

“WE'RE AN UMMAH:” DISRUPTING ANTI-MUSLIM RACISM AND NURTURING MUSLIM
EDUCATORS THROUGH CIRCLES OF COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT, STORYTELLING,
AND HEALING

By

Ambereen Khan-Baker

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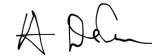
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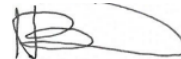
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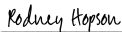


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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation of practice to my grandfather, my Abba, Inayat Aleem Khan, and my grandmother, my Dadi, Zaineb Bi. Their light, their wisdom, and their love has led me down this pathway. May Allah, subhanahu wa ta'ala (the most glorified, the most high, SWT), forgive them, raise their ranks among those who are guided, and take care of those they left behind, and forgive us all.

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ABSTRACT

Anti-Muslim leadership practices manifest at different levels of school systems and create experiences in which Muslim public school educators (1) face biased school-based policies and practices that alienate them, (2) encounter microaggressions and religious discrimination from colleagues, (3) are forced to debunk misconceptions about Muslims and teach about Islam to the greater community, (4) need to support the Muslim community to help Muslim families navigate the school system, and (5) must convey public Dawah to overcome these challenges. Recognizing that anti-Muslim racism is a systemic issue rather than an individual bias is crucial in challenging its practices, assumptions, and reasonings (Abdul Khabeer et al., 2017).

Using Liberatory Design, MusCrit, and narrative inquiry, the study aimed to empower Muslim public school educators to share their authentic identities, practice mindfulness, and build community, leading to the creation of their own ummah, a network of support and reflection. Data collection methods included empathy interviews, analytic memos, halaqa as a research method, and qualitative interviews. Using narrative discourse, a manner in which stories are told and presented, the researcher wrote narratives for all thirteen empathy interviews and six halaqas (Alleyne, 2015).

The research study provided findings and analyses of Muslim educators through the lens of the National Equity Project's Lens of Systemic Oppression framework and MusCrit tenets. The study identified the following themes of transformative knowledge; ideas reflecting the human condition; and the personal growth of Muslim educators, influenced by the conditions

and experiences within the halaqa space: (1) teaching as Dawah, (2) knowledge and empowerment, (3) anti-Palestinian racism, (4) a sisters ummah, and (5) collective healing. This research study's findings emphasize implications for school systems, including promoting representation, fostering inclusive environments, enforcing anti-discrimination policies, addressing systemic barriers, fostering trust, addressing trauma, and providing professional learning opportunities. Recommendations include antidotes to anti-Muslim racism, antidotes to overcoming challenges to identifiability, antidotes to whiteness as property and norm, and strategies to cultivate co-conspirators.

Keywords: MusCrit, Liberatory Design, halaqa, circles, anti-Muslim racism, Islamophobia, narrative inquiry, affinity spaces, mindfulness, school systems

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INTRODUCTION

Sharing my Stories as an Activist Researcher–Practitioner

Through narratives and vignettes, this introduction captures the intersectionality of how MusCrit tenets influenced my life as a Muslim educator, researcher, mother, and activist. Ali's MusCrit explores Muslim-American experiences through six tenets: systemic racialized oppression, Muslim identity, gender stereotypes, counternarratives, whiteness as the norm, and importance of allies in reclaiming space (Ali, n.d). Vignettes are short stories, scenarios, and accounts using imagery and are explored contextually to enhance narrative writing and illuminate pedagogic experiences (Hunter, 2012). Narrative inquiry is a method used by participants to interpret their experiences with the world and events (Bhattacharya, 2017). I find that the process of reflexivity is essential in identifying how my social identity as a Muslim public school educator affects the research process.

When I first looked at each tenet, I thought of sharing a story of how that tenet affected my life. As I began to write these narratives and vignettes, I realized that my stories connected and embodied more than one tenet. Therefore, instead of writing a narrative per tenet, I've written about painful and raw experiences that illustrate the role of anti-Muslim racism in my life, as well as beautiful moments in which I experienced community that helped me overcome these challenges. I focused on experiences that affected me as a researcher in designing, researching, implementing, and sharing this research study. Along with each narrative is a photo reflecting a moment, or a symbol that is significant and relevant to the vignette or narrative.

The Sisters' Area, Part One

Stepping out of my car, I adjusted my hijab and secured the end flap with a safety pin. I walked along the sidewalk, hearing the words of the call to prayer—the adhan, Ashhadu alla ilaha illallah—and I whispered in Arabic, “I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah.” Families shuttled in groups, with women heading toward one main entrance and

men heading to the other. In the distance, I heard birds chirping, children playing at the playground, and cars driving on the main roads outside the mosque's gate. As I approached the women's entrance, I saw a few elderly women sitting on the bench, clutching their tasbeehs, rocking gently, and whispering, "Subhanallah," "Glory be to Allah." I nodded and whispered greetings to them, and they silently nodded in return, continuing their prayers.

