Taking Responsibility for Anti-Muslim Discrimination in our Schools
Sarah Childers, Indiana

Amir is in fifth grade. Today is the day of his family history report, which he must give in front of the rest of his class at Skyline Elementary in Daly City, California. He’s nervous because his family is from Iraq, and some of his family has been killed or has had their lives disrupted by the war. Once he finishes his report, he asks if anyone has questions. Amir’s teacher asks him if his family in Iraq supports the war. Amir’s response is that his family has been strong for many years and he doesn’t even know any of his family that’s in Iraq. The teacher asks, “So you don’t know if they are terrorists?” Amir shakes his head.

In Minnesota, a Muslim girl who wears the traditional Islamic head-scarf, or hijab (heeb-jeb), is repeatedly taunted by a schoolmate, called “terrorist,” told to “go back to your country” and “the Qur’an is full of lies.” She tells her school counselor, but no action is taken.

A guest has been invited to speak to Mr. Escamilla’s social studies class at Enlove High School in North Carolina. Kamil Solomon, the head of a group dedicated to “helping Christians share Jesus with Muslims,” proselytizes to the class and distributes pamphlets describing the prophet Muhammad as a “criminal” and “demon-possessed.” The Enlove High School social studies department chair writes to Mr. Solomon, “It is our responsibility as educators to educate students about diversity and to teach students to respect themselves in the mirror to reflect on our own beliefs and attitudes.”

Taking perspective into the classroom about Islam, Muslims, terrorism and the war is crucial. As part of NSRF’s mission to “foster social and educational equity,” it’s our responsibility to further educate ourselves and to provide unbiased information to students and teachers alike, whether or not Muslim or Arab students are a part of our schools. Given the frequency of instances of discrimination at the hands of teachers and students, what is our responsibility to students who are Muslim, or who are perceived to be Muslim? How can we gain understanding and compassion for what these children are going through? What can we do in this society? What support can we give them? And how can we pursue adult and student learning in an effort to eliminate these biases and support our mission for social and educational equity?

To begin to understand and gain compassion for Muslim and Arab students, we have to look at ourselves in the mirror to reflect on our own beliefs and practices. As a nation, we generally do not know very much about Islam, Muslims, or Middle-Eastern cultures. In CAR’s 2006 American poll about Islam and Muslims, only 2% responded that they considered themselves “very knowledgeable” about Islam and Muslims. It is important for us to educate ourselves about changes in the media exposure. For the majority of Americans, is the one number one information source about nearly one-third of the world’s population.

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Given the wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds of Muslims, each individual’s customs and practices are unique. (Only 15% of all Arabs are Muslim; the countries with the largest Muslim

(continued from page 23)
On March 2nd, armed with our agreed upon norms, 53 of us began a text-based reflective conversation with an electronic “Block Party” about these quotes from the preface of Courageous Conversations About Race (chat members are listed at the bottom of this email, but I have removed names because individual confidence is one of our norms).

“It is precisely because few educators have explicitly investigated the taboo intersection of race and achievement that we offer this book. Our rationale is quite simple: We will never eliminate the racial achievement gap unless we have conversations about race.” (page xiv)

Well, isn’t this exactly what I want to engage in these conversations? I don’t know if this quote reflects the truth but I am willing to spend a significant amount of time exploring the intersection because thus far it doesn’t seem like other strategies have worked well to reduce the connection between race and achievement. Perhaps by having these conversations unforeseen ideas will emerge in the area of “what I don’t know that I don’t know.” So, it’s worth the effort to me.

All the quotes are strongly stated assertions: “we will never...” “just believe me,” etc. As premises to operate from, I think they can successfully frame these conversations in ways that are a healthy break from the “business as usual” discourse of schools. They are far more promising working hypotheses rather than “the truth.” -M

“White people, emotionally moved by what they have heard, often approach their client (Glen) at the end of these seminars and ask, ‘So what do I do now?’ ‘How can I be anti-racist?’ ‘How can you forgive me for having been racist?’ ‘How can I fix this?’ Glen’s answer is simple but profound: ‘Just believe me.’” (page xiv)

