Module 1:
Educational Framework:
An Anti-Racism/Anti-Islamophobia Perspective

Being a Canadian Muslim Woman in the 21st Century

introduction

This module applies a critical lens to existing multicultural discussions about diversity and difference. It does so by situating these discussions in an anti-racism/anti-Islamophobia educational framework that provides the pedagogical foundation for the other modules in this tool kit.

EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK: AN ANTI-RACISM/ ANTI-ISLAMOPHOBIA PERSPECTIVE

Religious and racial identity are important markers of difference in contemporary schools and multicultural societies. As such, it has become a major challenge for educators and school administrators to deal with religious and racial identity in a way that enables practitioners of different religious faiths to feel part and parcel of the learning process. Ever since 9/11, Muslim students have come under extreme pressure due to their religious identity. All Muslim students may share this sense of exclusion and marginalization because of their religious and racialized identity. However, this exclusion is experienced differently and perhaps more strongly by racialized female Muslims, particularly those who wear the hijab and therefore can be easily identified.

Often the stereotypical representations of Muslim girls/women project them as passive, incapable of agency and resistance, and unable to assume leadership roles in society. It is imperative that schools challenge such stereotypes by providing opportunities for these students and by offering them inclusive and enabling education. Therefore, it is important to bring this issue to the curricular level and make it an inseparable part of any teacher training and development program and more widely a part of any education system practising inclusivity and equity.

Through the *Being a Canadian Muslim Woman in the 21st Century* project, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) sought to develop an educational resource kit for teachers and guidance counsellors that would provide accurate, sympathetic and culturally appropriate information. To meet this goal, CCMW engaged consultants Dr. Jasmin Zine and Dr. Zabedia Nazim. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the needs of the various stakeholders, the consultants conducted a needs assessment that involved a series of focus group interviews with pre- and in-service teachers and Muslim students from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and the London and Waterloo areas.

The educational resource kit was designed based on the findings of the needs assessment report, and reflects the concerns of key stakeholders in the project. Mindful of the transformative aims of the *Being a Canadian Muslim Woman in the 21st Century* project, the consultants guided their design of this kit using analytical and discursive frameworks. These frameworks were based on critical multicultural, anti-racism education and anti-Islamophobia education. What follows below is a more thorough discussion of these frameworks and their relationship to the goals of the project.

Multicultural Education

Since the introduction of the Multiculturalism Act in the House of Commons by Prime Minister Trudeau in 1971, Canadian institutions have moved away from assimilationist policies. They did so, in an effort to create a more culturally pluralistic society, free from racism and from intolerance of cultural and religious differences.

Multiculturalism is a discourse and practice that acknowledges ethnic diversity and promotes cultural pluralism and cultural exchange. Unlike assimilation, it emphasizes the principle of national unity in diversity. Many school boards have developed multicultural policies, programs and practices based on cultural pluralism. These boards understand that we are living in a multicultural society and so the best kind of educational system is a multicultural one. The overall vision is to create a learning environment that respects the cultures of all students. Multicultural education initiatives have focused on showcasing the histories, traditions and lifestyles of various cultures. The aim is to create an atmosphere where students practise tolerance, respect and understanding of cultural differences. The central aim is to create attitudinal change. (See Dei, 1996; Dei & Calliste, 1996; Henry & Tator, 2010.)

Critics have argued that this liberalist multicultural approach to education overshadows serious discussions around racism and structures of social inequality. They believe that the focus of this approach is on the material and exotic aspects of culture—food, dance, festivals and traditions—rather than on the values and belief systems that underlie diversity. In effect, this approach *manages* ethnic diversity, while still maintaining the dominant culture and safeguarding privileges of dominant groups. Furthermore, liberalist multicultural education often ignores the role of educational institutions in the generation and reproduction of education. Unlike anti-racism education, multicultural education usually fails to acknowledge the endemic nature of racism in Canadian society and is less concerned with changing inequitable social and institutional relations (see Dei 1996; Dei & Calliste 1996; Henry & Tator, 2010).