A sign with the ends slightly frayed and yellowed on the door said, "Sisters' entrance." I gently pushed open the door and walked in, instantly smelling notes of jasmine, sandalwood, and camphor. Two little girls in colorful print dresses sat on the floor, unbuckling the straps of their shoes. Their mother, standing next to them, embraced a friend. I smiled at the little girls and leaned against the wall for support, to ease off my ballet flats. I placed them on the wooden shelf, lining them up with an array of sneakers, flip-flops, dressy heels, and slip-on shoes. The girls placed their shoes on the lowest bottom shelf, next to the other children's shoes, and followed their mother into the prayer area. I walked behind them, slipping quietly into the area.

The first six rows were filled with aunties I knew, my parents' friends, some of my teachers, and my mother's friends. A few younger mothers sat in the back with their children, among women who needed to use chairs to pray. I moved toward the middle of the space, sitting right next to the partition that separated the brothers' and sisters' areas. As a child, I always loved sitting next to the partition, at a time when they were cheaper and flimsier. Those partitions made it easy to look through the slits, peer into the men's area, see the Imam, and also see my dad. I never looked for long, just a few seconds. Now, in the women's area, several TV monitors showed the Imam standing at the pulpit, greeting individuals. Before I sat down, I looked at the sister next to me and said "Assalam alaikum" to her, and she nodded as if she understood the question I was going to ask her: "Do I have enough time to pray sunnah before Zuhr?"

Raising my hands as I started the prayer, I tuned out all the sounds around me: the quiet murmur of voices; the opening and closing of the door as sisters greeted each other; the sounds

of brothers greeting each other across the mosque; a conversation about the cost of gas; and the steps across the thickly padded carpet. I focused on the words of my prayer. After I finished, the Imam called for everyone to stand: “Brothers and sisters, make your rows straight. Stand shoulder to shoulder, feet to feet. Let no space between you.”

All the sisters stood, some adjusting their hijabs, dupattas, and scarves. I stood between two strangers, but they didn’t feel like strangers. As we started salat, a sense of peace came over me. Praying in community felt like feeling like this space was home. My shoulders touched the shoulders of women who were sisters to me in the name of Islam, despite us not knowing each other, as we worship in the same, communal ways. After salat, the sister to my left reached for me, embraced me tightly, and said, “Assalam alaikum.” She continued to speak in Guyanese, reciting a prayer. Although I didn’t understand her words, I felt the love, the blessings, and the warmth. She finally let me go but held my hands as if I were her daughter. Tears fell down her face. I gripped her hand and returned a prayer in English, smiling at her, expressing my care. Behind us, a friend of hers called to her, as one of my friends did to me, silently beckoning me to move next to her so we could catch up on our lives. That moment of exchanging duas and embracing each other gave me peace and hope.

Figure 1

Sister’s Area



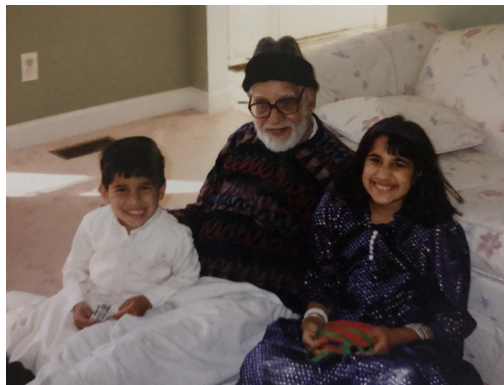
Note. Photograph of Ambereen Khan-Baker and Aleem Khan Baker (l–r), taken in the sister’s area of their mosque.

My Abba

Looking over that day's edition of the *Washington Post*, I read over the articles in the first section. The Bush presidential debate was that evening, and I knew my Abba would test my knowledge. He was my grandfather—a protector, a father, and a best friend to me. He taught me the proper way to make chai, as he was a tea salesman in Pakistan. Whenever he saw tea, milk, sugar, and carrots on sale in the weekly ads, he would ask me to take him to Safeway or Giant to stock up so that he could make his breakfast halva and have enough tea supplies on hand for a year. When I started driving, I took him to his doctor's appointments, and he would joke with his doctors, playing pranks on them, and they would play along to humor him. When I did the dishes, he yelled at me because he felt like he had no purpose if I didn't leave any for him. He would show me articles in the *Washington Post*, assigning me to read them, asking me for my opinions and later having political debates to test me.

Figure 2

My Abba



Note. The researcher's brother, grandfather, and herself (l-r).

That day, he made chai in the kitchen, and I was waiting next to him on the sofa. I traced the indentation of where his body would sit daily in the same spot, on the same couch. It was the same sofa that my parents had bought from Marlo many years ago. He came with his chai, sat down next to me, and said in his deep voice and stern tone, "Ambereen, read. Tell me the news."

