**‘Teaching Beyond Stereotypes': Ways to Teach the Middle East & Islam in Schools**

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By [Larry Ferlazzo](https://www.edweek.org/by/larry-ferlazzo) — September 29, 2020, 11 min read

***What are important considerations that educators should keep in mind when teaching Arab and Muslim students?***

Guest-editor [Dr. Sawsan Jaber “kicked off”](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2020/09/supporting_arab_muslim_students_in_the_classroom.html)a multipart series responding to this question. Dr. Jaber, along with contributors Abeer Shinnawi and Dr. Nina Shoman-Dajani, also were guests on [my 10-minute BAM! Radio Show](https://www.bamradionetwork.com/track/kcqa-sawsonjabernina-shomaniabeer-shinnawi/). You can also find a list of, and links to, [previous shows here.](https://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2015/06/17/all-my-bam-radio-shows-linked-with-descriptions/)

The focus of today’s column is the same as [post No. 1](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2020/09/supporting_arab_muslim_students_in_the_classroom.html): What c*onsiderations educators should keep in mind when teaching Arab & Muslim students?*Abeer Shinnawi, Sarah Said, and Dr. Nina Shoman-Dajani continue the conversation in today’s second post in the series....

Teaching Beyond Stereotypes: How to Teach the Middle East and Islam in Schools

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Growing up in the United States to Arab immigrant parents, I learned that watching the news was a must in our household. Before 24-hour news services existed, my parents watched every newscast available at the time to stay abreast of information coming from back home the Middle East. They were very aware of the unwavering biases and fraudulent claims made by the media about events that unraveled in the Middle East, the root of the constant harassment my parents faced as new immigrants to the U.S. The media portrayal of Arabs and Muslims has not been kind, which has led to the implicit and overt biases embedded in public school education. If the average Americans were gaining their information about a group of people using the media as the reliable source, then educators would not be immune from using the same sources to teach about the Middle East or Arab students.

Muslim and Arab students have been increasingly targeted in schools since the events of 9/11. This challenge creates a need for us to consider how to better address their needs. Educators are rife with implicit bias that they bring with them into the classroom, which can create a hostile environment aimed toward students who are Arab, Muslim, or are perceived to be both. The major issues when the topic of Islam emerges are the constant stereotypes and misconceptions that plague our society.

According to [Dr. Susan Douglas](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0002716203588001005), the K-14 education outreach coordinator for the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University states, “Stereotypes and misrepresentations of Islam have been deeply ingrained in American culture. Just as the legacy of slavery shaped popular images of Africa as a continent of heathen tribes ..., so the Western medieval world and colonial heritage of Islam has underlain modern miseducation about Muslim society and history.” With an increase of Muslim and Arab students in American public schools, there needs to be a major shift in how to teach the history of Islam and the Middle East.

There are many steps that need to be taken to change the false narratives that are marginalizing our Arab and Muslim students. The first step to *counter false narratives* is to begin with *creating a safe environment*in schools. Implementing a zero-tolerance policy with consequences regarding anti-Muslim and -Arab bigotry would give students a sense of safety. Another major step is to *write and implement a curriculum that reflects the rich culture and heritage of Arabs and Muslims* that have shaped the geographic, social, economic, and political landscapes of the world beyond American foreign policy or the Crusades, the focal point of many curriculum guides.

There are many resources, organizations, and educators who have created rich, engaging, historically accurate curricula that can enhance a student’s knowledge about the Middle East and Islam such as The Middle East Outreach Council which, according to its website: “established the Middle East Book Award in 1999 to recognize books for children and young adults that contribute meaningfully to understanding of the Middle East.” Last, teacher-college courses must provide *incoming new teachers with cultural-studies programs* to prepare them on how to teach students from various religious, cultural, and social backgrounds—those marginalized for decades due to the ongoing media and foreign policies that drive local, state, and national standards.

As an Arab American educator, the relationship I build with all of my students comes from a better understanding of their backgrounds because I know what it feels like to be marginalized, and that, in turn, creates a strong learning environment. Although every teacher may not be able to relate to being marginalized, every teacher has the duty to ensure a safe, culturally responsive classroom for all students.

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