



Equity Spotlight Podcast Series

Centering Equity in Supporting Muslim Students: Part II

Addressing Intersectionality: Surfacing the Complexities of 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 who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems. This is the fifth episode in the Centering Equity in Educator Effectiveness podcast series. Each episode in this series will focus on demonstrating equitable practices in curriculum, instruction or the learning environment.

Center Host: This is the second of a three-part series with Dr. Muhammad Khalifa. Today, we will continue discussing centering equity and culturally responsive and sustaining learning environments for Muslim students. In part one of this series, Dr. Khalifa provided a summary of the complex global history of the experience of Muslims and stressed the importance of grounding equity work for Muslim students in that history. He also described and explained some of the overt, as well as subtle ways that anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia may take form in schools. Part two of the series is a continuation of part one, and begins with the discussion of the unique lived experiences Muslim students bring to schools.

Um, I want to talk about how educators and school leaders can be responsive, um, to those circumstances that are specifically and particularly unique to Muslim students. Um, and also, about, you know, you've written about culturally responsive school leadership, and-and behaviors that center um inclusion and equity, advocacy and social justice, um, if you could, if you could elaborate for us, on what those behaviors might look like in schools, um, and you know, and some ways that school leadership and teachers can be responsive, um, to Muslim students.

Dr. Khalifa: Um, so-so, one-one of the things that I think educators and school leaders have to do, uh in order to be responsive to the needs of Muslim students is they have to kind of become aware of how, how oppression works, how it changes shape, how it hides, how it's normalized, um, without understanding that, then, not only will they not understand Muslim; how to address the needs of Muslim students but any minoritized student group they won't understand that but they certainly won't understand Muslims. Um, the role of liberation, many of my White colleagues, we joke because they're many of them are-are um, um critical White scholars, they understand how to critique Whiteness, White supremacy, colonization, colonialism, and that sort of thing, but when it comes when it comes to that uh, that, uh, notion of self-determination, then I think that many of them take a pause because what

that means is allowing indigenous, minoritized people to carve out for themselves what they see, and it's not just that they wanna take the place of the colonizer, or of a White person, they actually wanna carve out spaces, safe spaces, outside of school and inside of schools that can work for them to help them reach their goals as a community and as a people. And so, um, what that-that-that might mean for example, community-based education work. So, uh leaders have to, as you know from my scholarship I'm a huge proponent and advocate for teachers to move outside of the building and into communities to kinda find out-- and that, that would extend to the Muslim communities, so if a leader is being social just-- socially just, and if the leader is already engaging in advocacy work for communities, the communities they serve, then this I think could easily be extended and should be extended to Muslim students. If they are not doing these things, though, which many communities are not, they have to begin doing them for all of their s-minoritized students, in particular, th- the most um, marginalized students in that community, and such, um, they also, I think, along the lines of this, we've mentioned for example, um, yeah, White privilege, but we also have to talk about this idea of Christian privilege. Um, M-Muslims have to juggle how they are going to eat in a lunchroom, yeah I mean we have to pray 5 times a day, so that means that one of the prayers falls within the timeframe of school. And so they--th- they so for us, so-so I don't know how much time we have, but not to belabor history again, but we have to understand that religion, modern day religion, itself is an invention. And that means that, look, we will do as, uh leaders will kind of have their empire or whatever, but in order to maintain the semblance of religion, that's when religion is on Sunday and these various spaces and times. Well Muslims don't see it that way. For us, it's a lifestyle, it's an entire lifestyle and we are constantly doing this whole thing, the notion of critical self-reflection, we're-we're-we're-we're-we have to do that throughout the day, and so we, we have to-we take time away for spirituality, for reconnecting with a higher cause, in thinking about how our day is going, we do this constantly, it's not just like a Sunday or a Friday type thing. And so um, Christian privilege, for example, encroaches upon this space, and our ability to do that. Whereas all of the Christian holidays are off, we call it Spring Break now, we call it Winter Break now, but we all know really what's going on, when we call it the weekend, where it's Saturday and Sunday off but we really know that that was designed, now it's invisible-ized now again, right, it's invisible, but it was designed for some and not for others. And so I'm not, I- I- I'm not proposing that we change that, we change the holidays, in order to, but we have to at least be aware of how Christian privilege operates within schools and not only with the holidays, that's the easy thing, but even ways of understanding the world and reality. There are some very specific uh, ways I think that Muslims, make Muslims unique and we will get into that at a little, a little later in the conversation, but I- I- think it's-it's not necessarily upon all leaders to understand that in great detail but it is upon them to create the space that I am speaking about so that Muslims can comfortably co-exist in both, or many, maybe in more than just two; in fact likely more than two, could be immigrant it could be African-American. I'm not sure if you know this but a third of Muslims in this country are African American, who have converted over the last 50 to 60 years, or something like that. And maybe 10 percent are White Americans who also converted. Um, and so, uh, allowing them space to coexist um, with their Muslim identity with their American identity and with their other identities, is probably the most crucial thing that school leaders and schools can do. And so that reaches out to your, uh, policy question as well, and just recognizing that Muslims are spiritual beings, you know. And-and that, um, they should not be made to feel bad for beliefs that they have, uh, whereas, and-and-so-so-here's- wha-th-what-what happens in this country is that, um, it-it-it's promoted that this is a, this is a, uh, country. So there's sort of the

