative school culture. Furthermore, students may be differentiated in terms of language, with native Arabic speakers having certain advantages within Arabic and Qur’anic recitation classes. The colorblind approach to education prevents us from seeing the ways in which educators and students internalize dominant racist and orientalist narratives about themselves and others. The experiences of discrimination and marginalization in Islamic schools betray our religion’s egalitarian principles. Additionally, negative racialized experiences in Islamic schools can prevent the formation of positive Muslim identities for our students.

The survey was developed with the intent of becoming a pre and post assessment of MuslimARC’s teacher training courses. At this time, none of the teacher in the training program have completed the entire series of courses. Despite these limitations, the preliminary findings indicate that teachers are most interested in creating an anti-bias classroom or learning environment and an increased knowledge of anti-racism. They are least interested in creating anti-racism stand-alone lessons. In terms of instruction, teachers agree that they can use anti-racism terminology and teacher lessons. However, in general they do not agree that they feel confident in their knowledge of anti-racism. The initial findings indicate the importance of training teachers about anti-racism content and teaching methods of dialogue and discussion.

**All from Adam: Recommendations for Practical Implementation**

Founded in 2014, MuslimARC is a human rights education organization that is currently developing curriculum and standards based on best practices and research. The curriculum developed by the Southern Poverty Law Center, *Teaching for Tolerance*, outlines critical practices to help teachers work effectively with the four anti-bias domains: Identity, Diversity, Justice and Action. Working within a multiethnic climate, as a religious minority all Muslims students have to contend with questions about identity and marginalization. MuslimARC curriculum education is shaped by four values: 1. Deep appreciation of diversity, 2. Standing for justice against oppression, 3, Cross cultural dialogue and relations, and 4. Racial equity. Out of these values, six competencies serve as measures for the inculcation of anti-racism values for Muslim educators, administration, and students: 1. Self-Reflection to Increase self Awareness; 2. Continuous Learning; 3. Minimizing Racial Microaggressions; 4. Taking Personal Action; 5. Taking Action at Work/School; and 6. Educating Others. In partnership with a Canadian diversity consulting firm, MuslimARC has developed an anti-racism self assessment to measure these competencies.

Drawing upon the four values and six competencies, MuslimARC is building a repertoire of stand-alone and sequential units for multicultural anti-bias education. After delivering K-12 workshops for three children’s programs - Ansar Academy in Rancho Cucamonga, New Dimensions in Pomona, and the 51st ISNA Convention children’s program - MuslimARC decided the best way to introduce anti-racism is through teacher preparation. MuslimARC is currently in pilot phase with Muslim Community Center in Baltimore and has developed online training with remote support for teachers.

MuslimARC pedagogy is informed by the latest instructional design and anti-oppression pedagogy. Learner Centered Teaching (LCT) is at the core of MuslimARC’s programs and workshops. MuslimARC provides teacher education with two online asynchronous courses: Muslim Anti-Racism 101 and Introduction to Muslim Anti-Racism Education.

The first training course, “Muslim Anti-Racism 101,” focuses on the theoretical and theological foundations of anti-racism education. The three objectives for the course are: 1. Be able to define race and racism and outline the three "I's" of racism: Interpersonal, Internalized, and Institution; 2. Understand Qur'anic ayat, Prophetic narrations, and scholarly sources that support anti-racism ethics and work, and 3. Be able to outline the detrimental effects of racism on Muslim communities and individuals in North America. An outline of the course is pictured here.

Lesson 1: What is Racism?

1:1 Defining Race

1:2 The Myth of Race

1:3 Addressing Racism: the Personal

1:4 Addressing racism: the Structural

Lesson 2: Islam and Race

2:1 A Global Multi-Ethnic Ummah

2:2 Some Theological Considerations

2:3 Standing for Justice

Lesson 3: Racism in North American Muslim Communities

3:1 Race in Muslim communities (demographics)

3:2 Preliminary Findings of the Study of Intra-Muslim Ethnic Relations

3:3: A Way Forward

3: 4 Take the Pledge

This course provides a basic overview of critical race theory before outlining Islamic traditions that correspond to modern definitions of race and the history of ethnic conflict in Muslim societies. The third unit provides an overview of the Interethnic Study and offers several strategies for addressing racism on personal and systemic levels.

The second course offered to Islamic school instructors, “Intro to Anti-Racism Education,” is based off of MuslimARC’s trainer/facilitator guidebook. The online course was developed for the Muslim Community Center in Baltimore as part of a pilot project. The three objectives of the course are: 1. Be able to list the principles and values for Muslim Anti-Racism Education; 2. Understand and reference Anti-Racism Education Standards, 3. Be able to outline to develop lesson plans that utilize MuslimARC pedagogy of either storytelling, dialogue, or project-based learning. The outline of the course is as follows:

1. Principles of Anti-Racism
   1. Principles for MuslimARC Teachers
   2. Islamic Anti-Racism Values
   3. MuslimARC Core Competencies
   4. Teaching for Tolerance
   5. K-23 Anchor Standards and Domains
2. MuslimARC Pedagogy
   1. Multimedia
   2. Storytelling
   3. Dialogue
   4. Project Based Learning
   5. Creating an Anti-Racism Classroom
   6. Planning Your Lesson
   7. Selecting Activities
   8. Facilitating Workshops/Discussion
3. Self Reflection/Assessments
   1. Self Assessment
   2. Classroom Assessment
   3. Course Evaluation

Both courses can be completed at home and at the convenience of instructors, which allows for greater flexibility and accessibility. After completing the online courses, MuslimARC instructional designers work with Islamic school teachers to decide which techniques will work best in a given learning environment. This preliminary study will be expanded with a greater sample and post assessments for instructors who have completed the course. A larger sample and pre-and post assessments will allow for an analysis of correlations between MuslimARC teacher training and self-efficacy.

**Conclusion**

Taking into account the challenge of incorporating anti-racism education in Islamic schools, this paper placed Islamic education in Muslim communities into context of the state of the field of anti-bias, anti-racism education. It then examined survey responses and interviews to determine critical needs for improving Islamic school multicultural education. The final section outlined MuslimARC’s teacher training courses. Islamic schools are in a unique position to incorporate anti-racism education and foster positive self-identities for students who value diversity, justice, and meaningful engagement within Muslim communities and society as a whole. Building upon the four anti-racism domains, Islamic schools can create learning communities that authentically reflect Islam egalitarian ethos.

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