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GLOBAL BATTLEGROUND OR SCHOOL PLAYGROUND: *The Bullying of America's Muslim Children*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While bullying is on the rise in American schools, the reasons why Muslim children are being bullied vary: the American mainstream's limited knowledge, pervasive misperceptions, and negative stereotypes about Muslims. Little is known about Islam and Muslims, and little is being done to redress this situation. Recent data gathered on this student population indicates that continued inaction might engender a divided society related to school-based ostracism. This brief recommends a series of actions that, if implemented at the individual, school, community, and legislative levels, will help improve the situation and lead to a greater acceptance of Muslim children and youth.

CONTEXT AND IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM

On a typical day, ten-year-old Muslim Arab-American Reyhan steps outside her front door prepared to face taunts, jeers, and stares that place her in the company of those who bomb everything from cars to buildings. Although she is growing up in an American suburb, her reality is as far removed from those terrorists as is that of her next-door neighbor. Identified more easily because of her headscarf, Reyhan is often the recipient of discrimination and name-calling. But her situation is most difficult at school, where her peers

bully and socially exclude her, her teachers ask about the bag over her head, and where textbooks misinterpret her religion. She neither understands what all of this means nor how to respond; nevertheless, the ensuing social ostracism and misunderstanding deeply hurt her. Part of her feels guilt and shame and wants to distance herself from her community; yet another part of her takes tremendous pride in her family and heritage. She draws great strength from her religion and cultural traditions. Growing up Muslim in post-9/11 America is probably one of the most challenging tasks in human development.

This brief recommends a series of actions that, if implemented at the individual, school, community, and legislative levels, will help improve the situation and lead to a greater acceptance of Muslim children and youth.

While the schoolyard bully is not a recent phenomenon, the global geopolitical situation played out in schoolyard bullying certainly is. The bullying of school-aged children is on the rise, well-documented, and growing. The usual reasons, namely, physical appearance, ability level, and popularity, are being joined by lesser known (although equally strong) ones: ethnic and religious discrimination among school children. Muslim children report peer rejection, victimization, and social ostracism and isolation

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Child Study Center, faculty at the Zigler Center for Social Policy and Lecturer at the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University. She is known internationally for her work in the areas of early childhood policy development and analysis and program evaluation. She is presently working with over 20 countries on developing integrated systems for early childhood using a standards approach. In addition she is also working with several individual counties on formulating national policies for the well-being of young children. Dr. Britto has been involved in several early intervention program evaluations in Africa and Asia and most recently working on a 6 country evaluation of an innovative approach to improve school readiness. Dr. Britto is known nationally for her scientific work on young children's early literacy development and more recently on understanding issues of identity development of Muslim and Arab children growing up in the United States. Dr. Britto obtained her doctoral degree in developmental psychology from Teachers College, Columbia University. She is the recipient of several national and international grants and awards in recognition for her work and has published numerous books, articles, chapters and reports and has presented extensively at conferences, meetings and work shops (academic and non-academic) both nationally and abroad.

because of their religious affiliation. Based on recent work¹ examining the process of identity development of Muslim Arab children, preliminary results suggest that their ethnicity is one cause. Ever since 9/11, there have been increasing reports of discrimination, bullying, and exclusion of Muslim students in schools. Based on the results of several studies, they are reporting pervasive misperceptions and negative stereotypes about Islam in their schools and feelings of isolation and separation from their peers and the larger school community.² In large part, this bullying is linked to cultural misunderstanding. For example, girls who wear the *hijab* report feeling the most vulnerable. This phenomenon has been dubbed "hijabophobia".³ Even though negative media portrayal of Muslims is in part associated with these misperceptions, recent research also indicates that the curricula and teachers might be negatively biased in how information about Islam is being taught in public schools.⁴ Given the limited instructional resources available to teachers, educational polls note that this factor does little to eliminate the personal biases of teachers and school administrators.⁵

