

Muslim Female Students Confront Islamophobia: Negotiating Identities In-between Family, Schooling, and the Mass Media

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ABSTRACT: This article researches how Muslim students in Canada negotiate identity in an extremely complex discursive terrain of the unofficial Islamophobia curriculum of family, schooling, and mass media. Critical examination of the exclusion of Muslims from school policies and the absence of Muslim experiences and perspectives in the Ontario Language Curriculum are highlighted. This article aims at developing teacher educators, in-service teachers, and teacher candidates' critical multicultural awareness of how Muslim minority students negotiate the absence of their culture in the secondary language curricula. Drawing from postcolonial feminist perspectives and curriculum theory, this research was conducted with seven young Muslim women as participants. Findings indicate that, while absent in the official secondary language curriculum, the unofficial curriculum represents Muslim women as the cultural "other" sustained through the unofficial school curriculum and media portrayals. This study argues for a need to involve teacher educators, in-service teachers, and teacher candidates in complicated conversations on cultural and linguistic differences, engagement with life-experiences of cultural minorities, development of complex pedagogies, critical media literacies, and multicultural practices that are diverse and inclusive.

Introduction

Teacher educators, in-service teachers, and teacher candidates struggle with how to work successfully with students from different backgrounds against the backdrop of overseas conflicts, the terror attacks of 9/11, and the ongoing war on terror; attitudes towards Muslim students pose a particular challenge. Much of what we, as teachers, think we know about this diverse population is learned via the unofficial curriculum of the mass media, where Muslims are narrowly constructed as the embodiment of difference. Constructed as different from mainstream dominant culture, and often viewed from an Islamophobic lens, Muslim youth face qualitatively

different identity tasks than many of their peers (Abo-Zena, Sahli, & Tobias-Nahi, 2009). Many feel defensive and under attack or scrutiny because of their religion and “negotiate their religious identity and religious practice in a context that often includes explicit or subtle themes of misunderstanding, fear, and marginalization” (pp. 6-7). In spite of their growing presence as a minority student population, Muslim youth remain misunderstood and unacknowledged in Canadian school curriculum. Muslim female students who are visually marked by Islamic face covering have unique challenges negotiating their identities within a complex, shifting discursive terrain between family expectations, absence in the school curriculum, and mass media representations. In dominant media and school discourse, Muslim women are often portrayed as backward, oppressed, or exotic, which influences how the educational community views and interacts with them (Kincheloe, Steinberg & Stonebanks, 2010; Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009; Watt, 2007; 2008; 2011a; 2011b; 2012).

To grasp the complex positionality of Muslim youth in Canadian classrooms requires a nuanced approach to multicultural education that goes beyond race, class, and gender to include family, religion, and ethnicity, as well as the power of mass media in the construction of dominant ethnic and religious identities. Scholars have called for developing educators’ awareness of the complexity of Muslim women’s lived experiences for reflecting on the intersection of dominant discourses and the impact of classroom relations juxtaposed with their own sense of identity at home and at school (Khan, 2009; Kincheloe et al., 2010; Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009; Watt, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). Through witnessing how particular minority youth negotiate their lives and identities in between family, school, and public and school discourse, teacher educators, teachers, and teacher candidates are better positioned to respond to difference in ways that create equitable school curricula and classroom practices.

Interrupting dominant narratives, this research draws from a study conducted with seven Muslim-Canadian university students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds who describe their high school experiences and sense of identity during those years. Contrary to popular understandings of Muslim females as passive, oppressed, and exotic, their stories convey a strong sense of agency seldom portrayed in the media or school curriculum. Their narratives speak back to Islamophobia, widespread assumptions about Muslim female identity and the absence of their lived experience in the curriculum. Resisting the dominant discourse, many young Muslim women share stories of how they powerfully assert their identities “in relation to the categories laid on them” (Khan, 2009, p. 40).

