



Equity Spotlight Podcast Series

Transcription of Episode Four: Muhammad Khalifa, Ph.D. – Supporting Muslim Students

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Center Announcer: Welcome to the Great Lakes Equity Center Equity Spotlight podcast. This podcast series will highlight organizations and individuals in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana for working to advance equitable practices within school systems.

Center Host: This is the fourth episode in the Centering Equity in Educator Effectiveness podcast series. Each episode in this series will focus on demonstrating equitable practices and curriculum instruction or the learning environment. My name is Nickie Coomer, I am a graduate assistant with the Great Lakes Equity Center and I will be hosting today's podcast. This is the first of a three-part series with Dr. Muhammad Khalifa. We will be discussing centering equity and culturally responsive and sustaining learning environments for Muslim students. Dr. Khalifa is an Associate Professor in the department of Organizational Leadership Policy and Development at the University of Minnesota. He is most known for his work in urban school across the U.S., as one of the leading experts in culturally responsive school leadership and context. He has also developed - he has also developed online equity audits, and has helped hundreds of schools and principals become culturally responsive in the U.S. and abroad. Welcome, Dr. Khalifa.

Dr. Khalifa: Thank you.

Center Host: Alright, so, today we are discussing how to center equity and developing culturally responsive and sustaining practices for Muslim students in classrooms. Before we move forward, I think it's important for our listeners, um to understand what Muslim students may face in schools today. Can you explain for our listeners what forms, um, what forms anti-Muslim sentiment may take in classrooms?

Dr. Khalifa: Yes, uh well this question is one that requires a bit of uh, backgrounding, and a bit of, uh, historical, uh, contextualizing for the answer. Historically, oppression has sort of taken place, not only through genocide, which is the killing of people but also through epistemicide, and that is the total destruction of knowledge, identity and all other forms of-of for example Muslim epistemology, Muslim-

Muslim ways of being, there are multiple ways, so this type of destruction of, of a people is really starting to occur, for one of the first times against Muslims was in Andalusian Spain, the Great Moorish Empire that they initiated in Spain that was taken by the Christian Monarch, all were both genocide or killing of mass numbers of people, happened but also epistemicide happened, whereas uh, uh, western Europe, Christian Europe had maybe, you know, 2 to 3 thousand books, in the entirety, the entirety of Europe, where you had millions of books in the Muslim-held part of Spain, where they were completely just burned. The valuable books were taken over to Rome, and other, uh, Christian areas, but the remainder of the books were just sort of uh burned, and after some very brief, uh, debate happened within the Christian Empire, uh, Queen Elizabeth comes, she retakes this area of Spain and, um, exterminates people and knowledge. And this is really the first, so it's impossible for us to understand what happened, for example, in 2016 classroom without understanding really the origin of how Muslims, um, began to be viewed. So that's why I am sort of covering some of this history. Very briefly, and so what happened is that you had these debates that happened and-and this part of Europe about whether these Moors you know, darker skinned Muslims and Jews and women also were, uh, were tortured and killed, whether they were truly human, and so therefore could be enslaved or whether they weren't...uh, weren't, uh I'm sorry if they were truly human and could NOT be enslaved, or just kind of be controlled and oppressed, or whether they were subhuman, and since they were subhuman could actually be enslaved, right? So this whole biological vs. cultural argument really started at this early, uh, level and so, um, what what and, in in the modern era, you have, you know, similar to these arguments about Muslims and all the other minoritized people popping up, and so, um the you know instead of there being a subhuman, at that time wh-what you see is they're uncivilized, they're dishonored, they're not really like us, all of these kinds of discourses are popping up, and it's not really all that different from indigenous people in American or blacks were described as, in fact, this is the direct legacy of how blacks and indigenous people, this is the direct legacy of what happened to Muslims. It's so ironic that we are talking about Islamophobia now in the-the way that otherness and oppression and those kind of things happened in this country are a direct result of what happened to Moorship in Spain. And so um because of course fourteen-ninety, 1492 is when Columbus came here and that's exactly when these things were happening in Spain at the time, so um, you, it's- it's important to know that this happened to other minority people in this country but it's also important to note that obviously as I'm kind of indicating, that Islamophobia has been around for a long, long time. Of course it was intensified after September 11th.

Center Host: Mmm-hmm.