If not addressed effectively and immediately, this situation could lead to a multifaceted problem characterized by such potentially negative consequences as a divided American society. Our identity, a multidimensional construct consisting of such factors as gender, occupation, education, cultural background, and race, is a life-long process that emerges out of an interaction between our individual selves and the social context within which we reside. This process begins in childhood and is often consolidated during adolescence. Ethnic identity, which defines who we are with respect to a specific reference group, is one of the most central aspects of personal identity for immigrants and their children. More importantly, this aspect has been linked to psychological adjustment, academic achievement, self-esteem, and the overall well-being of immigrant children and adolescents. Social, political, and cultural contexts are primary influences on ethnic identity, and thus discord

among them could distort the formation of ethnic identity.

Children of Muslim immigrants and Muslim Americans are developing their sense of self based on the multiple dimensions of gender, ethnicity, religion, the family's original nationality, and similar factors. But given that current sociopolitical context tends to promote wariness toward Muslims in the West, the psychological well-being of Muslim children and adolescents is potentially at risk. For example, a series of focus group discussions conducted with sixteen-year-old Muslim Arab youth (twelve girls and ten boys), half of whom attended public school and almost all of whom were American citizens, revealed some novel insights.⁶ The girls, for example, reported tremendous internal conflict: they do not react to being called "terrorists," for doing so would only validate the taunt, yet they feel that this non-reaction means that they are somehow letting their community down. According to them, this internal conflict is leading them to shift the attribution of the blame internally. These situations are potential predictors of depression and both boys and girls remark that chronic taunting and discrimination are leading them to distance themselves from other children at school.

But Muslim children fit into neither model, for they are not primarily European and do not consider skin color to be the primary identifier of ethnicity.

This schoolyard bullying and ostracism is creating a social divide along the lines of religion and ethnicity. While some people believe the myth that teasing is a rite of passage through adolescence, when bullying occurs along ethnic and racial lines we may be looking at a frightening reality. If we listen carefully to what these Muslim children are telling us, we will learn that they are struggling to make sense of their own place within the

already complex social constructs of society that are further exacerbated by geopolitical events, with little by way of interventions and programs to assist them. This situation demands that educators, policymakers, and society at large address it immediately so that we can move forward with an undivided and united society.

THE CURRENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE AND INTERVENTIONS: PROGRAM AND POLICY RESPONSE

By some estimates, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States and will constitute its second largest religious minority even if immigration and conversion rates remain unchanged. Although Muslims have been immigrating to this country since the late 1800s, there is a dearth of research, information, programs, and policies that address the needs of their children and youth. In other words, the evidence required for program and policy planning and implementation with respect to Muslim children appears to be limited. A brief overview is provided below.

With respect to ethnic identity, for example, we know relatively little about identity development among Muslim American children. Original models of ethnic identity focused on first-generation "White ethnics" (e.g., Italians and Greeks) who immigrated during the 1920s and largely assimilated. Another set of theories around ethnic identity development focused more on recent immigrants of color, such as those from Africa, Mexico, or the Caribbean. In this theoretical paradigm, skin color is a significant component of ethnic identity. But Muslim children fit into neither model, for they are not primarily European and do not consider skin color to be the primary identifier of ethnicity. More recently, scholars have been seeking to understand the identity development process in order to dispel misperceptions and misrepresentations of Muslims. Emerging from this work are two major themes: (1) a Muslim American identity is very complex, for it encompasses and intersects with religion, gender, skin

color, national, and linguistic dimensions; and (2) even though Muslim Americans share a common faith, they are extremely diverse with respect to cultural association. Thus Muslim American youth exhibit and negotiate their identity in many ways. Some have managed to integrate their Muslim and American identities, others have somehow separated them into non-conflictual worlds, and still others see a degree of irreconcilability between these identities.⁷ This type of research clearly suggests that the complexity involved in understanding a Muslim American's identity is important, because lack of knowledge can be linked with the misperceptions that contribute to bullying at school.