Sometimes, he played these practical jokes on me because he was partially blind in one eye from a stroke, pretending he couldn't read. He constantly played pranks on me by tapping on my shoulder, running away, and telling me it was a crow. But I nodded, as I did *not* disobey my Abba, and read to him a few headlines. I knew not to read from page one, but deep in the first section were articles on what was happening internationally.

His words always stuck with me. *Read.* Over and over. And I did. As a teenager, I experienced a lot of trauma, and I often read and wrote through those times. But this ritual always stayed the same, whether I was twelve or nineteen. He saw my pain and anguish, and while there was nothing he could do to change the circumstances, he modeled how to recognize and overcome my challenges. He told me that one day we will all die, but what lives on past us are our deeds, actions, and faith. He taught me important lessons from the Quran, stressing stories to uplift and guide me. He emphasized that knowledge of our faith, the world, current events, and our surroundings is always essential. He told me stories from his childhood to help me recognize lessons and apply them to my life. Every day I came home from school or work, he would loudly and proudly greet me, saying, "As-salamu alaikum," or "Peace be upon you."

I can still hear his voice in my head.

But that day, as I read the articles, he asked me my thoughts. And we debated. He asked me, "What do you think should happen next?"

Later that night, as we watched the presidential debate, we stayed up past 11 p.m. to listen to the commentary while we had our own commentary.

My Nurturers

On September 11 of my senior year in high school, I was in my ceramics class when I heard that an airplane crashed into one of the twin towers in New York. When the class ended, I rushed over to Mr. H's classroom. It was the one place I felt safe.

I drowned myself in student government in high school and discovered my place as a student leader. My parents wanted me to receive a college education but had no resources to help me. They didn't know the definition of FAFSA or the importance of transcripts. If I wanted to go, I was on my own.

Shortly after September 11, Mr. H handed me an application for American University (AU). He said, "Ambereen, this is where you need to go. This is where you belong." Our discussion opened my eyes and influenced the career I chose: teaching.

After September 11, my life was overturned. Our Muslim community faced new challenges. My father's business was destroyed. My classmates made fun of me when they saw me fasting and praying.

However, at school, my teachers—Mr. H, Ms. P, Mr. C, and Ms. D—kept their doors open for me and repeatedly told me, "You belong here. This is your community. You are important to me, and I am here for you." They listened to my experiences, never answering my problems but coaching me to identify solutions. It was at that moment that I felt as if I finally belonged. Something I later would realize, as an educator of color, was that these educators identified themselves as Black and non-Muslim, and they were truly my co-conspirators in surviving and thriving as a teenager.

Throughout my teaching profession, I had a few mentors who listened to me, as my teachers did in high school, and who helped me identify pathways to move forward.

Mr. H showed me the path, but it was up to me to walk it. Two months later, I was accepted to AU and received a scholarship that covered 80% of my tuition.

And that's when I decided to become a teacher. Many individuals have supported and coached me, and cultivating resilience is a way for me to give back to the world and all its humanity, by nurturing and caring for others. Without my mentors, I would never have received my diploma.

Figure 3

My High School Diploma



Note. Ambereen's Maryland High School Diploma on her bookshelf.

Storytelling

Over thirteen years ago, when I wrote my first public narrative, which contains a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now, I was incredibly nervous sharing my experiences being othered when asked, “Where are you from?” I transformed those feelings of fear, self-doubt, and isolation into solidarity and hope. Writing about how I felt and the experiences I had started a healing process from microaggressions I faced as an educator of color. At that time, I was an ambassador for an organizing institute in which we supported teams of educators creating a campaign to make a change in their locals. My purpose was to model an organizing strategy—a public narrative—to show how we can connect in our shared values and build community, which is crucial in relational organizing.

Figure 4

Community and Public Narrative



Note. Ambereen Khan-Baker and Ellen Holmes (l–r) after Ambereen sharing a public narrative at a training.

Speaking my public narrative in front of eighty educators I had never met was nerve wracking. I had just left midday from teaching and handed over my class to a substitute teacher, so I was rushing to get to the training. At the training, my hands shook and I was scared to be vulnerable to strangers. My mentor, Ellen Holmes, encouraged me to breathe and stood nearby to comfort me. As I started speaking and sharing my truths, I felt the entire room quieting and listening. Afterwards, the room exploded into applause, and I smiled. Then, educators approached me and shared how they felt connected to me, even if they never experienced what I had shared in my public narrative. Many of the educators in that room became close friends of mine, and together, we built a community by writing and speaking a public narrative. We learned to advocate for our students and our teaching conditions.