Research Context

This qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) draws from a number of theoretical areas, including critical theory (Freire, 2000; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe et al., 2010; Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2011), media studies (Kellner & Share, 2007), postcolonial feminist theory (Rezai-Rasht, 2005; Trinh, 1988), and curriculum studies (Watt, 2011a; 2011b). The seven young female research participants were university students at the time of data collection, and all self-identify as Muslim. In terms of religious affiliation, they are Sunni, Shia, Bohra, and Alawite. Besides Canada, they have family connections to Pakistan, Lebanon, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Somalia, Yeoman, Germany, East Africa, and India. Three participants immigrated to Canada as young children and four were born in Canada. Each attended high school in Ontario during the years after September 11, 2001. Ethnographic data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions with the seven participants. They

also discussed and responded to visual print media representations of Muslim women to engage their perspectives on the role of the mass media as unofficial curriculum on Muslim women and the impact on their lives. Themes related to the topic of inquiry were identified using open coding and connections were made to the academic literature.

Mass Media as Curriculum on Otherness

Most teacher candidates are unaware of the ways they are being socialized into the hidden curriculum and positioned by the media because their pedagogies tend to be “invisible and absorbed unconsciously” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 4). However, given their ubiquitous presence and authority, teacher candidates must be made aware of the goals of socialization as part of the process of education, Kellner and Share argue. A site where the goals of socialization through educational curricula are realized is in the realm of print and media, where images insidiously promote dominant discourses. These influential curricular sites saturate one’s field of vision to such a degree that we, as teacher educators and teachers, barely notice their presence. During the research focus group session, research participants looked at a number of images of covered Muslim women in the print news media. Participants affirmed that representations in the media offer a limited aspect of their complex identities and influence public perceptions of Muslim females:

Overall, Muslims are not well portrayed in the media. The media are very selective, if they do show Muslims. There is always that “they-are-so-different” tone. Rarely is it a positive thing (Miriam, Research Participant)

What people see on TV is their assumption of me. These assumptions include where I come from, who and what my family is like, and so on . . . When they meet me and I’m not “oppressed” and they realize that I have a sense of humor, and that I don’t *just* wear black, they think that I’m *different* than the average Muslim woman, but in fact I *am* the average Muslim woman (Noor, Research Participant)

In discussing the challenges of anti-Islamophobia education, Zine (2003) observes orientalist constructions of difference permeate representations of Muslims, with images of terrorists and burqa-clad women being primary markers of the Muslim world. The proliferation of such images is a taken-for-granted part of the visual culture surrounding us—an unofficial curriculum that constitutes subjectivities and impacts material lives. Rezai-Rashti (2005) argues that in the Canadian education system colonial discourses related to Muslim women persist and that many in society “still rely on the old stereotypes as well as on the more recent popular images of Muslims portrayed by the media” (p.179). Educators often assume these girls are forced by their parents to cover. It seems difficult for many people to imagine why anyone would cover if they didn’t have to.

Stonebanks and Sensoy (2011) write about schooling identities and the construction of knowledge about Islam, Muslims, and Middle Eastern peoples in Canadian schools. Drawing from their personal experiences they reflect on how the unofficial curriculum of the mass media impacted their own lives in Canadian schools as children with family connections to Turkey and Iran. They describe how popular cultural representations of Muslims played out in expectations teachers and fellow students had by sharing experiences of being “the other” in school:

We can individually recall many instances from our childhood when we were asked if at

home, our families ate with our hands, whether our moms walked behind our dads, along with the surprise that is still expressed when I (Özlem) refer to “modernities” such as cell phone or computer use while in Turkey, or the bank machines on the corners of streets in Istanbul, or when I (Christopher) in my youth had to convince adults that yes indeed, there were clean toilets in Iran. (p. 11)

Negotiating Absence in the School Curriculum

In addition to the unofficial curriculum of the mass media, the classroom is “a central site for the legitimization of myths and silences about non-Western and often non-Christian peoples” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 2). Little effort is made to historicize and contextualize the Islamic world and its relation to the west (p. 3). Like media representations, school representations make little space for complexity (Sensoy, 2007; Watt, 2008; 2011a; 2011b). In stark contrast to the regularity with which Muslim, female bodies appear in the unofficial curriculum of the mass media, the participants in this study seldom saw their own bodies represented in the high school curriculum. Three participants reported when they were attending high school they did not notice Muslims were largely excluded from the curriculum and, at the time, it was not an issue for them. Only after graduating did this become apparent, and in retrospect they began to reflect on possible implications.

