

Middle School, the Middle East, and a War: Debunking Myths and Stereotypes

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ADVOCATES OF SOCIAL foundations view education as a means for social change.¹ They seek to study and understand the larger social role of the educational system and the complex relationships between teacher, children, school, and society. However, in reality, teachers often fail to be social change agents. The constant bombardment of standardized testing, state curricular requirements, and children with increasing social and emotional issues, hinder teachers' efforts to spend time planning and preparing for well-rounded, challenging lessons. James Banks, however, describes a theoretical framework for implementing a multicultural curriculum, with various levels of ethnic content integration, that enables teachers to explore the theory of social action and implement social action in their classrooms.

Making a Change

In the spring of 2003, we used Banks's *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies* as our guiding text as we took a traditional world history unit on the Middle East and attempted to increase content and focus on the social action aspect.² Unintentionally, we began the unit the same week as the Iraqi War. This increased the tension, the urgency, and the necessity of changing past methodology and trying to help students understand not only the history, but also the impact of current issues on the world and their community.

Two particularly relevant sections of the book were "Part One: Goals, Concepts, and Instructional Planning" and "Part Five: Asian American and Arab American: Concepts and Strategies." Part one offered

an introduction into the philosophy of multicultural education; it introduced the rationale behind the movement and provided a general overview for implementing curricular changes in any subject. Part five was used as a guide to relevant historical and curricular material on the Middle East.

The text describes four levels of integration of ethnic content: the Contributions Approach, the Additive Approach, the Transformation Approach and the Social Action Approach. The Contributions Approach is the one most familiar to college students. This level calls for the addition of "heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements" into the curriculum.³ This approach is easy and tends not to use material that challenges mainstream American ideas. An example would be the simple, familiar story of Rosa Parks as an elderly woman tired from her day at work who, on a whim, decided not to give up her seat on a bus; that version downplays the true, more controversial background of Rosa Parks, who was a social activist and active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The second level, the Additive Approach, inserts material about diverse ethnic groups into the curriculum without drawing connections with the existing curriculum. This approach also leads to a surface understanding of the material. The Transformation Approach, on the other hand, "changes the basic assumptions of the curriculum and enables students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from several ethnic perspectives and points of view."⁴ This approach, and the desire to guide our students into viewing issues

from other perspectives, led us to seek out a Muslim school in our general area, with whom our students could become pen pals, and where we could plan to visit.

The goal of our project was to reach the fourth and final level of integration of ethnic content, the Social Action Approach, which suggests that we, as teachers, must be socially responsible by giving our students the skills they need to be socially active in the future.⁵ In the past, this unit had focused on historical and cultural facts of the Middle East. But because of the approaching war, we felt it imperative that our students have a broader understanding of events and of the people. We wanted our students at Carl Traeger Middle School in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, to study what was happening in the world not only from the American perspective, but also from the Arab and Muslim perspectives as well.

Getting Started

We began the process by looking at the lesson plans from the previous unit and deciding which to change and which to retain. Some lessons were eliminated after we concluded that they perpetuated stereotypes. The next step was to brainstorm some potential problems. The problems identified focused not on the logistics of the unit, but on possible parental or student response to the academic content and the social action methodology:

1. What would be the attitudes of parents towards some of the information in the unit?
2. What would the students' attitudes be towards both the material and the more social action oriented methodology?



3. Would the enhanced fear and resentment felt in the Arab American community as a result of September 11 hamper the learning process?
4. Were we in danger of creating more stereotypes rather than eliminating them?

We made two major curricular changes: The major change was dropping the textbook questions; the other adjustment was changing the major project, which had consisted of the traditional historical, geographical, cultural report on a Middle Eastern country, to a more social action oriented poster project, in which the students created posters to teach others in the community about Muslims and to help eliminate misconceptions.