liberal argument that the liberalist argument is that as long- I-I- can do anything that I would like to do, as long as I am not encroaching upon the rights of other people, right?

Center Host: Right.

Dr. Khalifa: However, for, um, for the Muslim community that's a very destructive, and not just the Muslim community, other indigenous communities, but we're talking about Muslim, that's a very destructive approach because for us, and for other minoritized people, we center the community interests above the individual. You see what I'm saying?

Center Host: Yes.

Dr. Khalifa: And so-so that's-that's diametrically opposed. Now, again, I'm not suggesting that school leadership uh, subscribe to the way that Muslims might view the world, I'm not suggesting that; but at least give the space so that they can actualize who they are in public schools. Okay.

Center Host: You know you had mentioned that um, you know, there's certain things that make Muslims unique and you know, schools providing the space that um, you know, where Muslim students can coexist with their, with multiple identities, um, and with that I, and I had read something you had written about how school discipline policies can um, problematize behaviors or manners of speech or dress or other cultural customs that wouldn't normally be problems if you're subscribing to um, you know, a dominant culture or dominant norms. Um, and so, what it-what ways can educators and policy makers start to provide spaces by that, maybe – maybe in the context of discipline policies, if we...?

Dr. Khalifa: So, um, it's important to note that Muslims, we-we're talking about them in a way that's really to be honest, a-a bit simplified, and I know we're doing that, uh, because, so-uh, so it's probably more, as I alluded to it a second ago, it's probably more useful for us to talk about Muslims and how they identify in this context. So you have these African American Muslims, which is probably about a third of Muslims here (US), and then you have other Black Muslims who are somewhere from the African continent, east African. Here in Minneapolis where I am now, and in Columbus and some other places, West Africans in Columbus also, and Houston and some other places. And so, these African Muslims who came here from Muslim countries, within the past say 40 to 50 years, mostly under 20 years though. Um, they then identify, some of them, as African-American Muslim. That's-that's, they, they identify as Muslim, but they also identify with cultural practices as African-American, some of them. A large number of them in public schools. So there are authors like, uh, Foreman, and uh others that have written – Bigelow – that have written about how this happens. So then you have other Muslims, though, who came here and up until say 15 years ago, maybe 20 years ago, had sort of beco- just like in ways the Irish, in ways that the Italians, in ways that Jews, became White, [Center Host: Yes.] you know these communities were very discriminated against, they were in enclaves, ghetto-ized enclaves in fact, in New York and other places, and eventually though, they were able to become White. Well many of these Muslim immigrants from, so Indians, so the model minority thing, so Indians, and when I say Indians I mean from India, um, were identified, they were-they were not oppressed in the ways that for example, Native Americans, African Americans and Latina/os were oppressed. They were able to live in White areas from the very beginning, they were able to get White jobs, they were able to assimilate into White America and many of them uh, wanted to marry White people and in fact did. Which is fine, but you have to understand that for Muslims, though, that change, from Muslims from Syria, from the Syrian area who have White skin, or from Lebanon who have very light skin, or from

