Understanding Islam in U.S. Classrooms
A Guide for Elementary School Teachers

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From Multicultural Education

The blending of various ethnicities, cultures, religions, and languages has made our schools diverse and complex. Even though the mission statements and 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.

Negative attitudes 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 religious beliefs, locally and around the world, young people are unable to grasp the issues that can impact their lives.

To help students understand different aspects of diversity and eradicate negative perceptions, the inclusion of “multicultural education” in elementary classrooms has become critical. For example, in the wake of 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 world views. To remove negative stereotypes associated with Islam and its followers, educators must introduce and explain the common values as-

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associated with Islam in a manner that elementary age children can understand.

This article provides strategies that can be used by elementary school educators.

**The Roots of Islam in the U.S.**

The presence of Islam and practicing Muslims in the U.S. is not a recent phenomenon. These roots can be traced back to the time of Columbus’ arrival in the New World. 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. 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. Awareness about diversity should include comprehension of different religious beliefs 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, “knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person, but is also absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity.”

**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. Some studies estimate the number to be much higher.

The Muslim population in the U.S. includes people who emigrated from many different countries as well as those Muslims who were already here and others who have converted to the faith. Throughout American history, people from many different religions have lived together, making the U.S. one of the most religiously di-
verse countries in the world.

Recently, Islam has become a highly misunderstood religion, with many Americans holding inaccurate and negative perceptions about Islam and Muslims. Such misunderstandings are in part the outgrowth of reporting on the unfortunate events of September 11, 2001, the 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 City.

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.

Negative perceptions such as these underscore the importance of teaching about Islam and Muslims in American classrooms. To eliminate the negative perceptions, it is necessary to address this topic early in children's lives. Children in elementary grades are beginning to develop perceptions about people different from themselves and starting to acquire prejudices from various sources.

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. Furthermore, having children form accurate understandings surrounding the beliefs and customs of Islam will contribute to the national interests of the U.S. Without multicultural education that accurately informs children, we risk depriving children of the opportunities to understand and adequately communicate with the 23% of the world’s population who are Muslims.

Teachable Moments

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

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 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 Ramadan.

Such behaviors of Muslim
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students may generate curiosity. 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. They provide teachable moments. They are opportunities to open up discussion about Islam.

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.

The strategies that follow 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 shared by Islam and Christianity. Educators can initiate conversation by pointing out the similarities between these religions. Children tend to be more receptive when they can relate to the similarities rather than differences among concepts and people.

Teachers can guide students to think about the basic concepts or beliefs of Christianity (or Islam) and then put their thoughts in writing. Teachers can then collect the writings and identify 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 bib-
lical stories about Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Noah. Several religious denominations in the U.S. (for example, Mennonite, Mormon, Lutheran, and Baptist) have practices in which women cover their heads using bonnets or other head coverings.

After compiling general basic beliefs of Christianity, teachers can then compare these with the basic beliefs of Islam. 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 believe in the concept of heaven and hell and follow the teachings from their holy book (the Quran); they pray several times a day; they believe in giving and charity (called Zakat); and they fast for 30 days during the month of Ramadan. Many Muslim women, though not all, cover their heads with scarves called Hijab.

Exposing elementary school children to a positive and non-biased learning environment can enhance tolerance and awareness of other's beliefs. Educators can also invite to the classroom a practicing Muslim from the community to answer additional questions raised by 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. 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. 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 from the Middle East. Such a perception is highly inaccurate. Muslims are as diverse as any other population in 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 Muhammad. However, in terms of ethnicity, regions, and customs, Muslims
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vary widely when it comes to cultural traditions such as language, food, clothing, and social etiquettes.

According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 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 7 billion people.

However, only 20% of Muslims are Arabs or originate from the Middle East. In fact, Indonesia has the world's largest concentration of Muslims.

Understanding the diversity within Islam can help students realize that Muslims are no different than other Americans, who are also diverse in terms of ethnicity, geographic locations, languages, and customs.

Contributors and Their Contributions

A third approach focuses on the historical contributions made by scholars from the Muslim world in various fields or disciplines. This 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 that teachers conduct additional research to gather information about the contributions of Muslim scholars. To help with the research process, some references will be cited in this section which can be used as a springboard for further research.

Similar to the socioeconomic diversity seen among the Muslim population, the contributions of Muslim scholars in various fields are also diverse in nature. 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 Reichart 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’ 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 U.S. is identified as the Arabic number system, very few know where the concept of “zero” came from.

The contributions of Muslims in other areas of mathematics have also been well documented. 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.

- Science and medicine. Muslim scholars contributed substantially to earth science, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and medicine. The word “chemistry” came from the Arabic word “alchemy.” Abu Musa Jabir Ibn Hayyam is known as the “Father of Arabic Chemistry.” 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. Among many Muslim physicians, the most famous in the Western world is Ibn Sina, known popularly as Avicenna. Throughout Europe, he established free hospitals and developed treatments for diseases using herbs, hot baths, and major surgeries. Ibn Sina’s famous book The Canon of Medicine was used widely in Europe’s medical schools. Like Ibn Sina, Al-Razi Ibn Sina was also known for his famous books Kitab al Shifa (Book of Healing) and Treatise on Smallpox and Measles.

The contributions of Ibn Sina and Al Razi Ibn Sina are just two examples of Muslim accomplishments in the field of medicine. Contributions of other Muslim physicians can 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. Muslim scholars were engaged in the development of scientific knowledge that provided the groundwork for many academic fields. For Muslim scholars, this
period is known as the “Golden Age.” Falagas, Zarkadoulia, and Samonis 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. These characteristics must be taught and developed in 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 religions practiced in the U.S, Islam has become a highly controversial and misunderstood faith. 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.