It wasn't until university and taking certain courses that made me reflect back and realize that there was never any Muslim, or minority, represented (at school). But at the time I never noticed it ... I never thought about it because it had always been that way. I've always learned that stuff and I thought, okay, these are the people who make history. If anything I probably thought that okay, they're probably predominantly white because they had the resources and the opportunity to go and do these things.... But I never thought that there must be Muslim people out there, and there must be other minorities who helped establish the world as it is today. (Noor, Research Participant)

The following narrative of Noor's memories of her high school experience suggests difference may not have been valued. She downplayed the Muslim aspects of her identity and remembers feeling invisible:

I feel like a lot of the time I ... just fade into the background. I feel like I'm not noticed. I feel like when I talk no one really hears me a lot of the time. I feel like if I start talking – I don't know if I talk quietly or what it is – I feel that if someone else starts talking at the same time that person will get the attention over me.... And after a while it becomes very hurtful because you feel like you don't get noticed.... And partly it's because you don't want to be pointed out: “*How come you don't do this? How come you don't do that?*” I feel like I'm not taken seriously.

Not seeing oneself represented in the official school curriculum may foster a sense of alienation, of not belonging, of being an outsider (Dei, James, James-Wilson, Karumanchery & Zine, 2000; James, 2007; Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2011). This feeling is reinforced intertextually through mass media representations of Muslims as other. In one interview session, Leila stated she distinctly remembers wishing she were “more normal” during her middle school years. Britzman (1998) asks: “What makes normalcy so thinkable in education?” (p. 80). She laments it as “the great unmarked within classroom sites” (p. 80) and wonders how pedagogy might “admit to the unthinkability of normalcy and to how normalcy is being constituted again and again” (p. 87).

Sensoy (2007) immigrated with her family to Canada from Turkey when she was a child. She offers the following account of her experience of the Social Studies curriculum and her interpretation of how it impacted her sense of identity:

In school, I hated socials the most because they taught me to hate myself – or maybe they taught me to hide myself. We (Middle Easterners) were clearly not significant enough in the course of world history to be mentioned in textbooks. However, on the rare occasions when we were mentioned, it was clear that the contributions of the Palestinians, the Iranians, or the Ottoman Turks had frequently been, and perhaps in the minds of some still often are, the cause of trouble for “the allies,” and thus have been an impediment to peace in the world in general ... I hated the Middle East. (p. 594)

Whose histories do we acquaint ourselves with, whose do we chose to ignore, and how does this impact on local and global relations? Stanley (2002; 2006) writes that grand narratives – which are the widely circulated “common sense” representations of the past – underlie public memory in Canada. They impose a particular order on the past and often fail to put particular events in historical context. Grand narratives represent certain perspectives and exclude or marginalize others. For these reasons, he argues for a rethinking of the history curriculum and its purposes. Abdel-Fattah (2007) captures in fiction some of the complexity of negotiating Muslim identities in schooling contexts through Jamilah, the main character in her adolescent novel, *Ten Things I Hate about Me*. She portrays a Muslim girl’s high school experiences growing up in Australia. Jamilah adopts a more Aussie-sounding name – Jamie – when she is with her friends as a means to negotiate her school and family identities. In the following excerpts Jamilah describes some of the complex identity issues she feels she faces at school:

I was born in Oz but people still assume I was born under a camel in a cave in a desert in the Middle East to parents who belong to a tribe with Osama bin Laden genealogy. (p. 90)

Keeping your distance from your friends is exhausting. It means you’re constantly acting, constantly choosing your words and thinking about ways to avoid exposing yourself. I can’t afford to show them the real me. They wouldn’t understand my culture or my religion. I’ve done everything I can to dissociate myself from being identified as a wog. Amy likes me as Jamie. She doesn’t know about Jamilah who speaks Arabic and goes to madrasa and celebrates Ramadan and plays the *darabuka* and can cook Lebanese food and has a strict dad. I wish I could talk in capital letters at school. Use exclamation marks and highlighter pens on all my sentences. Stand out bold, italicized and underlined. At the moment I’m a rarely used font in microscopic size with no shading or emphasis. (pp. 91-92)

Jamilah’s complex identity negotiations are similar to those a research participant engages in at school. Leila is African-Canadian and does not wear hijab, but she considers herself a devout Muslim who does not drink alcohol, attend parties, or date:

Sometimes I felt that I couldn’t just be myself at school but I did it anyway.... Sometimes I felt like it’s not necessarily going to be welcomed – the fact that this is my identity and that the choices I make are very different from you. You can be in a situation where people are talking about stuff that you don’t relate to, like sex or going out, and it’s sort of a hostile environment I guess. In that sense it’s tempting to just go along with it and not assert the fact that, no, this isn’t me, this isn’t my particular personality. I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes and I never tried to alienate anyone, but at the same time I never tried to be anyone who wasn’t me even in an environment where it would have been

easier. Sometimes I would not say something to avoid provoking a fight because I am not especially confrontational, but I never withheld a crucial part of myself just to fit in, just because it was too much work trying to have a different identity for each person. How are you supposed to figure out what each one expects?

The thing to know about the Canadian Muslim identity is that the kids growing up here, especially kids whose parents have not grown up here, are very, very much in two worlds. Even though at times they will seem to relate more to one than the other, and a lot of Muslim kids will seem like they've got the old school home values, it's still very much a struggle for them to keep their home life and their school life and make some sense of that, and try to be one person in face of all that.... Like you'll get girls who wear cover at home and then take it off and go hang out with their white boy friends.... It's always, always a struggle for people, even if they don't necessarily say anything about it. Or, if they seem very devout, it's still hard to be surrounded by such a radically different view of things at school.... It's hard going from one world at home to another world outside – very, very hard.

Negotiating expectations between home, school, and popular culture is a complex process for Muslim Canadian girls. Jiwani (2006) asserts acceptance and belonging are achieved through “fitting in,” but she also asks, “fitting into what?” (p. 120). The notion of *fitting in*, which underlies multicultural discourse, assumes a normative center with the other on the margins vying to get in and be accepted. This is a one-way process, which places all responsibility on anyone deemed to embody difference. Those already there at the center of the dominant culture are safe and have no responsibility to the other. This is exclusion.

In the following narrative, Sarah describes how she “compartmentalized” her home and school identities. She is not visibly marked as Muslim either, since she does not cover and she sees no reason to bring her Muslim identity into school. However, when another Muslim student starts attending her high school, the situation shifts:

What ends up happening for me is the compartmentalization I was talking about becomes threatened when other Muslims enter the picture. And (laughs), maybe that sounds a little odd. So, it was really easy to keep everything separate, but then this guy just turned up in grade twelve and he was Muslim, too. That was when it first started to cause a bit of trouble for me in terms of identity because now I didn't really know how to define myself in relation to him. Before I had it very easy. I actually didn't talk about anything related to Islam at school. (Sarah, Research Participant)

Trinh (1988) suggests difference “is not opposed to sameness, nor synonymous with separateness ... for there are differences as well as similarities within the concept of difference” (p. 2). Teacher educators, in-service teachers, and teacher candidates are often unsure about how to work with students who come from backgrounds different from their own. Many grow up in communities where there appears to be little ethnic or cultural diversity. We tend not to see the difference that exists within the imaginary category of “whiteness,” which holds a privileged position in society. As Stanley (2002) contends, school continues to be “about and for white people” (p. 2). It is not surprising that Leila mentions during an interview that she finds herself imagining what it might have been like to be born white. Caught up in assumptions about the neutrality of schooling and humanism's discourses of equality and universalism, it may be difficult for teachers to see how curriculum is a contested cultural document that excludes some identities as it includes others.

Stanley (2002) points out Canadians “do not have a common history, and no single narrative will ever make it so” (p. 2). He advocates enabling “each student to explore his or her past, to construct a narrative that explains how it is that they came to inhabit the common space of the classroom, and to allow other students to see and engage with this narrative” (p. 2). For research participants, this frequently takes place informally in spaces outside the official school curriculum. They have few opportunities to bring their personal stories into the classroom. Beyond sharing stories, Stanley identifies a further challenge as having students see “how this personal history intertwines with those of the multiple communities that the young people inhabit” (p. 2). He stresses students should be provided “with a sense of how the spaces they inhabit have been constructed by people who went before” (p. 2). DiAngelo and Sensoy (2010) similarly argue for the “need to understand the history, struggles, and perspectives of [other] groups in relation to [our] own” (p. 99). Although knowledge of the past may be available; “it is not what circulates in popular culture” (Stanley, 2009, p. 144). Colonialism is not simply about events that happened in the past, but “continues as processes of cultural production through which power legitimizes itself by silencing the memory of its own unilateral construction, at the same time that it seeks to fix and re-fix meaning” (p. 144). By bringing multiple narratives into the classroom, grand narratives are interrupted and space potentially opens up for difference.

