

Bullying Students Who Are Muslim: How Can Teacher Educators Intervene?

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This commentary discusses the problem of bullying as it relates to Muslim students. The authors posit that teacher education programs can impact how Muslim students are treated in schools. In doing so, they provide practical avenues teacher educators can use to prepare pre-service teachers to address the problem.

The recent attacks in the U.S. and Europe, combined with the failure of true understanding of Islam among the public, have created a wave of anti-Muslim bias in the discourse of public perception. This anti-Muslim sentiment has subsequently trickled down from the larger society into our schools. According to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), more than 55% of Muslim students in California have been victims of Islamophobic bullying at schools in 2015 (CAIR, 2016). In a New York City public school, a sixth grade Muslim girl was recently beaten by other students who shouted *ISIS* at her (Winegar, 2016). A 13-year-old student in Vandalia, Ohio, threatened to gun down a Muslim student on a school bus, calling him a *towel head*, a *terrorist*, and *the son of ISIS* (Rizga, 2016). Hafsa Abdi, a student in St. Cloud, Minnesota, was bullied while walking home because she is Muslim. She recalled, “the problem is particularly difficult in the bathroom where she said upperclassman have bullied Somali girls who were preparing to wash themselves before praying” (PBS News Hour, 2016, para 3). According to CNN, American Muslim students are seeking help with bullying, depression, and other issues related Islamophobia. In fact, there has been a 660% increase of Muslim American students seeking help in schools to face these challenges (Stelter, 2015).

BULLYING ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Shyness, anxiety, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, and fear of school are inherent outcomes of school-based bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Sharp, Thompson, & Arora, 2000). These outcomes can have devastating impacts on the lives of bullied students, especially their academic success. For example, research by Spere and Evans (2009) examined the impact of shyness on the development of language and literacy skills of young readers by implementing a model of emergent literacy over a period of three years. When compared to non-shy children, the study concluded that shy children have lower literacy skills in the area of receptive and expressive language development and in the social use of language (Spere & Evans, 2009).

Unfortunately, current anti-bullying strategies might not be the most effective method to combat the harassment and aggression received by Muslim students at schools. In addition to categorizing this harassment as a type of bullying, teachers should also address it as a product of wider trends like Islamic-bias and misinformation that circulates throughout society.

As with differences related to other forms of bullying behavior (Jones, 2014), the broader societal view places Muslim students within an established normalizing structure. This structure dictates how individuals are treated within a community, which perpetuates how those individuals are treated in schools. As members of the school

community, it is important for educators to contemplate their role in creating safe places for Muslim students. As a result, in this commentary, we discuss how teacher education programs can prepare pre-service teachers to create an inclusive classroom environment.

CREATING EMPATHETIC CLASSROOMS

Empathy is one of the most important attributes required in addressing all types of bullying within schools (Jones & Augustine, 2015). Rock, Hammond, and Rasmussen (2002) posit that anti-bullying programs, including lessons in empathy, can dramatically decrease bullying behaviors. Teacher preparation programs should contemplate how their curriculum infuses lessons that prepare future educators to teach empathy to K–12 students.

Promoting empathy by asking all students to experience the emotional state of Muslim students may produce a vicarious response that is full of compassion and kindness. Research has shown that teaching empathy and compassion to students can reduce the aggressive behaviors in classrooms (Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). Students can become more caring and less oblivious to hurting the feelings of their peers (Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006).

To address the alarming increase of Muslim students who are becoming victims of bullying at schools, teacher preparation programs can provide a roadmap to pre-service teachers using a self-determined behavior approach that focuses on promoting empathetic behavior in their future K–12 classrooms. The roadmap can include a broad range of self-determination elements such as intervention strategies or outcome measures to assess victims of bullying and those who bully them. Self-management and self-regulation strategies can be successful intervention components, which may reflect recognition that students who bully exhibit deficits in these two areas. Pre-service teachers should understand the special needs of both the victim and the perpetrator of bullying. They should also be able to create a classroom environment that reinforces positive behaviors, encourages peer empathy and support, and provides safe feelings for all students.

CREATING ADVOCATES

In addition to preparing pre-service teachers to teach empathy, we believe educators should instruct preservice teachers to become advocates for students who need another voice. To have successful anti-bullying programs at schools, especially to address bullying due to race or religion, teacher preparation programs can team up with other stakeholders to advocate for legislation that could help this cause.

From a legal perspective, each state has its own legislation and policies that govern bullying at schools. However, there is no clear and comprehensive federal or state policy that forces school districts to provide effective programs against bullying (BULLY Project, n.d.). Federal and state laws allow schools to determine anti-bullying programs that would be effective and implemented by school administrators.

Local school districts and states need to implement new legislative measures to ensure that schools develop

effective and successful anti-bullying programs to address all types of bullying, including the rise of Islamophobic bullying. The goal for the school staff, school districts, state legislators, and the federal government should be to educate all students effectively with teacher preparation programs that work as knowledgeable partners.

RECOGNIZING CONTRIBUTIONS

When developing programs to tackle bullying behaviors, teacher preparation programs should include bullying based on religion, especially anti-Muslim bullying, as an essential component of their curricula. The present climate against Muslim students at schools is appalling. They are not simply being bullied, rather they are essentially told they are not *true* Americans and are outsiders in our society. Educators should teach students the value and contributions of the many Muslims in our country. One example is Fazlur Khan, who is known as the *Einstein of structural engineering*. Khan invented a new structural system of steel tubes that revolutionized the construction of skyscrapers. Another example is Ayub Ommaya, a neurosurgeon who invented a catheter system to deliver drugs to the brain. Ahmed Zewail won a Nobel prize in Chemistry and is known as the *father of femtochemistry*. Dr. Zewail pioneered the work in rapid molecular chemistry. Moreover, no one can deny the contribution of Malcolm X to the civil rights movement and his call to achieve equality and justice for all Americans (Jeffries, 2015). We believe this type of recognition can influence how Muslim students are treated in schools. As such, teacher educators should prepare future teachers to recognize important contributions.

CONSTRUCTING RELATIONSHIPS

As Crownover and Jones (2016) postulate, positive relationships can impact bullying behavior within schools. They argue for a relational pedagogy, which they define as relationships that develop “organically through social interactions and by deliberate pedagogical instruction” (para 12). These relationships become the framework for addressing issues of difference within school communities. Classroom communities that provide spaces to construct positive and caring connections will impact how difference is viewed and supported. As with other types of bullying behaviors, bullying toward Muslim students exists within a binary that fuels the belief in a power structure. If the binary is dismantled, the power dissolves. In doing so, we believe classroom relationships can disrupt the binary of *us versus them*, which will cause the foundation of bullying behavior to crumble. Integrating the bully and victim perspectives within the framework of creating a relational pedagogy may help explain the antecedents of aggressive behaviors exhibited by perpetrators.

Students are not born bullies, nor are they born with hate. They are dynamic learners who are influenced by the environment around them. It is imperative that teacher preparation programs prepare our candidates to address all types of bullying in schools, especially the bullying of Muslim students. As such, we believe that preparing our teacher candidates to be empathetic and teach empathy is vital. Moreover, creating advocates for all marginalized students and highlighting how these marginalized identities have created a better world is also important in addressing how Muslim students are treated in schools. Finally, the core of teacher education programs should be based on relational pedagogy and we should prepare future teachers to establish classrooms that embrace positive relationships.

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