

# Introduction: Teaching About Islam in U.S. Schools

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## *Abstract*

*This issue of *Thresholds in Education*, addressing teaching about Islam in U.S. schools, brings together a diverse set of articles each threaded together by a common desire to respond to the question: what does it mean to be educated about Islam? Though the articles speak to a variety of diverse platforms including textbooks, secondary classrooms, and institutions of higher education, they all call into question the ways in which Islam is currently approached and offer new frameworks for understanding curricula on Islam. After outlining a brief summary and the sequence of articles in this series, the author of this introductory essay asks the reader to consider how each of the articles addresses curricula on Islam through the lens of the curriculum box, including explicit, implicit, and null curriculum (Eisner, 1985).*

**Keywords:** *curriculum on Islam; religious literacy; Islamophobia; curriculum box*

This issue of *Thresholds in Education*, addressing teaching about Islam in U.S. schools, emerges at a time when the sociopolitical landscape grows in its explicit hostility towards Muslim-bodies. Incidents of hate-crimes against bodies perceived to be Muslim have only increased, and the fervor has permeated school walls with reports of teachers lashing out against Muslim students inside schools and through social media. While this reality is worthy of attention and outrage, the set of articles in this issue address the larger, pre-existing orientations of dehumanization that have fostered the fertile ground from which nonsensical policies such as “The Muslim ban,” and systematic state surveillance of Muslim communities (Ali, 2016), flourish. More specifically, these articles address the production and dissemination of knowledge on Islam and Muslims and its manifestation within school curricula.

While this set of articles addresses different sites of knowledge production, including higher education institutions, textbooks, teachers, and secondary education classrooms, they all acknowledge and critique the ways in which epistemologies of dominance, such as Orientalism and White Supremacy, have shaped what counts as official knowledge (Apple, 2000). As the authors in this issue point out, the subtlety with which oppressive frameworks have become commonsense, make it difficult to imagine what teaching beyond the current curricular frame might look like.

Another impossibility to imagine in an environment of dehumanization is the luxury of asking: what do students need to learn about Islam in order to be considered “educated?” While, nothing can be extricated from context, all too often scholars, teachers, and cultural workers center dehumanizing discourses about Muslims and Islam and create curriculum with the intention of responding to the oppressive frame. This practice is ultimately self-defeating as it continues to allow dehumanizing discourses to dictate the contours of curriculum. For example, a common

practice among well-intentioned teachers is to emphasize commonalities between Islam and other Abrahamic faiths in hopes that understanding Muslims as “not that different” will quell anti-Muslim sentiment. This, once again centers the norm as Christian-centric and only allows for acknowledgement in relation to itself. These articles, while grappling fully with the troubled notion of “Islamophobia,” offer an affirmative approach to teaching about Islam rather than focusing on strategies of curricular responses built to satiate the curiosities of those who take-up dehumanizing dispositions. After all, one doesn’t need to know anything about Islam to know that discriminating against Muslims is morally reprehensible.

The first article in this issue asks the question that all of the other articles, in one way or another, grapple with. That is, *what does it mean to be educated about Islam?* It does so by calling into question the assumptions that learning about Islam will quell Islamophobia. Unearthing assumptions made by many well-intentioned educators, I lay out some of the ineffective teaching strategies commonly used for the purposes of responding back to Islamophobia, which ironically end up reinforcing many of the precepts of Islamophobia. I posit that teaching with an epistemology of complexity is more fruitful for creating a critical mindset poised to resist facile ideologies like Islamophobia. Given the current curricular constraints, prioritizing this epistemology might mean sacrificing our commitment to teaching “the basics” of Islam.

While the first article engages with the broader landscape of curriculum, the second article written by Al Sager and Zagumny, reports on a critical discourse analysis of textbooks used to teach about Islam in secondary classrooms. In an environment where most teachers have little critical knowledge about Islam, it is incredibly likely they would rely on the textbooks as a source of knowledge. Al Sager and Zagumny find patterns of dehumanization of Muslims and their faith-tradition by categorizing attributes assigned to Muslims and Islam in the textbooks. These categorizations, while based on contemporary texts, mimic an Orientalist perspective.

Rashid’s article picks up on the vitality of the Orientalist lens in curriculum by focusing on knowledge production in institutions of higher education, sites where knowledge is authorized for dissemination in K-12 contexts. After offering analyses on the connections between categorizations of *othering* within the higher education context and its translation in secondary education, Rashid challenges the common dichotomy within Orientalist studies of “the west” and “the other,” by revealing how Orientalism, among other factors, has shaped the way Islam is understood as a timeless monolith, rather than a focus on situated localities. He does this through the case study of Shi’ism, arguing that when curricular decisions are made about what is included in the curriculum box, Shi’i traditions, among others, are often made marginal. This, in turn, results in Shi’i traditions presented in K-12 contexts as deviant offshoots from what is “authentic Islam.” While acknowledging the myriad of practical challenges in offering a variety of perspectives within the situated realities and histories of Muslims, Rashid gives a caution that a cultural studies approach which values context and diversity, should not devolve into relativism.