Miriam describes how the curricular content she experienced in her high school English and history courses does not engage minority perspectives:

History is a passion of mine.... I remember that the only mention that they ever made of an Islamic country was Iraq and how Hitler wanted to go around into Iraq to get their oil in order to continue on to Russia.... I took American History the year after but we didn't get to touch on the war with Iraq or any of the newer issues. We did mostly material about what went on, on American soil. We had to write a paper at the end of the course, however. And I remember I got a really high mark. My topic was about the war with Iraq, and I remember that paper was the most research I ever did. I tried to take both sides of the story, but it was really hard to find any information that would support the Iraq side in the war or why the war is a bad thing. Also, there was barely any information that I found on the actual conditions of Iraq after the start of the war, about how the country is worse off than ever.

Miriam's history teacher provided an opportunity for students to critically investigate a topic of personal interest, which stands out for her as a highlight in her high school education. Teacher educators, in-service teachers, and teacher candidates might expand the curriculum to include a variety of perspectives. On the topic of Iraq, for example, students might be challenged to cultivate a more complicated view of world events by reading a work such as *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* (Riverbend, 2005). Riverbend is a young, female Iraqi blogger who began reporting her experiences living in the war zone in Baghdad in August 2003. This is not a perspective one often sees in the nightly news.

American Mother and Daughter Negotiate *Hijab*

The identity negotiations Muslim female youth are caught up in within the family complicates their school experiences as they move between school and home expectations. Krista Bremer's (2010) story about her ten-year-old daughter's decision to start wearing *hijab* attests to the difficulties parents and youth face negotiating Islam in North America. Bremer (2010) describes her ambivalence when Aliya announces she would like to start covering.

American citizens living in North Carolina, Bremer's husband, Ismail, was born in Libya. When their daughter was born they agreed they would raise her "to choose what she identified with most from our dramatically different backgrounds" (p. 121). Bremer quietly assumed her daughter would identify more with her own background and values. She writes:

I secretly felt smug about this agreement-confident that she would favor my comfortable American lifestyle over his modest Muslim upbringing...Not once did I imagine her falling for the head covering worn by Muslim girls as an expression of modesty. (p. 121)

The first time Aliya appears in her newly-purchased *hijab*, Bremer (2010) writes that "from the waist down, she was my daughter: sneakers, bright socks, jeans a little threadbare at the knees. But from the waist up, this girl was a stranger" (p. 122). She asks Aliya if she was really "going to wear that" out of the house. Bremer is incredulous when her daughter replies, "yeah." On their way to the store, she steals glances at an "aloof and unconcerned" (p. 122) Aliya in the rearview mirror:

I wanted to ask her to remove her head covering before she got out of the car, but I couldn't think of a single logical reason why, except that the sight of it made my blood pressure rise. I'd always encouraged her to express her individuality and to resist peer pressure, but now I felt as self-conscious and claustrophobic as if I were wearing that headscarf myself. (p. 122)

Bremer is surprised by her daughter's choice. Even though she knew Aliya could one day decide to cover, she did not think she would actually choose to do so. Bremer (2010) also reflects on the uneasy ambivalence she felt as a girl the first time she wore a two-piece bathing suit in public. On one hand there was the promise of feeling attractive and powerful, and on the other, an unspeakable vulnerability. She contemplates her own daughter's decision in light of her own embodied, female experience:

I imagined Aliya in a string bikini in a few years. Then I imagined her draped in Muslim attire. It was hard to say which image was more unsettling. (p. 124)

Bremer worries about how Aliya will manage at school in her new attire. As her mother, she naturally feels a strong desire to protect her and is concerned "that her choice would make life in her own country difficult" (p. 127). This young girl is living her complex identity – memorizing verses from the Qur'an and learning Arabic from her father, while also becoming "an agile mountain biker who rides...on wooded trails, mud spraying her calves as she navigates the swollen creek" (p. 127). How will her experiences at school intersect and/or clash with her negotiation of the unofficial curriculum of the mass media as a visibly Muslim female?