Popular media generally portray negative images and stereotypes of Muslims that are often linked with violence and terrorism. Other media representation of Muslims tends to intensify the dichotomy between "us" and "them," with Muslims being treated as the out-group.⁸ Recent research reveals that the media is marginalizing the representation of ordinary Muslims.⁹ In summary, the data on the challenges facing Muslim children are not well documented and most school personnel are not well informed about Islam. Their primary source of information is the popular media, such as Hollywood movies, where Muslims' portrayal in American popular culture is stilted, as well as those actions of Muslims themselves that cause misperceptions. This state of limited knowledge and the prevalence of negative media about the lives of Muslim American children neither addresses their challenges nor helps provide sufficient and valid evidence for school-based programs and policies.

The results are clearly seen with respect to the very few and very recent school-based interventions. For example, one attempt to address the challenges of Muslim American children, *(Re)embracing Diversity in New York City Public Schools: Educational Outreach for Muslim Sensitivity*, was developed several years after 9/11.¹⁰ Designed to promote peace education in New York City schools, it focused on understanding Islam and furthering cooperation, negotiation, and

respect for diversity. Missing from the curricula and a pointed recommendation of the authors, however, is the need to understand the Muslim children's ethnic identity so as to be able to improve the curriculum. The second example, *Learning from the Challenges of Our Times: Global Security, Terrorism and 9/11 in the Classroom*, will be implemented in New Jersey schools in fall 2011. Its stated purpose is to provide teachers and community members with the tools they need to help students understand such contemporary challenges as threats to global safety and security and how they can contribute positively to their schools and communities. The effectiveness of this curriculum is not yet known. The Islamic Networks Group (ING), which is working for mutual respect in society, is actively raising awareness of the bullying of American Muslim youth. But more importantly, it has been creating educational materials for teachers about getting to know Muslims and Islam. This promising initiative is designed to provide balanced and unbiased information to educators and school administrators.

In general, there is a heightened awareness and growing legislative response with respect to a policy level response to bullying. The United States Department of Health and Human Services hosts a website that raises awareness about bullying and disseminates information on its prevention. Over thirty-five states have enacted legislation designed to reduce or prevent bullying.¹¹ There is, however, a wide variation in definitions of bullying and prevention strategies and programs. In addition, the outcomes of antibullying prevention and intervention programs are mixed, with some reporting a positive impact and others none. Given this variation, the antibullying community is calling for legislation that will promote a consistent definition of bullying and research-based, comprehensive antibullying prevention programs.

Yet research indicates that the reasons why specific children get bullied are quite complex. For example, younger children tend to bully and get bullied more than their middle-school peers. Gender differences

in bullying also exist. With respect to ethnicity, some studies note higher rates of physical bullying among African-American and Hispanic high school boys than white boys.¹² Very few of these studies, however, have looked beyond these larger minority ethnic groups. Moreover, Muslim American students are bullied for quite different reasons. Thus, if new antibullying legislation is based on research and the lack of data on bullied Muslim children persists, new legislation will not address the challenges that they face in school. This situation needs immediate attention and amelioration.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In the past decade, Muslim American middle- and high-school students have faced a notable rise in bullying and discrimination. This individual-level social ostracism and peer rejection has been linked to their religious and ethnic affiliations, which are tied into the macro geopolitical context. Clearly, multiple levels of influencing factors (e.g., individual friendships, the school, and the larger community) need to be analyzed to redress this situation. As a single strategy is unlikely to be effective given the problem's complexity, I present below a series of recommendations that are evidence-based and not mutually exclusive.