Henderson’s article, much like Rashid’s, understands curriculum as a tool of dominance, which acts as a gatekeeper for who is considered worthy of full humanity. By framing official knowledge within the context of White Supremacy, Henderson elucidates several ways in which an educational investment in whiteness continues to *otherize* that which isn’t white. In an effort to analyze knowledge production through the lens of White Supremacy, while also resisting the uptake of the limited frames offered by dominant white-centric constructions, Henderson employs Islamic frameworks as analytic tools. In an educational context where religious illiteracy abounds (Moore, 2007), Henderson’s move to write from within critical discourses of Islam, by using the concepts of *shirk* and *ummah* as analytical frames, is a bold methodological

challenge to the facile ways in which Islam is often reduced in arenas of Western knowledge, including academia.

The final article, authored by Meymand, focuses what is at stake as we grapple with the question of what it means to be educated about Islam. After discussing a framework of Critical Southwest Asian Studies, the author recommends that educators adopt Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy for teaching Muslim students. While the sociopolitical situation rests on the bedrock of centuries old dichotomies of West vs. the rest, too often our students are framed in the spaces between hyphens. The Orientalist obsession with labeling and disciplining subjects into their proper categorization lives on in the way we strategize teaching our “diverse” students. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy resists the hyphens and dichotomies by offering students opportunities to live their humanity more fully in classroom spaces.

Throughout this special issue the authors have attempted to bring forward, not only the problems of dominant discourses about Islam and Muslims, but have also recommended ways to counter these discourses in order for all students to benefit. The process of improving our educational approach in classrooms must start with a deep study of what is presently in the curriculum box. Using Eisner’s (1985) framework, educators and academics can reflect on the three strands of curriculum: the explicit, the implicit, and the null. In this issue, Al Sager and Zagumny most directly take up what is explicitly taught about Islam through their textual study and Meymand suggests explicit ways to redirect that instruction. While all authors touch on the implicit curriculum and its antecedents, Merchant, Henderson and Rashid attempt to unearth how dominant discourses control and discipline what we learn as official knowledge (Apple, 2000). The null curriculum, a set larger than any other, is addressed in Rashid’s case-study of Shi’I Islam in higher educational institutions, which is so minimally taught that it can be considered null.

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# When Exposure Falls Short: Islamophobia Beyond Islam

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## *Abstract*

*With the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States, educators are well poised to respond to the current climate of intolerance through religious literacy. While the mission for many educators and scholars is clear, the way forward is less so. This article critiques a common assertion upon which many educators rely in order to thwart Islamophobic sentiments in their students; that is the assumption that exposure to Muslims will produce religious literacy thereby reducing Islamophobia. After deconstructing this assumption, the article posits a critical curriculum frame as a more effective means of teaching against Islamophobia.*

**Keywords:** *Islamophobia; critical curriculum studies; religious literacy; Islam*

## **Introduction**

**R**eligious literacy has become particularly compelling because of the rise of hate-speech and hate-crimes against Muslims in the United States and Europe. When religious literacy is framed as a strategic response to this crisis, it may constrict the conceptual rigor and depth of what counts as literacy. The presumed cause and effect relationship between exposure to Muslims with a reduction in hate-speech/hate-crimes against Muslims, creates an ideal environment for educators to disseminating facile and simplistic information about Muslims and Islam. After all, if ignorance is the real problem, it follows that facts will fill the knowledge gap, thereby reducing prejudice. This has led to an increasing focus on religious literacy in K-12 schools. While this knee-jerk reaction to a manifestation of oppression is a worthy project, I posit that attention to educating for critical frameworks and thought-processes is a more meritorious pursuit, not only for combatting Islamophobia, but for preventing the spread of oppression more generally. In what follows, I analyze assumptions inherent in educational discourses on religious literacy after which I offer a critical curriculum studies approach to advocate for a more robust, and distinct prejudice reduction curriculum.

## **The Incompleteness in Frames of “Ignorance”**

In the spring of 2017, Teaching Tolerance released a feature article titled *Expelling Islamophobia*. After outlining the phenomenon of anti-Muslim hate crimes and widespread ignorance about Islam in the United States, Sean McCollum, author of the feature, turned to what could be done to expel Islamophobia. One of the essential problems identified by the author was highlighted using a Pew study, which stated “nearly half of Americans report not knowing anyone