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Arab American Youth in Perspective



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live in a ghetto-like enclave that is segregated from the middle-class neighborhoods by a wall of auto-industry factories. Girls have the responsibility of helping their parents manage household affairs, such as paying bills, aiding siblings with homework, earning good grades at school (which is often synonymous with being a good Muslim girl), marrying while in high school and caring for their own children, and behaving according to Yemeni religious and cultural norms, which are often quite strict in comparison with those of mainstream American homes. The boys usually work outside the neighborhood and contribute to the household income.

The September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States brought new attention to Muslim Arab American communities and highlighted how little we know about these communities, the Middle East, our own foreign policy, and national and local security. Although these issues are beyond the scope of our scholarly activities, many of us conduct research in schools that include Arab American students, or deal with issues of diversity in our work. Drawing on my experience as an educational anthropologist whose research centers on youth cultures and literacy studies, I provide in this column a brief overview of Arab immigration from the Middle East to the US and describe the impact Muslim Arab youth have had on public schools.

The majority of early Arab immigrants were Christians who immigrated from Syria and Lebanon at the turn of the twentieth century. They had little formal education and half of them were illiterate in Arabic and English. A second wave of predominantly Lebanese and Palestinian Muslims arrived after WWII. Many held professional degrees, came from an urban middle

and upper middle class background, and were often secular in their worldviews. Although most adapted to the American way of life, they continued to identify with the Arab world and to speak Arabic in the home. Recent immigrants include those who arrived since 1965, when the US Congress changed restrictions on immigration. The majority of these immigrants come from six countries: Lebanon, Jordan/Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. They are diverse in terms of educational and professional background. My current research focuses on recent Yemeni and Iraqi immigrants in the US, but the discussion that follows draws on two years of fieldwork in a Yemeni community in southeastern Michigan.

Throughout southeastern Michigan (which has the largest Arabic speaking population outside the Middle East, nearly 300,000 people), public schools enroll Arab American students who are at different stages of acculturation to "American culture." The students in my study come from families in which the parents are illiterate in English and either semi or illiterate in Arabic, and work in blue-collar or manual labor jobs. Families

Youth life in this community is complex and complicated as boys and girls struggle to find a middle ground between being American and Yemeni in their school and community. As scholars and researchers in European countries such as England, France, and Germany—where large populations of Muslims from Pakistan, Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia reside—have documented, Yemenis also contend with both formal and informal curricula in their public schools. Formal curricula include the day-to-day academic subjects taught in school, while the informal curricula include physical education classes, extra-curricular sports, or lunch in the cafeteria. These academic and social dimensions become all the more complex when students do not participate as expected. For example, a Division AA high school, in which one third or more of its female student population will not participate in after-school sports for cultural/religious reasons, will not be able to compete adequately within its own division. Ultimately, a school experiences funding, policy, and cultural conflicts when this occurs. At the individual level, students must contend with

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incompatible social norms. For example, Yemeni girls who would like to participate in after-school, extra-curricular activities and are likely to suffer dire consequences from their families in the US and Yemen if they do, find it difficult to be American in that context. Furthermore, in analyzing the discourse of classroom life among girls and boys in this community, I found that girls are more likely to interact as any other adolescent does when no Yemeni boys are present in the classroom; however, a strong male Yemeni presence in a high school curtails talk, laughter, eye-contact, and other paralinguistic interaction in hallways, the cafeteria, and sometimes the classroom.

September 11 highlighted similarities and differences in the various cultures Americans represent. One of the more interesting differences on which media networks such as CNN focused were Islamic schools, and specifically the madrasahs (schools for public instruction), which in Afghanistan were used by some of the Taliban as hate-training schools against Americans. This is unfortunate because madrasahs and other Islamic schools have a long distinguished history that focuses on the values of learning in various disciplinary fields, religion, language, and oral recitation. For students in the Yemeni community in southeastern Michigan, the combination of their public high school and their neighborhood “Arabic School” is a contemporary variant of a madrasah. Because education is highly valued by Muslims, parents send their children to school seven days a week, to public and private school. Like many Arab Muslim communities in the US and elsewhere, this Yemeni community has an “Arabic School,” which is housed in the neighborhood mosque. Most of the boys and girls in this community attended Arabic School on the weekends, where they learned to be literate in Arabic by reading the *Qur’an* and studying Arabic grammar and writing. Religious instruction also took place. During the two years I spent in this community, I found that students often questioned the values the teachers taught and compared them to what they learned at their public school. For example, a teacher would tell her female students that they are “like wrapped chocolate” and that only their husbands should look at them in the eye. This often contradicted the feminist philosophies espoused by some of their public school teachers, in whose classrooms boys and girls interacted openly with one another in most contexts. Because there was very little interaction between the public school and the community, teachers in each setting knew very little about one another’s cultures (other than what they saw and heard in the public media) and communities.

As educators and researchers, it is important that we are aware of how youth make sense of their world. As I

report elsewhere (please see references), all too often teachers remain ignorant of their students’ communities, religion, and their struggles to be both American and something else, such as Yemeni. If researchers and educators are to support diversity in public schools, then they must be aware not only of its existence but also of its manifestation and acknowledge that diversity is part of a larger geopolitical way of life. Awareness is the first step towards understanding. I remain optimistic that schools are also experiencing a middle ground that will privilege their students and communities. Perhaps that will be one of the positive legacies of September 11, 2001.

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