Given that these children experience bullying and discrimination in peer interactions, these recommendations are related to this level of person-to-person interaction. A leading factor here is the American mainstream's general misperception of Islam and Muslims. Accompanying this situation is the media's growing influence on children's social development. Most mainstream media concentrates on the extremes of behavior and, in the case of Muslims, negative portrayals of community members. But because technology has democratized the media, it also provides us with an opportunity to potentially alter preconceived attitudes. Therefore, a key recommendation is to reduce prejudice and stereotyping through innovative media-based

interventions. On average, American youth spend over seven hours a day consuming media and interacting socially online. One of the more popular channels is *YouTube*. If Muslim American youth were to create video portraits of themselves to express their identities, environment, and lives, such material could be streamed on popular sites to educate non-Muslim American youth through media that is both acceptable and socially desirable. This media-based intervention is particularly relevant for Muslim American adolescents whose identity has been prejudged by others based on general media representation. Such video self-portraits make it possible for Muslim American youth to override negative representations. Video portraits and video diaries have enlightened audiences about groups whose lives are often told by others. By placing such material in the popular media, Muslim American youth can educate their peers and help dispel misperceptions that cause social discrimination and bullying.

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The next set of recommendations for policy interventions concerns the site where such bullying occurs. School-based interventions are rooted in evidence. Therefore, any proposed anti-bullying programs must understand who Muslim American children are, their lives, and the challenges they face while developing their own identity. While curricula using lectures, written materials, and other traditional methods are starting to emerge to help the country's teachers and students better understand their Muslim

peers, there is a lack of research in this area. Given this fact, a pointed recommendation is to conduct policy-relevant research to improve teacher training and curricula practices. The educational research community needs to study this situation so that it can design programs that promote multicultural respect and understanding in schools. The three curricula mentioned above are good models of how the situation of Muslim American children can be improved in schools; other school systems should follow suit. Unfortunately, most antibullying programs in school follow a set of guidelines that address bullying in general. Of these guidelines, the ones that are most relevant for Muslim American students are those that address tolerance and respect. In order to educate students, teachers, and families about Islam and Muslims, particularly Muslim American students, research that can be translated into information that can be shared at staff meetings, student assemblies, newsletters to families, school websites, and student handbooks is required.

The communities in which children reside have an important influence upon their attitudes, beliefs, and values, regardless of whether the bullying occurs at school or in cyberspace. Building interfaith dialogue among community leaders through neighborhood partnerships is an effective way to address social discrimination at school. Educating them about social discrimination, building a common understanding among the different ethnicities, and finding ways to connect are vital to such an endeavor. Several proactive Muslim organizations have taken it upon themselves to reach out to such people and educate them about this specific problem.

Legislatively, and because the jurisdiction of schools falls under the mandate of state governance, the adoption of antibullying laws by states is very important. Currently, such legislation both requires school personnel and administrators to be trained in intervening and reporting incidents of bullying.

It also empowers parents to file reports of bullying experienced by their children. But none of these are prevention strategies. Furthermore, it is difficult for states to devise laws that address one particular group or conditionality. Therefore the issue of bullying of Muslim American children needs to be recorded as per the current legislations. But more importantly, it needs to be advocated for in newer legislation that looks specifically at the issues of hate crimes and racial ethnic discrimination.

CONCLUSION

Reyhan was probably bullied at school today, just like many of her peers. But unlike them, there is not much she can do about it. A majority of non-Muslim American children are bullied because of, among others, self-esteem issues, revenge, boredom and entertainment, competition, and gaining acceptance. They can potentially address and understand all of these. For Muslim American children, however, the primary reason for bullying is the geopolitical situation, which they cannot control and are often hard-pressed to even understand. While the incidence of bullying Muslim and non-Muslim American children might be equivalent, the underlying reasons for such attacks certainly differ. Thus there is a need for intensive and pervasive efforts to educate American society about Islam and Muslims through the words, experiences, and lives of Muslim Americans themselves. Information should then be provided to libraries, knowledge bases, teachers and school administrators, as well as featured in educational materials and resources, school curricula, popular Internet sites, television, and films. If we want to ensure that Reyhan will walk out of her front door tomorrow without fear of being bullied or ostracized, we need to begin today. To ensure a united American society tomorrow, we need to move forward with educating American citizens today.

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ENDNOTES

1 Britto, et al., forthcoming

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