Sarah Kassem is a Canadian teenager who in Grade 10 similarly tells her parents she would like to start wearing *hijab* to clarify her moral values to her peers. Her parents also worry about her decision to visibly mark herself as Muslim, knowing that wearing *hijab* in Canada can be difficult. Her father discourages her because he is worried it will complicate her life, especially on the soccer field. Sarah does face difficulties in school once she decides to veil. She explains how once when she was struggling to understand a verse of Shakespeare in English class, a new teacher suggested she take English as a Second Language course. "I was born in Saskatchewan!" she replies (Anderssen, 2009). During high school, Kassem often finds herself defending Islam in an effort to counter the assumptions many people have of Muslims, especially related to the rights of women. Even though her parents had reservations, she and some of her Muslim classmates feel wearing *hijab* meant being an ambassador for their religion. Asserting their Islamic identities in spite of potential difficulties is a choice they make.

Constructing a “Muslim space” (Khan, 2009) for themselves at school takes varied forms, including school-wide efforts to establish a prayer room, organizing Muslim Students’ Associations, and hosting girls-only alternative proms. Many girls also take action on a personal level such as the use of humor “to address stereotypes held by peers in their schools” and joking with non-Muslim peers “in an attempt to avoid otherwise confrontational scenarios” (p. 34). No matter what path they choose to make school more welcoming, research participants frequently mention family as a strong source of support in their lives. Noor, for example, attributes much of her success negotiating the social aspects of school to the guidance she received from her mother:

Noor: I participated in everything that I could. I mean, I was never allowed to wear revealing clothing but I would wear my long skirts and a three-quarter top, or I would wear a half-sleeve. And I participated as much as I could, you know, *anything to fit in*. [At school dances] it was hard squeezing out of the whole, *oh, sorry, can't dance with you*. But yeah, I used to dance once in a while, like with one of my friends or somebody I felt really comfortable with, I would dance. Then I would tell my mom, and that would upset my mom. But my dad was okay with it, so it would be something I would feel really, really guilty about. I'd have a lot of guilt, I felt like I betrayed who I was. Why can't I just say, *no, I don't want to dance with you?* ... And you know, I think back to it now and I'm like, *how could I survive high school?* I could have gone the opposite way because there are people who went the exact opposite way. They had boyfriends, they did the drugs, they wore the clothes, they did everything. The only reason I probably didn't fall into that is because my mother was very strict and she was like, you cannot go out after this time, you cannot go out every weekend with your friends doing something I don't know about. Like I don't want you wandering the streets with your friends, I don't want you wandering in the malls. So, I thank my mother. It's because of her that I am the person I am today. Otherwise, it's so easy in high school I think, to just fall into the trap of wanting to be cool and doing all the silly things ... Now when I think back to it I think why did I even want to do those things?

Diane: So, did you at times feel that you wanted to do them, but couldn't?

Noor: Definitely, yeah, I did. I mean, like, everyone does them. All your friends are doing it and after a while they stop inviting you because, you know, “*She never comes.*”

Noor credits her parents with providing her with the values and support needed to negotiate aspects of school that conflicted with their Islamic beliefs. Although peer support during high school was important for the young women involved in this study, they all place more stress on the crucial role their parents play in their complicated lives. On the topic of covering, contrary to the popular belief Muslim girls are forced by their families to cover, only one participant was ever pressured to do so. After wearing *chador* for a few weeks while attending her last year of high school in Dubai, she decided to take it off. Her parents were not pleased, but accepted her decision. Perhaps it is difficult for people to accept that a young woman would want to cover of her own free will because this perspective is not represented in the mass media.

Muslim Girls Experience Catholic School

Shaza Khan (2009) also emphasizes that Muslim students are not passive victims, but often actively transform marginalizing factors in their own environments. Her research participants construct a Muslim space for themselves in their schools. Khan describes, for example, the manner in which young women use *hijab* to respond to the challenge of educating others about Islam. She writes, “despite the absurd questions they received about their religion and scarves,” (p. 28) some of the girls feel that wearing *hijab* gives them an opportunity to teach their peers about Islam. In her study of the perspectives of Muslim girls and their public high school experiences in Windsor, Ontario, Diab (2008) concludes her research participants have “positive schooling experiences” in part due to wearing *hijab*, which helps the girls to validate their Muslim identity. This stands in contrast to a widespread assumption that covered females lack agency and would not choose to cover unless coerced.