Dr. Khalifa: So you asked about uh anti-Muslim sentiment in the classroom. I would posit, and I would argue that, as a leadership scholar, that these occurrences happen inside and outside the classrooms. Um, anti-Muslim bullying happens on the playground, in the hallway, in the lunchroom, they are often driven by these early historic discourses, you know, that we were just talking about, um, and it's uh, very very insidious discourse about Islam and Muslims, and really shows there not indefensible against this kind of thing. Uh, for example, when Dr. Abdi here at the University of Minnesota explained that it could be more direct types of Islamophobia, such as making remarks, uh, about Muslims or it could be much less direct, but equally as violent, right? Such as asking female uh Muslim students about relations

or asking about something that happened in the Middle East so these kids are obviously here and born here and positioned here, many of them. So um this you know, this is a particularly bad time for Muslims because, um, it forces them really to choose between their Americanness and their Muslimness when this hadn't even been an occurrence before, they just thought of themselves as American and Muslim. But when they come into these school spaces they have to force, they're forced to choose parts of their identity in order to be comfortable. And if they choose their Muslim identity they'd be typically be outcasted, okay, and so, um, this is a very violent, it's all so particularly bad now because if you come into a school or classroom and say these black kids are this, or these gay kids are this, or these transgender kids, or the Jewish kids, or any other group, I think that you would find it would meet resistance, in some cases depending on how much privilege that group has you will be suspended perhaps even expelled, ok?

Center Host: Yep.

Dr. Khalifa: Muslim, anti-Muslim bigotry, anti-Muslim sentiments are virtually unchecked in American society today. Um, and that because that's the case, you have kids, I won't say their name, there's a child in one of my son's schools, who recently told my son 'hey, I'm not Muslim anymore', and when he asked why he said there was a verse in the Quran about uh beating women. So this is a typical standard critique, a white Islamophobic critique, about uh that's that's often leveled at Muslims. So this often happens often with people going through um, picking uh, verses from here or there out of the Quran, or some other Islamic text and without having any context to that, right? Um, just going and characterizing an entire religion or an entire faith that way and it happens not only through text but even the actions of a few. So like less than 0.0001% of the Muslim community supports any type of terrorism, but you wouldn't know that from watching the news here or listening to discourse here. And you wouldn't know that we uh, don't beat our women and when we don't do this then we are characterized by such a small percentage of what actually occurs. So this Muslim kid came and told my son, hey look I'm not, I'm not, I'm not this anymore because of this verse in the Quran, so even Muslim children are forced to kind of see themselves and their religion through the eyes of, so, the the the privileged group and the powerful group here. And it's caused him to-to make this choice and make this decision to leave the faith. Now, that's problematic, obviously because not only because one of every two women in American is abused, but because their abuse in American is invisible-ized, and normalized. And accepted. And so what happens when people are othered, it means that they're the only ones held up to examine. No one else is held to a standard, so this young Somali kid is moving away from Islam presumably to American-ness, in his mind anyway, not understanding what he is moving towards perhaps is the same, maybe even worse, maybe even much worse, in fact, statistically much worse, than what he is moving away from. All because he has begun to accept this. So it's-it's more than just somebody coming in and teasing you and saying hey, are you a terrorist? You see, it's a very deep, very complex, very um, uh, very, very important yet, uh, misunderstood yet complex narrative that Muslim students are constantly grappling, grappling with and having to make these big decisions. Oftentimes, at the exclusion of their families and their parents, because their parents (especially if they're immigrants or refugees) might not understand what they're dealing with.

Center Host: Thank you so much. You know when I was writing that question I sort of had in my head what, you know, what anti-Muslim, um, sentiment or Islamophobia might look like in schools, but honestly I was not aware of the depth of of what that is and as as you, you know, describe the effect that it has on, on children, um, I'm so glad that we're talking about this in this month's episode though,

because I'm hoping that we can, you know, in moving forward through our questions, um you know, and with you sharing your expertise on culturally responsive practices, talk about how we can start to hopefully address that in schools.

That concludes Part One of this series.

Center Announcer: This podcast was brought to you by the Great Lakes Equity Center, directed by Gayle Cosby. The Great Lakes Equity Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide technical assistance, resources, and professional learning opportunities related to equity, civil rights, and systemic school reform throughout the six state region of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. The contents of this presentation were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. This podcast and its contents are provided to educators, local and state education agencies, and/or non-commercial for the use of educational training purposes only. No part of this recording may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical including recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Great Lakes Equity Center. Finally, the Great Lakes Equity Center would like to thank Indiana University School of Education as well as Principal Investigator Dr. Kathleen King-Thorius and co-Principal Investigators Dr. Brendan Maxcy and Dr. Thu Sương Thị Nguyễn for their leadership and guidance in the development of all tools and resources to support region 5.