My Dadi

I vividly remember how my Dadi—my grandmother—used to pray, especially Fajr, early in the morning. I was an early bird and always woke up for Fajr with my dad. I lived with my Dadi many weekends as a teenager and for periods when my life was unstable. When I lived with her, I slept on the floor with a blanket and pillow, or on the twin bed across from her if my uncle was in Pakistan. When everyone was still asleep in the morning, my Dadi would sit on her bed, her legs crossed, and she'd pray rakat after rakat. She held her tasbeeh in her hands and quietly continued to pray. When her legs got tired, she would stretch them and continue reading her Panj Surah, her book of chapters and prayers from the Quran. Dadi would wake me up at Fajr prayer, not saying a word but motioning with her hands that I needed to make wudu and make salat. Groggily, I went to the bathroom and returned quietly to the bedroom, ensuring that I didn't wake anyone up. I wrapped my large scarf around me and pulled out the janamaz—prayer rug—hidden behind Dadi's large vanity.

After praying, I sat on the edge of Dadi's bed and crawled between her body and the wall, snuggling close to her and holding her hands, feeling the heat between them. Between the blinds, we lay there, watching daybreak, rays of oranges and yellow peeking through. When she arrived in America, Dadi had forgotten English, and my parents focused on teaching me Arabic but not Urdu. But Dadi and I learned to communicate through our own language—a language of love, some broken Urdu and English, and our laughter. I quickly picked up Urdu while watching Pakistani soap operas, especially Dadi's favorite, which we'd watch together after school each afternoon.

Figure 5

My Dadi



Note. Ambereen's grandmother and Ambereen Khan-Baker (l-r).

I still remember how my Dadi would envelop me in a hug, and I could rest my head against her chest. She would whisper duas in my ear as if willing them to come true.

When I was pregnant with Aleem, we discovered a tear in the baby's amniotic sac, and I went on bedrest for the rest of my first trimester. That pregnancy was full of challenges: taking blood thinners and steroids to address autoimmune issues; being on bedrest; moments when we thought I was miscarrying; being quarantined; experiencing stress with COVID-19; dealing with traumatic triggers at my sonography appointments; and being alone at my appointments as my husband, Ethan, was no longer allowed to be with me because of COVID-19. I cried every single day. During that time, I remembered Abba and Dadi's lessons of resilience. Every day felt like a

test, but I felt the love, compassion, and empathy of Dadi and Abba, who were with me that entire time, along with my family, support system, and faith.

I remembered that spot on Dadi's bed, her embrace, her arms hugging me, reminding me how much I was loved. And I prayed for her, just as she always whispered prayers into my ear.

Mindfulness and Storytelling

August 2022. Sitting at a table in our large meeting space and reading over my newest version of my public narrative, I greeted my colleague, whom I call my "work wifey," Jennifer, rushing into the room with her backpack and water. We had texted several times that morning, running over a few ideas we wanted to implement on our first day facilitating our launch training for eleven of our teaching fellows.

Jennifer ran out of the room to use the bathroom while I reread my public narrative. When I was done, I took a deep breath and could hear her talking to one of our security guards outside the room.

She popped her head back in, smiled widely, and asked, "You ready?"

She knew what I was doing. I had facilitated writing and sharing public narratives dozens of times, but she knew the story I shared today was different. And some anxiety and nervousness were kicking in. I always use public narrative to teach educators how to share their "why" to call people to action and propel them to create positive change. I have twenty versions of my public narrative; the one I use at any given time depends on the audience and my call to action. With this group of Fellows, I wanted to be vulnerable and share my activism for women's rights. I had five miscarriages, and a medical abortion saved my life. When I saw Roe being overturned, it urged me to mobilize individuals around the importance of high-quality medical care. This version of my public narrative was very triggering and deeply emotional. I wanted to show our Fellows that getting in touch with your real emotions and experiences helps convey values that move people to action.

The week before, Jennifer listened to me practice before our training and suggested a mind–body scan for our Fellows to do after they heard my public narrative. It was a last-minute change and would add fifteen minutes to our day, but I agreed. I was learning to let go of perfectionism, a characteristic of white supremacy that I was struggling with.

I nodded, connected my Surface to the audio and visual system, and opened the slide deck. Our second-year Fellows were already gathering outside the room, discussing their dinner from the night before. I looked at my papers, notes, and scribbles. I also had a draft chapter of my problem of practice underneath my notes, with annotations all along the margins. In addition, I was brainstorming ideas, to distract myself from thinking about the public narrative.

In two hours, I will be sharing this story. Jennifer moved to my side. Even though we were both still wearing face masks, I could see her face was full of compassion and understanding. I took a deep breath and smiled. “It’s going to be great.”

Figure 6

Facilitating Mindfulness and Public Narrative



Note. Ambereen Khan-Baker and Jennifer Locke (l–r) while facilitating our Fellows launch at the NEA.

We turned and greeted our Fellows as they entered the room. Their excitement, joy, and lively conversations filled the room. Ten minutes later, Jennifer opened the training with a short body scan. As a prologue to the public narrative, we launched into a writing and sharing activity

about “where you come from.” Two hours later, I led the Fellows into facilitating public narrative, asking them, “What are the experiences in your life that have shaped the values that call you to leadership in education?”