Lesson Plans

Below, we describe three lessons added to the existing world history curriculum at Carl Traeger. We also changed the focus of two existing major lessons: a cartoon activity and a poster project. The existing projects did not require students to look beyond the surface of political cartoons or to actually try to implement their poster ideas. Although these activities are not discussed in detail, they were essential to the unit. The cartoon activity focused on the impact of media on stereotypes and perceptions. The poster project allowed students to brainstorm ways to take action on issues instead of just talking about prob-

lems. The goal of all the changes was to create a more social action oriented unit on the Middle East. The first major change implemented was the addition of current issues to the unit.

Current Issues

A major goal of the social action level is for students to become aware of the current social system and its impact on people. Another major goal is to force students to learn how to look at situations from the perspective of others. One way to do this is to pay close attention to what is happening around the world. The current issues lesson plan included four objectives: (1) to investigate how the media portrays Arabs

and Muslims, (2) to determine if their portrayal is negative and/or positive, (3) to continue improving mapping skills, and (4) to map the trend of gas prices to learn about supply and demand.

Arabs in the News/Economics in the News

Students were asked to bring to class one news article a week that talked about people of Arab descent or followers of the Muslim faith. Students were also required to color code the article according to whether it was positive or negative toward the people or culture featured. If the article had a negative context, one color string was selected to connect that article to the location on the map that it referenced. If the article was positive, a different color string was used. We believe that this activity increased our students' awareness of issues faced by Muslim students, and as a result they were able to interact on a more profound level with the students at the Muslim school when we visited.

Read Aloud

We chose to use *A Stone in My Hand* by Cathryn Clinton. We reviewed a variety of books including *Habibi* by Nye, *Sitti's Secret* also by Nye, *Sami and the Time of Trouble* by Heide and Gilliland, and *The Breadwinner* by Ellis. But the imagery, depth of the characters, and the issues raised in *A Stone in My Hand* highlighted many things Oshkosh students would



not know that would be informative. The story is set in Palestine during the *intifada* (uprising). The protagonist, Malaak, a Palestinian, is trying to cope with the death of her father in a bus bombing, her brother's involvement with a young Palestinian activist who throws stones at Israeli soldiers, and her own deep rooted fears. We decided the text would have to be carefully discussed and used to show both sides of a conflict. The focus could not be just on what Hamid, the young Palestinian activist, was thinking when he threw stones, but also on what the Israeli soldier was thinking when the stone was being thrown at him.

The students read a chapter every day and discussed the story. Because the story is told from the point of view of Muslims, they had many discussions about the Jewish side of the fight for control of the Holy Land. This book worked nicely because the struggle for Palestine is often in the news. With the help of the news articles, and this book, the students were able to get a better picture of what life was like for people in the Middle East—Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

Pen Pals/Visit to Salaam School

The students studied the history of Islam; the basic beliefs of the religion; they drew comparisons between Islam and other major world religions; and we discussed democracy in the Middle East, along with other topics. But we wanted our students not just to hear their teacher talk about Middle Eastern history and culture, but to interact with Muslim students as well. Deborah did some research on the internet and found the Salaam School in Milwaukee. The social studies teacher at the Salaam school was very excited about the prospect of our students becoming pen pals. She sent us the list of 7th and 8th grade students, indicating which were boys and which were girls, because our inexperience with the Arab language did not enable us to differentiate from the names. We could not communicate with the Muslim students via the internet, because they had received some negative e-mails in the past and were not comfortable sharing their addresses. Students at



the two schools corresponded twice. Carl Traeger students anxiously awaited the third letters and instead received them in person upon arrival at the Salaam School. Upon our arrival, students from both schools were put into groups and given questions to answer. The questions led them into discussions about how much they had in common as well as how they were different. Students were able to talk about dress codes, school food, music and clothes. Our students learned about the Muslim girls' commitment to wearing the *hijab*, the Islamic dress. It was not only a good icebreaker, but also a wonderful exercise in culture.

The director of the Salaam School mentioned that many people came to visit the school and that their students were often featured in the media. However, usually the students from other schools did not interact very much with the Salaam students. The visitors did not ask many questions or speak freely with the Muslim students. This was not the case with the Carl Traeger students, the director pointed out. After the initial meeting, the students immediately started talking and getting to know one another better. Some of this may be attributed to the pen pal exchange. We believe however, that the key factor was how aware the Carl Traeger students were not only of Muslim history, but also of the current issues the students faced. Because

Carl Traeger students had been reading and discussing issues of discrimination facing people of the Muslim faith, the issues had been made real for them.