Turkey, or from other places, they were able to become White whereas Blacks were – so in other words what I'm- I'm- I'm-trying to draw out some of the nuances, and I know our time is limited. But I'm trying to draw out some of the nuances and not – not all Muslims are equal, in the regard of assimilation, and to American society. Some have additional barriers because of the color of their skin and because of the place, or how they identify when they come, uh the resources they come with, when they come if you come as a voluntary refugee, that means probably that you don't have much money when you came, whereas if you come as-as an engineer, or a medical doctor and you were educated back home, that has impli-implications for how you will experience life here. So going back to your point, so-so now that we have that out of the way, going back to your question, I-I would argue that school leaders and policies and disciplinary policies, if they are already anti-oppressive in their works, they don't need to do anything different. They just need to extend that anti-oppressive work to-- to they need to extend it to communities that have Muslim students. If they are not doing anti-oppressive works already, well then they need to go ahead and look at this great, great body of literature that myself and other scholars have been contributing to, uh, doing equity audits, which means that you are looking at who's suspended, what students, how frequently, what programs don't have, for example, Ethiopian Muslim students or other um Muslim students in it, are they under-repre-- are they over-represented in Special Education, in the Twin Cities there is uh overrepresentation of Somali students in Special Education classes. And really what it boils down to is that White teachers don't understand how Muslim students are, uh, existing in schools, and so for them, it has to be a learning deficiency, right? [Center Host: Mmm-hmm]. Or, a disability, rather. And um, so, uh, so, that's-that's one start, another thing is that there are, uh, unique ways, I would argue, that indigenized people, indigenous people, and Muslims, have as it pertains to solving conflict. And when something foreign happens, I think this can-this can be seen in a number of countries so for example, um, not to belabor the point but in-in-in East African conference right now Somalis had for-for-for millennia, I would argue, uh, very indigenous ways of solving conflicts between tribes, within tribes, so on and so forth, and in the past 100 years that changed; foreign ways of governance came in and so on and so forth I'm- I'm not Somali, but as my reading of history suggests that these indigenous ways, these historic ways of solving conflict were uprooted and so I would – I would suggest that who needed/find tribal elders, for example, to commit and help mitigate, or uh, it doesn't have to be an elderly person it could be a mentor from the community, a community based mentor to come in, not as, so-so-so, school districts have been hiring Somali liaisons and Ethiopian liaisons in order, in-in what in-in, what some of them unfortunately have been doing this deficit-izing the Somali community, or the East African community for White administrators. Now, personally I have done many of these meetings and uh, these liaisons that think things like, you know, um, our community is, uh, they can't read, they don't even know how to write their name, and just confirming a White educator that say, "Hey it's not your fault," White educators, "that the Somali students are coming out of school and this and that." And that's very problematic, so, what-what-what-if school districts have to be careful not to choose Somalis that will just confirm all whiteness and White practices that are hegemonic for people of color they have to be careful about that. That being said, there are ways that districts can go into communities and actually locate and find older people and younger people who could serve as mentors and help mitigate conflict between, not just students in the school, but between communities and schools. Or training, making sure that teachers are up to date on training, and about cultural practices, spiritual practices, religious practices of all of those students. Of all things. So this is just a part of the unit of work that anti-oppressive leaders and anti-oppressive educators sort of engage...and, uh, so it just has to be extended in the same ways

that we reach out the Black community, African American community, families, we reach out to uh, migrant community and other Hispanic or Latina/o or Chicana/o uh people. And in the same ways we uh reach out to indigenous people we have to extend that, and if we're not doing that for these other communities- that's very problematic of course- but if we are, then we have to extend that to Muslim students as well, and get past this whole notion of the separation between church and state. Because as we. as we already discussed, Christianity is rife and it's controlling order in all public schools that I've ever been to. So, it's not about uh, and but-but when you claim it's not then you invisible-ize it and you normalize Christian space and that's problematic; so instead of doing that, what we have to do is say ok, look, we just have to make sure that all of our spiritual people have a space in the school.

Center Host: And that concludes part two of our three-part series with Dr. Muhammad Khalifa.

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