When I facilitate public narratives, I share my own. My mentor, Ellen, always told me that, as facilitators who ask our participants to be vulnerable, we must model that vulnerability first. After I finished my story, I looked across the room. Jennifer took over facilitating and leading the exercise of a mind–body scan. I watched our Fellows process what I had said and checked in on their bodies. They journaled to capture their noticings and reflected on what their bodies and minds told them then. Afterward, they talked in pairs about the experience and what they noticed about their body scan. It was so powerful. They spoke through their emotions and identified the areas in which they felt anger and happiness.

I had never done a body scan before when sharing a public narrative. But seeing Jennifer lead this exercise and watching the impact on our Fellows made me aware of how important it is to notice our body and where there are signs of distress. We didn’t get a chance to finish all the content with the training that morning, but still, this activity was worth it. As a result of the body scan, Fellows got more in touch with one another and connected deeply to the message of my public narrative.

Mind–body Scans

In the summer of 2023, I took a class on mindfulness facilitated by Dave Trachtenberg. The mindfulness practices that Dave facilitated helped us bring awareness to what we were feeling in our bodies. I resonated with body scans, and they helped me. Inspired by my doctoral research, I wrote a new version of my public narrative, which focused solely on my experiences as a Muslim public school educator.

As I shared that narrative, I saw the impact across the room and even among the educators who self-identify as Muslim. These were also their experiences. After that, I

incorporated a mind–body scan. When participants shared their experiences in pairs, I walked around the room, hearing how powerful and necessary it was for them to have a space to share their feelings and awareness of their bodies.

Since then, every time I have facilitated a public narrative, I have incorporated a body scan so that participants can check in on what and how they are feeling. Those experiences influenced my research process: listening to Muslim public school educators sharing their pain, happiness, and struggles, I realized that they, too, need a space to process their bodies' reactions.

Figure 7

My Public Narrative



Note. Ambereen Khan-Baker shared a public narrative to a group of educators during a presentation about anti-Muslim racism.

I am that One Flower

June 2023. Sitting at my desk, I sorted through all the consent forms to find the form for the empathy interview that was to follow with an educator who later used Sehra as a pseudonym for the research study. This was my fourth empathy interview. I had my questions ready on one screen monitor and my Zoom window open on the other. I felt less nervous about interviewing now that I had completed three interviews. A notification popped up. Sehra was in the waiting room.

I took a deep breath. I said, “Bismillah, in the name of Allah,” and admitted her into the room. As her audio and video connected, I smiled and said, “Assalam alaikum.” Sehra smiled back and greeted me. After going through the IRB protocols, getting her verbal consent, and clicking on the record icon, I started with my first question: “Tell me about a day in the life of a Muslim educator. What parts of that day are typical? Not typical?”

Sehra proceeded to tell me her accounts of her school days, of wearing a hijab, and of overcoming misconceptions as a Muslim woman, saying, “This is me, unapologetically Muslim.” Sehra told me how she viewed herself in that moment: “Walk into a field full of grass. You see one flower there. I am that flower. I am the reason everyone looks at the green grass. I’m different, and they don’t understand why I am there.”

My breath hitched, and I momentarily closed my eyes. As an interviewer and researcher, I had to keep my feelings and facial expressions neutral, but I couldn’t help but absorb her words and emotions. Her strong sense of self resonated with me. It was at that moment that I realized the power of my positionality as a Muslim woman. It was as if Sehra and I were standing, shoulder to shoulder, feet to feet, in the sisters’ area of the mosque. It’s a place where we feel safe and can be vulnerable. It’s like letting go of any shield or walls. You can be yourself. Through listening to Sehra’s words and her affirmations, I felt the exchange of love, warmth, and blessings. Our empathy interview felt like a conversation with an old friend, with me listening to her stories and hanging onto her beautiful images.

Over the past few years, with the pandemic and a newborn, I had few opportunities to visit the mosque. My prayer rug and hijab were in the center of my bedroom, where I prayed and could tune out the Zoom calls, the e-mails, and the laundry baskets that sat half-full, abandoned near my bed. My tasbeih beads lay haphazardly on my end table. My Quran is an app on my phone, and my dua book is now another app on my phone. My bedroom became my own mosque. My desk, right next to my prayer area, is where I conducted all of my empathy

interviews. Conducting those interviews created a new sisters' area for me, right in my own home.

The Muslim women opened up to me and saw me as their Muslim sister. In my own experiences in the Muslim community and with my family, I observed how body language, diction, and facial expressions are different among women talking with one another, compared with women speaking to men. For example, my aunts always stop their conversations when my Dad or any adult male enters the room. They code-switch. They move on to different topics, straighten their scarves and body posture, and keep a particular tone. I could see that in the empathy interviews. Most of the women did not delve quickly into their trauma. Instead, they answered a low-risk question describing their day as a Muslim teacher. When discussing their responses to their challenges, they started going deeper into their conversations. I realized it was primarily because they felt safe with me. They didn't need to code-switch with me. Although I might not be a member of their inner circle, I'm a Muslim sister.

