**Building Strong Muslim-American Youth through Civic Engagement**

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**Abstract**

Young Muslim-Americans face a great deal of pressure because of Islamophobia. Civic engagement is a remedy. Students who are given the tools to be informed citizens participate in society confidently. Young people today are more connected to the world around them and politics through social media. In the classroom, it is a Social Studies teacher’s responsibility to provide students with the tools to decipher information before them and form their own opinions through research. Inquiry-based learning is the vehicle to achieving this goal. Promoting the idea of students looking at themselves as journalists makes this task easier as journalism is inquiry and civic engagement. Students can work with journalists giving real world application to the Social Studies classroom.

**Statement of Problem**

Increasingly, young Muslim-American students find themselves caught in a narrative that treats them as “others”. Islamophobia is on the rise. CAIR found that from 2014 to 2016 anti-Muslim bias incidents increased sixty-five percent and hate crime increased from 38 in 2014 to 260 in 2016 (CAIR, 2017). Islamophobic incidents and hateful language causes students to feel pressure that can have damaging effects on their spirits and identities. In Islamic schools, it is important for us to promote civic engagement among our students in order to remind them that they do belong and allow them to participate in the world confidently by applying academic knowledge and Islamic manners.

The concept of civic engagement may be one that is hard for students to grasp at first. Many students and even adults view civic engagement as being exercised at the polling booths, but this is simply not the case. Students are engaging in civics every time they read a news article, go on social media, or form an opinion on a subject. However, information comes at young people fast and without the proper skills and manners, civic engagement can quickly become an exercise in ignorance, anger, and hopelessness. Young people have to be able to sift through misinformation, facts, and opinions in order to take a stand on an issue. Journalists use that skill set every day in order to write articles, produce documentaries, and inform the world. If students are introduced to information through the thought process of a journalist, they not only gain important skills in deciphering information, but learn a lot about themselves as well. Forming opinions after a great deal of thought and research allows students to confidently own their ideas and defend their positions. Confidence is key for young Muslim-Americans to take back their narrative and engage society as an informed citizen.

**Review of Literature**

Social Studies sometimes has a bad reputation as a class in which knowing the names and dates of important individuals and events suffices as a good education. However, this is not what Social Studies is, nor does it qualify as a good Social Studies background; this is preparation to win a trivia game show. Social Studies is the beginning of a student’s involvement in the world around them. It is essential that students have the ability to identify, consider, and research issues in society in order to form their own opinions based on facts (NCSS, 2013). Students form these opinions through inquiry-based activities that ultimately asks them to “communicate their conclusions and take informed action” (NCSS, 2013). Informed action is the most important component. Information is always at a student’s fingertips, but it is not always good information. The world is filled with opinions and it is ever easier for people to express them publically to large audiences via social media.

Social media platforms come in a variety of formats such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr, and Instagram, etc. These websites and apps contain information about any topic. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, sixty-two percent of adults get their news from social media and eighteen percent do so often. Over half of the adults surveyed in this study used on one social media site (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). If adults are following this trend in using social media, young people are doing the same. Research shows that interactions on social media influence a young person’s involvement in politics and civics even if their participation in social media is not explicitly political in intention (Bowyer & Kahne, 2016). Participation in social media is especially important for students and young people who come from minority groups and have fewer socioeconomic resources. Social media and digital media offer young people, who feel their narratives are not regularly found in traditional media sources, an avenue “to learn, to speak out, and to amplify their voices” (Luttig & Cohen, 2016).

However, participation in social media comes with issues. Platforms that provide general anonymity to users who can in turn be retweeted or reposted by someone with credibility does not use the same rigorous fact-checking that traditional media sources are supposed to be held to. Often in the world of social media, news can spread quickly without a lot of critical analysis leading to potentially detrimental consequences. Therefore, Social Studies teachers must work with their students to analyze the information that comes across their screens. “Social Media is not the same as Social Studies” (Paska, 2017). “Googling” something or number of likes does not give something more integrity. At this point, it is a student’s ability to analyze information and preparedness for the world that determines their level of informed civic engagement.

Civic engagement means different things. Two people may get asked to define civic engagement and they may give incredibly different answers. Citizenship is multi-faceted and does not have one definition. Westheimer and Kahne discuss three kinds of citizens: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice oriented citizen. Personally responsible citizens engage in volunteer activities, make donations, and obey laws. The participatory citizen engages in collective efforts such as organizing volunteer activities and views engagement as something done on the group level. Justice oriented citizens look at what causes problems in society and tries to take action to change those underlying causes (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In Islamic schools, service (the personally responsible citizen) is discussed within our curriculums when we talk about Zakat and Sadaqah. The American Mosque Study found that ninety-eight percent of mosques and mosque leaders agree that Muslims should be involved in American institutions and ninety-one percent agree that Muslims should be involved in politics (Bagby, 2012). Civic engagement is not something unusual for the Muslim-American community. It is merely up to students to decide what engagement means to them as they experience it in the classroom.