A highlight of the visit was the ethnic potluck prepared by the parents of the Muslim students. Oshkosh children were very receptive to trying various foods. An unexpected and pleasant outcome of the project is that many of the children are still corresponding many months later.

Issues Encountered

Although a lot of time was spent trying to anticipate possible problems or obstacles, there were some unexpected roadblocks. Some were easily overcome and others made carrying out the goal of the project difficult. One issue was that not all teachers or students at Carl Traeger participated in the project, leading to a differentiated seventh grade curriculum. The only students in the school who participated in the unit were students in Deborah's class. To increase the impact of the unit, next year the school will try and incorporate all of the seventh grade students. Many students who were not part of the class were very disappointed.

The inability to e-mail the students at Salaam School forced the use of the old-fashioned "snail mail." The use of e-mail might have allowed the students to communicate more often and to become

even better friends. The letters took time to draft. The response could take weeks to arrive. Setting up the field trip, meeting with the *Oshkosh Northwestern* reporter, contacting and gathering gifts for the Muslim students all took time out of the school day. Although it was all extremely worthwhile, this type of student involvement requires an enormous amount of outside time and effort. The actual visit to Milwaukee, which is one hour and forty-five minutes away, was too short. By the time the students met each other, had a tour, talked for a while and ate the wonderful lunch prepared by the Salaam School parents, it was time to leave. No one was ready for the day to end, but we had to be back by the end of the school day.

Support for the project varied. The Carl Traeger administration was extremely helpful and supportive. That may not be the case in all situations. However, three parents were concerned that the field trip would provide an opportunity for Muslims to recruit converts. After Deborah spoke with the parents by phone and explained the day's schedule and the purpose of the event, only one parent still preferred that her child not go.

The day of the field trip, the students needed to be excused from their other classes. Fortunately the staff was in favor of letting the children attend. Unfortunately, the students were supposed to get their work finished before they left so it could be ready for the day we returned. Some did not complete their work and were penalized.

Conclusions

We believe that students must be able to do more than regurgitate dates and facts. The social action aspect of this project allowed the students at Carl Traeger Middle School to learn more than just "stuff"; they learned about people and how different cultures view the same things. In addition to the typical curriculum—what the different countries are, the difference between Christianity and Islam, the famous places in the Middle East—they went much further. The discussion that followed *A Stone in My Hand* allowed

the students to talk about both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, specifically from the perspective of children. The current issues exercise also allowed them to talk about stereotypes. Incorporating recent news and using hands-on activities to make learning real was essential. Having students read the paper and listen to the news made them aware of their role in the larger social picture.

The turning point for the Carl Traeger students came however, when they read the pen pal letters and learned just how much they had in common with the Muslim students. The letters conveyed that the students liked the same music, shopped in the same stores, played the same sports, owned pets, and loved pizza. The pen pal exchange and the visit also showed the Carl Traeger students how different the lives of the Muslim students were and how the problems they face varied from the problems non-Muslim adolescents might face. However, in the end our students felt, not so much that they had just met a group of Muslim students, but that they had simply met another group of middle school students. The visit brought to light the great similarities that exist between the students from both schools. 🌍

Notes

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972); C. Grant and C. Sleeter, *Making Choices for Multicultural Education: Five Approaches to Race, Class and Gender* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999); C.A. Grant and K.M. Zeichner, "On Becoming a Reflective Teacher," in *Exploring Socio-Cultural Themes in Education: Readings in Social Foundations*, ed. J. Strouse (Upper Saddle Ridge, N.J.: Merrill, 2001); J.A. Banks, "The Dimensions of Multicultural Education," *Multicultural Leader* 4 (1991): 5-6.
2. Banks, *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002).
3. Banks and Banks, eds., *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993), 18-20.
4. *Ibid.*, 19.
5. *Ibid.*, 20.

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