I realized that my being a female Muslim researcher influenced the participants. Of the 13, 12 self-identified as female and one self-identified as male. In reading Neila Miled's (2019) article on her qualitative research on Muslim youths, "Muslim researcher researching Muslim youth: reflexive notes on critical ethnography, positionality and representation," I learned that she helped me think about the identities I hold: when she had a realization that her identity as a researcher was blurring the lines, when the Muslim community called on her to help their students navigate, and when the staff in the building asked her for help. Her realization of how much she felt connected and became part of the Muslim student community resonated with me. As I later listened and began analyzing the empathy interview data, I realized that I felt like them. I wanted to help my participants overcome their challenges, talk about my experiences to bond with them, and reassure them that they were a "pretty flower," as Sehra said in her interview.

Figure 8

That Flower



Note. I took this picture at my sister's wedding, as it reminded me of this narrative.

Experiencing Anti-Muslim Racism

November 2023. Adnan and I were meeting up with my cousins in downtown Rockville, just ten minutes from our house, for a rally supporting a ceasefire in Gaza. I wanted to make sure that Adnan, then 12 years old, attended with me to see how we have to advocate as Americans on issues that matter most to us. I told him that Allah (SWT) would ask us what we did and how we acted on the Day of Judgment. The rally was led by a coalition of multifaith Marylanders who joined to call for an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian aid.

We had our posters, and my cousin handed us Gaza flags. We had strollers and plenty of snacks. When we got there, we quickly encountered a group of counterprotesters yelling slurs on loudspeakers. Volunteers ushered us to the other side, away from them, because we had young children. Keeping our children safe was important to us.

At the rally, a high schooler shared her experiences advocating for her classmates and sharing her emotions. We were straining to hear her as we kept hearing the counterprotesters, who had moved past their barriers.

The counterprotestors used profanity, saying, "Rockville is my town, fuck off. America is ours. We will protect America. We will secure America against you animals, against you traitors,

against you barbarians. You'll never live again because we'll take your heads. We'll take your life. Because we are white, and you are murderers. Go away! Go back to where you came from. Go, go! You are not welcome here. Rockville is my town. Fuck off, Fuck off, Go away" (Raef, 2023).

Adnan looked at me, horrified. He grabbed my arm and asked me, "Mama, why are they saying this?"

I was stunned. How *was* he saying this, and no one was stopping him?

I pushed aside my own fears as I quickly scanned the area for any visible threats. I texted Ethan to let him know what was happening and that we were safe. These were protocols we followed when I attended any rally. Know your surroundings and send updates regularly.

Then, pulling Adnan aside, I explained to him how rallies work, how everyone is allowed to be there, and that there usually was the presence of police, who had the group of instigators taped off from us. I was still processing my emotions, fears, and shock. This rally had lots of children who all heard these messages. This was our own community. We live here.

Figure 9

Adnan and Ambereen



Note. Photograph of Ambereen Khan-Baker and Adnan Khan Baker (l-r), taken at a rally in downtown Rockville, Maryland.

After the rally, as we returned to our car, I explained to Adnan that not all individuals felt this way and that we belong here and live here. We try to provide Adnan with a complete picture

of his unique heritage. He may be a Muslim and 50% Pakistani, but he is also 40% Ashkenazi Jewish. He knows that his grandmother was a stateless refugee with her parents after World War II and the Holocaust. We've explained to him the horror of that history and that his great-grandparents fled Nazi Hungary with forged papers they had printed, leaving everything behind. He knows his great-great grandparents were killed in Auschwitz because they didn't make it out of Hungary.

I was staying off social media for the previous month, but I realized I couldn't be silent anymore. My silence caused harm. I posted a picture of Adnan and me at the protest, sharing my feelings and my reasons for desiring a ceasefire. Soon after I posted, I received a barrage of hateful messages and posts. They were from the same individuals I've welcomed in my home countless times, who saw me plan my mother-in-law's birthday celebrations and later her celebration of life. The words people said and the way they associated me with terrorism appalled me. It was eerily similar to what I experienced after 9/11. I couldn't respond to their posts or messages. It doesn't take away the feeling that you are "less than"—that you are not human.

At the same time, family members and friends received threats and faced similar situations. I was researching anti-Muslim racism for my knowledge review, drowning in reading and annotating article after article. My feelings were raw. As a researcher, I was vulnerable. Would I receive backlash for this research? In researching, I quickly identified themes for my knowledge review, as I had experienced an explosion of ideas and connections between my research and how anti-Muslim racism has affected the community—the Muslim community—and how Muslims perceive themselves. This was happening in front of me. I saw how Muslim educators around the country were being put on administrative leave and villainized by their own community.