Critical Multicultural and Anti-Racism Education

Racism may be defined as a negative, dehumanizing, and oppressive view, attitude, behavior and action towards members of another group. It can be biological, scientific, academic, institutional and cultural. It also intersects with other markers of difference, such as ethnicity, class, gender, religion, and citizenship. In situations involving racism, individuals, groups, communities, or institutions exercise abusive power over other human beings. Racism facilitates and justifies political, social and cultural structures of inequality and the systems of dominance based on race and other markers of difference.

Anti-racism education is based on the principle that race, despite the concept's lack of scientific foundation, still largely determines (or *mediates*) the experiences of racial minorities in society and in the school (Dei & Calliste, 2000; Dei & Kempf, 2006). Anti-racism (and by association anti-racism education) can be defined as an action-oriented vision seeking to challenge and subvert the imperialist, colonialist, and racist approaches of governments, corporations, institutions, groups, and individuals towards other human beings. Such a vision involves the processes of identifying, challenging, and eventually eliminating the individualistic, systemic, organizational or governmental barriers to equity, equal access, and full development of every community's linguistic, cultural, socio-economic and spiritual needs.

Anti-racism education emerged as part of the Canadian landscape during the late 1980s (Henry & Tator, 2010, p. 215). Unlike liberalist notions of diversity and tolerance that multicultural education espouses, anti-racism education focuses largely on changing institutional and organizational policies and practices that reinforce racial bias and inequality. Rather than focusing on individual attitudes, prejudices or cultural misunderstandings while questioning systemic inequalities, anti-racism challenges notions of equal opportunity, meritocracy and neoliberal solutions for racial inequality. Beginning in the late 1980s, Canadian school boards have worked to develop anti-racism policies that led to the introduction of new equity initiatives and programs that included the following (Henry & Tator, 2010, p. 215):

- training educators in anti-racism

- reviewing personnel practices

- analyzing assessment and placement procedures

- introducing employment equity strategies

- reviewing curriculum materials to identify racial bias

- developing anti-racism curriculum resources and strategies

The current difficulties that Muslim girls and young women encounter in the Canadian school system cannot be significantly addressed through multiculturalism education that considers the problems they face as merely cultural and religious misunderstanding. Anti-racism education goes beyond attitudinal engagement with race and race's intersections with other forms of difference. The *Being a Canadian Muslim Woman in the 21st Century* project finds anti-racism education a more useful framework for the design of curriculum that aims to address barriers young Muslim women students face in the education system. Anti-racism education views Muslim girls as racialized subjects and recognizes the ways that their experiences are mediated by race and its intersections with other forms of difference.

Anti-racism goes beyond attitudinal engagement with race and its intersections with other forms of social difference. Anti-racism education is an action-oriented approach that aims at systemic and institutional change. This is not to say that multicultural education is totally ineffective in addressing issues of cultural, religious and ethnic inequality. However, multicultural education on its own is not enough. By including anti-racism education, the result will be much more just and equitable for everyone involved. This particularly relates to issues around systemic barriers and structural forms of inequality.

As a matter of fact, it was in response to this contribution of anti-racism scholars that a new field titled critical multicultural studies was developed. In addition to regular concerns about cultural, religious and ethnic issues, the *critical multiculturalism studies* approach takes into account race and racism, systemic barriers, and structural forms of inequality. In the context of educational systems combating racism, sexism, Islamophobia, and other systemic barriers, an effective combination of multicultural education and anti-racism education is a more constructive strategy than multicultural education alone.

The experiences of young Muslim women could be situated in a context of racialization, where they are subjected to racism, sexism, religious discrimination, and gendered understandings of society. The issues around hijab, faith, and forms of religious practice fall under the category of cultural oppression. But when they are connected together in a holistic way, the result becomes a racialized subject that embodies various cultural and racial characteristics, different from those of the dominant group in society. Hence, an education informed by both multiculturalism and anti-racism perspectives would be most effective in challenging the kinds of racism, sexism and Islamophobia that young Muslim women students encounter.

Anti-Islamophobia Education

As a system of oppression, *Islamophobia* can be defined as "a fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents that translates into individual, ideological and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination." In developing the foundations of anti-Islamophobia education, Zine (2003) proposes the following framework, which attends to the various, individual, ideological and systemic levels of this oppression that form an inter-related and interlocking system:

- **Reclaiming the stage:** This refers to understanding and presenting Islam from a platform of peace and social justice and not through the spectre of terrorists and suicide bombers. Negative stereotypes of Muslims as fanatical terrorists should not be the entry point for understanding Islam as a broad faith tradition. This limited understanding casts all Muslims as "fundamentalists" despite the many orientations to the faith that exist.