**Methods**

The C3 Framework describes four dimensions of inquiry-based learning:

1. Developing questions and planning inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action (NCSS, 2013)

Inquiry-based learning requires teachers develop questions that will engage students curiosity. Inquiry is not giving students a topic and putting them in the computer lab in front of a search engine. Inquiry presents students with a compelling question to which they have to create supporting questions that will help them answer the larger question. In order to answer those questions, students will need to find reliable sources and use the various disciplines of Social Studies to answer them. Students will ask questions related to their subject from history, geography, economics, and civics. Under this format, disciplines within Social Studies do not compete for time or attention. Most questions require using all of these tools. When asking a historical question like “What were the outcomes of the American Civil War?”, one does not simply look at one discipline in order to answer the questions completely. Current topics are no different. If you ask students “Is the Muslim Ban unjust?”, students will have to research what countries are impacted, what immigration policies are used to justify it and what are court findings, what other bans have existed historically, what industries are impacting by such a ban, how does Allah (SWT) define “just”. Students will have to determine what resources are good for their research and which sources are reliable? Finally, students must come up with some way to share their findings such as writing a letter, an article, organizing a protest, or calling an elected official.

**Recommendations for Practical Implementation**

Several steps should be taken from the beginning of the year to make your objectives clear. While inquiry is more exciting than sitting and listening to lectures and reading the textbook, it can sound really intimidating to students. Framing the inquiry as journalism can make the task more approachable. Start the year with an introductory inquiry about “What is good journalism?” Students will have to create supporting questions about defining what “good” is, where do journalists find their information, how do they use their information, what are requirements to be a journalist. This inquiry, also, opens doors to discussions about honesty and integrity which can used to discuss the necessity for Muslims to act in ways that are honest and respectful.

Reach out to journalists to have them talk to your students about what their careers and how they engage topics they are researching and what questions they want to answer. Take time in class to engage in current events, especially as they relate to, but not limited to the Muslim community. Inquiry can be used answer questions on the local to global scale. Also, you can ask students to do a quarter/semester inquiry as a project. Inquiry goes hand and hand with project-based learning. Even if not creating a lesson into an inquiry, use open-ended questions using documents and analysis for the lesson to challenge students’ critical thinking skills.

Asking students to form their own opinions can lead to controversy. Gauge your class and your students. Remind students of Islamic manners when dealing with others such as:

* "O Messenger of Allah! It is a great Mercy of God that you are gentle and kind towards them; for, had you been harsh and hard-hearted, they would all have broken away from you" (Quran 3:159)
* "I served Allah's Messenger for ten years and he never said to me, 'Shame' or 'Why did you do such-and-such a thing?' or 'Why did you not do such-and-such a thing?'" (Bukhari, 2038)

Also, inquiry-based learning may involve controversial topics. Be mindful of what students are curious about discuss them using guided exposure. The purpose of Islamic school is not to hide the outside world from students. That is a disservice to them and their families. Instead, we should engage controversial topics with Islamic knowledge and discussion with judgment. Ultimately, students will face controversial subjects at some point in their lives. We fail as educators in Islamic education if we shy away from them and force students to engage them alone.

Most activities students from my school, Lexington Universal Academy, have been involved in have been local in nature. Local organizations are a great option for students to be involved with because they allow students to serve their immediate community and interact with them even on issues that are national in nature. Students have worked with our local Share Center to support food drives, coat drives, and the Day of Dignity in cooperation with the Share Center and Islamic Relief USA to provide essential services to those in need. Students have, also, brought national issues to local audiences. When the Muslim Ban was proposed, former Lexington Universal Academy students organized a protest that called on many different local civic organizations such as the Kentucky Refugee Ministries and our Kentucky Secretary of State, Alison Lundergan Grimes. Organizing local entities around national issues is very effective because it creates solidarity with other groups in the country and shows them that national issues do affect their everyday lives.

The issues you may choose to focus on do not have to be “Muslim” in nature. Climate change is a large concern for future generations. Other social justice issues such as food justice, equal pay and Black Lives Matter may, also, be topics that your students feel passionate about and would like to engage. Linda Sarsour is a great example to share with students as she engages with different national movements from Black Lives Matter to Women’s March because she believes she needs to be a part of any movement that fights oppression as a part of her Muslim identity. It is best to have students look to national movements, but encourage local action because the issues are gigantic and can feel overwhelming. Local action may bring local successes and local unity providing a greater sense of hope and confidence for students as they begin their civic journey.

Inclusion of parents is important to create an environment of civic engagement across the school community. As Muslims, we should never stop learning or seeking knowledge. Islamic schools can provide an opportunity for parents to be involved in their student’s civic life and educated about issues they face. One activity at LUA was a Social Media/Anti-Bullying seminar for parents in cooperation with the Lexington Police Department. This activity was set up so parents could know what their students were seeing and interacting with on social media and how to avoid social problems created by using the platforms. The Parent-Teacher Organization/Association at your school is a great resource as well. Organizing events takes a great deal of time and effort and parents can be a great help in creating successful civic action.

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