Adnan and I continued to have conversations as he began to experience anti-Muslim racism in his school. As a researcher who was taking it all in and contemplating it, I became

passionate about this work. One way of dismantling racism is to show its impact on individuals' lives and help individuals advocate, become resilient, and grow a community.

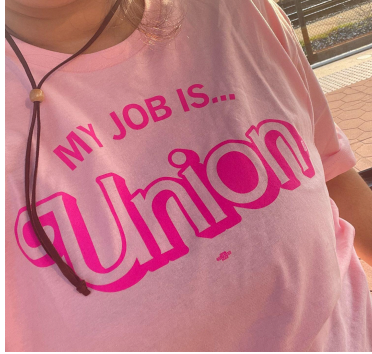
Activist Researcher–Practitioner

July 2024. I was enduring one of the most painful periods of my professional and personal life. In the extreme heat that morning, I joined my colleagues on the picket line, chanting with them and advocating for workers' rights. These were the same colleagues who were cheering on my dissertation work and supporting my research on anti-Muslim racism. Even on the way on Metro, I was reading articles on anti-Palestinian racism to include in my knowledge review. Many of my colleagues had attended my training on anti-Muslim racism earlier that year. We knew we deserved a contract that reflected our values and voices. I was petrified at losing my health insurance, trying to figure out how to manage and handle care for all of us and our autoimmune conditions—in particular, my husband and his heart conditions. Not receiving a salary was another stressor. In the middle of all this, I had to plan out my intervention and the halaqas and finish all my doctoral coursework within weeks. Physically, I was worn out and experiencing extreme pelvic pain, which I would later discover required treatment.

That morning, after I walked from the metro station, I greeted Jennifer on the picket line. We checked in on each other, along with all our colleagues, about what we needed and what our families needed. We picketed with each other, we sang together, we laughed together, we gave out water and paper towels, we checked in on how we were feeling, and we sat down with a colleague who wasn't feeling well. We showed love to each other. That is what solidarity looks like.

Figure 10

My Job is...Union



Note. Riding the metro and wearing a shirt that captured my organizer's values.

In the middle of all this tumult, I was still completing my doctoral coursework and taking an independent course with Dr. Thomas on analyzing all the data I had collected through my empathy interviews. He asked me and some of my cohort mates to present at the orientation for the newest cohort that was entering the program. I had said “Yes” months ago, but on that day in July, I realized I hadn’t prepared anything.

Two hours before the presentation, I sat down and thought through what story I wanted to tell. What was most important at this time in my life to share about my research? I pulled through a few of my public narratives and added information from my research, and, thankfully, I had slides from my fifth-semester review that I could reuse.

When I hopped on the Zoom call that evening, I saw all these new and eager faces, ready to start their journey: the excitement, the joy, and the nervousness of not knowing what would be ahead in a doctoral program. Fortunately, I saw Dave, whose kind presence reminded me to focus on my breath, breathing in and out. I hid my video while I did a grounding exercise, feeling my feet on the ground and my body supported by the chair. I took three breaths: one for myself; one for this beautiful, thriving community in this space; and one for those who have supported me. Next to my desk was a picture of my Dadi, whose picture frame moves back and forth between my shelf and my desk, depending on my children’s actions, and I remembered her teachings and influence as a source of strength.

After all the introductions and an activity, Dr. Thomas introduced me. I unmuted and started to share a new public narrative focusing on me as a Muslim researcher. This time, I had no notes or scribbles. It was just reading from memory and feelings.

“Hi, my name is Ambereen Khan-Baker. I am a proud member of cohort seven. This is my eighteen years as an educator”—I paused—” almost nineteen. When I was younger, people asked me, ‘Where are you from?’ I told them, ‘I’m from Maryland,’ but I knew the next question: They would ask, ‘Where are you *really* from?’ They meant my parents, who immigrated to the United States from Pakistan over fifty years ago. Growing up, I struggled with my identity, whether it was in the Pakistani community or my own place at school. When I was twelve, my parents divorced, and we lost our home. For the next eight years, I lived out of a duffle bag and my backpack, moving back and forth between five houses with either my aunt, uncle, grandfather, grandmother, mom, or dad.”

I described how my teachers supported me, especially after September 11. And then, I discussed how my life changed. “In 2008, I married my husband, Ethan. We bought our first house together. While I finally had a personal sense of security, I didn’t professionally. Administrators pointed at me at my school and said, ‘Look, we have Ambereen. We’re diverse.’ My principal led a diversity and inclusion training, eerily similar to Steve Carell’s character in *The Office*, leading his staff through Diversity Day training. I am a super fan of *The Office*, but actually experiencing that episode firsthand was horrific and labeled me as an outsider.”