During interviews, Tina and Sahar describe how they actively defend their right to wear Islamic covering when they decide to attend their local Catholic high school. They consider the religious values espoused in a Christian educational institution similar to their Islamic values in many ways and are also keen to learn about different cultures and religions. They consider coming in contact with difference an essential part of getting an education. Sahar and Tina are not the first Muslim youth to attend Catholic high school in Ontario, but their intention to wear *hijab* at this particular school is a challenge to established norms. Both girls grew up in Canada and made periodic visits to their families’ ancestral homes in Southern Lebanon. They have spent their entire lives negotiating dominant discourses in the mass media, which construct covered Muslim women narrowly. Hardly a day goes by when the issue of veiling is not in the news. Well aware of the meanings associated with the black covering they choose to wear as an expression of devotion to Shi’a Islam, Tina and Sahar are determined to claim a space for their Muslim female identities at this Catholic high school.

At the start of the school year, they set up an appointment to meet with the Vice Principal of St. Mary’s (a pseudonym). Shortly after they introduce themselves, he expresses concern over their choice of clothing. He insists being Muslim is not a problem, but the *hijab* could bring the girls unwanted attention. He wants to ensure they do not have difficulty fitting in to the school community, so if they want to attend St. Mary’s they will have to uncover. Sahar and Tina recount this initial meeting:

When we first met the principal he told us: “*Oh, you’re going to have to take off your hijab because people might not accept it, because we’ve never had hijab before in this school.*” And then he said: “*The reason I’m saying to take off your hijab is just so that you guys will feel comfortable. No one will harass you.*” But I was like: “*Don’t worry about it, we can handle ourselves.*” You know what I mean? You know, you can handle yourself. Even if you don’t wear the *hijab* you’re always going to be harassed. (Sahar)

We talked to the Vice Principal and he told us, just for our own safety, that we had to take off the *hijab* for our own protection, so that we don’t get criticized by other students. And then we talked it over with him, cause no other *hijabi* girl was allowed in that year or ever before. And then we told him that we would never take off our *hijab* because it’s who we are, and we’d never take it off for any reason. And he was really friendly about it. He accepted it and so we went there. (Tina)

Tina and Sahar thus enter the school on their own terms by firmly asserting their identities. To stand up to the school authority takes courage, but their story does not end here. Not only do they negotiate acceptance at St. Mary's, over time they become student leaders. The girls work out a mutually acceptable variation of the required school uniform with the school that includes their decision to wear loose fitting clothing and black *hijab*. They have to compromise somewhat, but they understand the need to do this. At first, the Vice Principle is proven correct: their Islamic dress does attract a great deal of attention. Sahar and Tina remember feeling uncomfortable, but their determination and openness towards others gets them through. Both girls reach out to students and staff by fully participating in class discussions and school activities. Once everyone gets to know them, Tina and Sahar enthusiastically respond to questions about their religious customs and beliefs. Tina explains:

It's funny because everybody was looking at us at first and we felt uncomfortable. Even Arabs who were Muslim stared at us. We didn't understand why they were looking until finally one girl approached me:

"How come you guys are allowed in?"

And I'm like, *"What do you mean?"*

"Well, in years before, any girl wearing the hijab was not allowed in this school."

And I thought, well that's funny because the V.P. was very comfortable with it once we explained our position to him.

Unprecedented schoolwide conversations on difference emerge among students and staff and Sahar and Tina thrive at this school. Even though these Muslim youth are comfortable with who they are and are capable of asserting themselves, the visual expression of their Islamic identity does make their daily lives a struggle. Tina tells about a phone interview she has for a job that goes extremely well. When she meets with the potential employer in person, Tina is informed the position is no longer available. The girls accept that many in North American are unfamiliar with Islamic practices of covering and do not understand their decision to cover. They are also cognizant of the mass media's powerful unofficial curriculum on Muslims – especially since 9/11. For these reasons, these youth spend a great deal of time having to explain themselves to others:

You know, a lot of my friends say I am not what they were expecting a Muslim girl to be like, because when they first see me all like this in black head covering I'm seen as this quiet person. And then when we do an all girls party you'll see me going wild and dancing. And they say to me, *"You can dance?"* *"Yeah, I'm a girl!"* (laughs). Some people misinterpret that if you're a *hijabi* you're like this at home. That this is your personality. I'm like, *no!* I swear to God I'm not like that. I'm just like you. I want to have fun. I want to party, I want to do stuff. It's just that outside I want to be respected. You know what I mean? I sometimes feel wearing *hijab* gives me an advantage, especially when finding a relationship or friendship, because this way you're not basing your friendship on looks. You know how teens are: *Oh, she's pretty. Let's go with her. We're going to be popular.* I find a lot of that in high school. But when you wear *hijab* people love you for your personality, for who you are, and I think that's so great, because at that point the person truly understands who you are. Sometimes we're so taken by our looks, our outside, we tend to forget about what's on the inside. Just because a girl does not wear a *hijab*, that does not make her a bad person. Just wearing a mini skirt does not mean, *Oh my God, she's bad.* No. She can be wearing a skirt and that's just her way of thinking, *"That's my fashion; that's how I want to dress."* (Sahar)

Like other Muslim youth, Tina and Sahar work out ways to negotiate the sometimes hostile, post 9/11 world they are growing up in. In this case, a school principal chooses to listen to these youth and he gives trusts them and gives them a chance. He takes a risk by going against expectations, and in doing so, opens up his school to rich intercultural experiences. By permitting difference into the spaces of St. Mary's High School, opportunities for face-to-face encounters and engagement are created for all members of the school community.

This story of how two Muslim girls negotiate their way into a Catholic school only to become student leaders is inspiring. Teacher educators, in-service teachers, and teacher candidates need to reflect upon their own response to difference, such as when a particular style of dress evokes curiosity or discomfort. What are the implications when we avoid encounters with the unfamiliar, or when we choose to engage? What do educators and students in a global society miss out on by censoring or marginalizing difference? Tina and Sahar explain most people they meet at their new school claim to know little about Islam. Should we leave it to Hollywood, video game designers, politicians, and the corporate media to educate young people about difference – about who belongs and who does not? What are the personal and societal, the local and the global, implications of not preparing teachers to critique the mass media as an influential curriculum on difference? How can multiculturalism expand to encompass broader intersections of identity and experience?

Sahar and Tina demonstrate how two youth and an administrator can make a difference to an entire school community. Their very presence in the school is an opening to ways of seeing self and other more complexly. Ahmed (2000) asserts that when we avoid the encounter, fail to get close enough to face others, we are left with judging from afar by reading the other as a sign of the universal. The visual difference of Tina and Sahar's Islamic identities initially causes concern from an administrator and curious stares from staff and students. However, after an initial uncomfortable period, Sahar and Tina's presence in the school provokes rich intercultural exchange. Tina explains with pride the two girls came to be known as "the pioneers of St. Mary's." Muslim female students are claiming a space of their own, and educators should take note of the possibilities.

Education Beyond Islamophobia

It is not only Muslim female youth who are affected by media portrayals and lack of representation in the school curriculum; however, in the current political climate they are certainly at greater risk. The lived experiences of Muslim girls complicate multicultural discourses by going beyond race, class, and gender to consider multiple intersections of identity in between family, school, and the mass media. By working with narratives of minority youth to challenge dominant meanings, teacher educators, teachers, and students may better appreciate how engaging difference in between school and home provides students and teachers with valuable opportunities to negotiate diverse identities and worldviews.

Current research supports the conclusion that multicultural education contributes positively toward combating racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination and bias including Islamophobia. Multicultural education advocates inclusion of cultural and other forms of diversity in school curricula, classroom content, and instructional practice. This is made possible when teacher educators and in-service teachers recognize the critical importance of reflecting on their own biases and integrate academic and multicultural content in their curricula which is outside their comfort zone. The experience of bias is compounded when educators are

not informed about cultural difference such as different religions including Islam, therefore, are hesitant to address such topics.

What is recommended is professional development for teacher educators and in-service teachers aimed at developing multicultural understanding through experience with cultural diversity in a wide variety of contexts. In the age of standards-based reform, it is important for educational institutions to create the time and space for integrating multicultural content and experiences into school and college curriculum that addresses historical absences. This involves educating teacher educators, teachers, and students about different religions and cultures and teaching multicultural competencies for equitable education for all students.

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