  Reclaiming the stage means adopting a pedagogical approach that shifts the popular media discourse away from the negative stereotypes toward a discourse of peace and social justice that is an essential, yet largely ignored aspect of the Islamic tradition. Because distortions of Islam abound, a critical counter-narrative is required to reframe currently dominant attitudes and present a more balanced perspective.

- **Understanding diversity and pluralism in the Islamic tradition:** Islam is not a monolithic tradition, as there are various individual and sectarian orientations to the faith. This diversity represents a spectrum of beliefs and attitudes that form the broad framework of Islamic epistemology. Recognizing this diversity is important in shattering limited and stereotypical representations of Islam. However, even taking into account this diversity, there is still a broad common tradition and heritage shared by Muslims around the world that forms the basis for developing trans-national solidarities and alliances.

- **Claiming a space for religious/spiritual world views as part of public discourse on education:** While public schools may be secular in orientation, many students are not. Religion and spirituality are key components of the way many people see the world and their place in it. Understanding how religion shapes people's identities and world views is an important aspect of human social and cultural development. Secularism is not a neutral vantage point; it is an ideologically situated framework that masquerades as universalism.

  Creating inclusive schools in a multi-faith, multi-ethnic society means incorporating faith-centred knowledges and experiences within a broader discourse of public education. If pluralism is to include and honour religious pluralism, then schools should reflect this form of social diversity as a common ground for building broad social and cultural literacy among students.

- **Understanding the politics of marginalized religious identities:** The Euro-centric focus of Canadian education is an alienating experience for many Muslim students. This is also true for many other students from other marginalized communities whose cultural and religious practices may run counter to the conventional standards of the dominant Canadian culture. In many cases this leads to what has been referred to as the "split-personality syndrome" faced by some Muslim youth. These youth develop a double identity in order to contend with the competing cultural demands of home and school.

  Within the politics of schooling, the organization of Muslim students, around issues of representation and religious accommodation, has enabled them to effect change and transformation within the status quo culture of schools in ways that preserve their identities and lifestyles. Student organizations, for example, have been used as a corporate means to resist the marginality and subordination faced by Muslim students in a secular, Euro-centred school system. Through these organizations, Muslim students have advocated for the recognition and accommodation of religious observances in schools. Understanding and supporting the politics and dynamics of religious identities within secular public schools is an important, yet often neglected aspect of equity in education.

- **Challenging institutionalized Islamophobia:** Addressing the systemic mechanisms that sustain Islamophobia is a critical aspect of unravelling the systems of power in society that sustain social inequality. Issues such as racial profiling, for example, that target individuals on the basis of their race, ethnicity, faith or other aspects of social difference, are major systemic barriers that criminalize and pathologize entire communities. In schools, the practice of "colour-coded streaming," whereby a disproportionate number of racially and ethnically marginalized youth are channelled into lower-level streams, is another example of institutionalized racism.

  Negative perceptions held by teachers and guidance counsellors toward racialized students have often led to assumptions of failure or limited chances for success. These perceptions are based on false stereotypes such as "Islam doesn't value education for girls," or "Black students won't succeed." These negative attitudes are relayed to students through the "hidden curriculum" of schooling and impose lower expectations on youth from specific communities. These institutional aspects of racism and Islamophobia need to be addressed and challenged in order to dismantle the systemic basis of social inequality.

- **Deconstructing the politics of representation, and demystifying stereotypes:** Since 9/11, renewed orientalist constructions of difference have dominated the representation of Muslims in media and popular culture. Images of fanatical terrorists and burqa-clad women are seen as the primary markers of the Muslim world. Deconstructing and demystifying these stereotypes is critical in helping students to develop a critical literacy of the politics of media and image-making. Critically examining the impact of how these images create the social and ideological divide between "us" and "them" is important in understanding how power operates through the politics of representation.

This framework is linked to an anti-racism educational framework. It also focuses on identifying and working to disrupt interlocking systems of oppression based on race, class, gender and religious difference. These concerns and educational imperatives are an important foundation underlying the pedagogical approach taken within this resource kit.

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