As a white ally, I feel stuck by the “truth/pain of a colleague of color’s experience when I have to reckon with my piece of responsibility, my role in causing the pain. In the heat of the moment, I may not know what to say. In my discomfort, I may welcome the chance to just move on if nothing has been said, or happened. What I am learning, and it is an ongoing process of learning, is that it is precisely at those uncomfortable moments that I need to slow down and acknowledge what was said/happened and own it. And learn the best way to respond... that I need to think about it, or talk more with colleagues about it. As a coach/facilitator, I am working on holding the space & time for these admittedly intense and awkward conversations because I know that it is only by working in this risky zone that we can move forward. Concretely, this means changing the agenda and being willing to go beyond the tried-and-true steps of the protocol, or if the protocol’s not working. Based on conversations C and I have had in our work, I know that this willingness to ‘hold the space’ is part of her definition of having her back.” -D

“Courageous Conversation, as a strategy, begins the process that the truly educative educational leaders collectively view themselves and the schooling enterprise to be inherently non-racist. In fact their tightly held beliefs and understandings regarding the significance of race make it difficult for teachers to comprehend, examine, and...” (continued on page 19)

population are Indonesia and India.) Students who dress or appear as Muslims may struggle with teasing or threats from peers or even teachers. However, many Muslims do not dress in an obvious way, and their inner struggles are just as painful. Consider some of these questions to help identify how you can best support Muslims in your classroom.

- Are they afraid to come to school?
- Are they scared to practice their religion in school (via dress, prayer, reading scripture, etc.)?
- What accommodation can you offer?
- Do they have family or friends who are affected by war?
- Are they suffering from fatigue, depression or lack of sleep with international family?
- Are there no Muslim teachers in your school and your students are forced into the position of discussing events, family, or their opinions about current events, will be held against them by teachers or principals?
- Have they been threatened or assaulted by fellow students or teachers?
- Are there students in the classroom who have expressed biased opinions or made negative remarks? How can you support those students’ learning and growth?

Even if there are no Muslim students in your classroom, the following ideas for framing conversations about current events, religion, or culture, to do they prefer to avoid attention?

- Are they scared that their perceived connection to current events, or their opinions about current events, will be held against them by teachers or principals?
- Have they been threatened or assaulted by fellow students or teachers?

Finally, I’d like to share my personal connection to this concern. Two years ago, while I was working at the Winter Meeting in Denver, Colorado, I received a phone call from my husband, who was distraught. Our mosque had been the target of an early-morning bombing attempt, which thankfully only caused minor damage and hurt no one. The bomber was by all definitions a terrorist, as the act was designed to bring fear to our community. And it was frightening. The bomber left a burned Qur’an behind.

Many positive things came out of this incident.

- Other religious communities rallied to our side to stand against hate in our town, and our relationships with those partners were further strengthened.
- However, when my husband was interviewed several times on local radio about the incident as a represenative of the mosque, a troubling number of callers couldn’t accept what happened; instead, they suggested that someone at the mosque had done this deliberately as a sympathy play, or that it was “just coming” for all of the terrorism in the Muslim world.

This practice of blaming the victim is all too common even in our teaching tactics used regularly against people of color when they raise questions or criticize about racism.

We cannot afford to be silent about anti-Muslim bias in the thinking or the practices of our schools and communities.

“If the 21st century wishes to free itself from the cycle of violence, acts of terror and war, and avoid repetition of the experience of the 20th century- that most disaster-ridden century of humankind, there is no other way except by understanding and putting into practice every human right for all mankind, irrespective of race, gender, faith, nationality or social status.” - Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Peace Prize Winner and first Muslim woman recipient, 2003.

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Resources

- Islamicity: www.islamicity.com/education
- Understanding Islam and the Muslims: The Muslim Family and World Peace, by T.J. Winter and John Williams
- What Islam Did For Us: Understanding Islam’s Contribution to Western Civilization, by Tim Wallace-Murphy
- The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity, by Seyed Hossein Nasr
- Silent No More: Confronting America’s False Images of Islam, by Paul Findley (former Congressman, D-Ill., 1961-1983)
- Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism, by Omid Safi
- Why I Am a Muslim by Asma Gull Hasan
- Council on American Islamic Relations: www.cair.org

Book Chat

• Are there students in the classroom who have expressed biased opinions or made negative remarks? How can you support those students’ learning and growth?

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