I paused, taking a deep breath in and out. “My business manager insisted on calling me ‘Mrs. Baker,’ not ‘Mrs. Khan-Baker,’ as if I should adopt my husband’s name. He forced the front office to rearrange the mailboxes so my mailbox would be alphabetized under ‘Baker.’ The county system would not change my e-mail address to “Khan-Baker” because the principal and business manager refused to sign off on the change. My uni-serv director had to intervene at the county level to change my e-mail address and recognize me as Mrs. Khan-Baker. Despite these

setbacks, I recognized the opportunity to be guided through the National Board Certification process—an experience that challenged me and changed my entire perspective on teaching.”

I changed the slide to a picture of me teaching. “I left that county and moved to the one that I currently live in. There, through my union, I mentored teachers going through the National Board process and learned how to seek out teachers and cultivate them as leaders. In my school building, I had no issue taking leave for Eid, wearing mehndi, or being fully accepted as Ambereen Khan-Baker.”

“In 2016, I facilitated an NEA training for members and affiliate staff. I sat in the bar at happy hour, laughing with my co-facilitators. Then I looked at the TV. I froze. Trump was giving a speech about a Muslim ban. Listening to his language, I felt shock and fear overcome me.” I paused, letting everyone read some of his rhetoric on the screen. Then, I continued: “Losing my home was my biggest fear. We made so many sacrifices to build the home and family we have. My husband’s family was completely displaced or killed in the Holocaust, and my mother-in-law spent her childhood as a refugee. Home was more to us than just a shelter; it was a place for us to belong. Over the next six months, I spiraled. Trump’s words and rhetoric filled the airways, and I lost hope.”

I changed the slide to a picture of Abba and Dadi. I said, “One day, I decided to get off social media, stop listening to TV, and pay attention to myself. And I remembered what my grandmother and grandfather taught me as a teenager as I was facing my own trauma. They taught me to be an informed citizen, to be aware of my surroundings and current events, so I could use that knowledge to educate and resist. They taught me that faith is the core of one’s well-being. I decided to give voice to my feelings and use those feelings to move others to action. When I started sharing my experiences as a Muslim educator, I started to heal. I began dispelling myths, teaching my students and colleagues about my heritage, and sharing my experiences as a Muslim educator combating racism that is embedded at multiple levels in our systems.”

I shared my research next. “When I started this doc program at AU, I was asked what my dissertation of practice would be. What will be the story I want to tell? I explored my experiences, and since my body of work was focused on educators of color, I focused on my identity as a Muslim public school educator. So, I did a lot of research. Not much was there. There was a lack of scholarship about and awareness of Muslim public school educators. These experiences I shared as a Muslim American are part of my positionality as a researcher. These stories, feelings, and emotions influence the way I research.”

I then shared what happened to Adnan and me at the rally and the backlash I faced on social media. I didn’t summarize nearly all of what happened to me personally or professionally, because, if I had gone there, I would have broken down in complete tears, and I did not want that. “As a researcher, I realized that the stories I heard from Muslim public school educators are not the ones we hear in mainstream media, especially given our current climate.”

I paused, realizing I was calling myself a researcher for the first time, not an educator or a facilitator, but a researcher and an activist. I spoke: “With the change of circumstances facing Muslims after October 7, there was both an urge and pushback to share stories and experiences. In reflecting on the present, I reflected on the past to dream of the future possibilities of this intervention.”

Tears started pouring. I couldn’t help it, and my voice became heavy: “Experiencing, researching, and creating an intervention about and while experiencing anti-Muslim racism was tough.” I paused. “This fall, I hope to empower Muslim public school educators to share their authentic identities and experiences in an affinity-based space that can lead to storytelling, mindfulness practices, community building, and creating a support network.”

I saw private messages in the chatbox as I saw how many scholars resonated with my story. Dave private messaged me with the words, “WOW. This was powerful, Ambereen.”

Sisters' Area, Part 2

During Ramadan of 2024, my cousins gathered at my Mumani's house to have an iftar, or break our fasts. Adnan fasted for the first time. After we broke fast, we all went downstairs to my Mumani's basement to pray Maghrib. Placing my hair into a bun, I tightly wrapped my hijab around my head and joined my cousins and nieces. Behind us was an array of toys and playhouses for the little ones to play with and keep busy. We prayed on a collection of bedsheets, old prayer rugs I remembered from my childhood, and elaborate decorative prayer rugs.

Standing shoulder to shoulder, feet to feet, next to my cousin Shana made me feel like coming home. Years of memories flooded me as we prayed together. As teenagers and young adults, we prayed side by side at her parent's house, the mosque, Muslim summer youth camps, and sisters' halaqas. After we finished salat, Shana and I turned to each other and hugged fiercely. We both cried, and I told her how I missed this joy, how much I needed it, how much I needed to know how much I was loved, and how much I loved her. In that hug, I felt liberated and I felt safe.

In "Love as the practice of freedom," bell hooks wrote, "The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom" (hooks, 2006, p. 250). I learned to love and value myself in order to separate myself from the toxicity around me and create a community that I needed to heal myself. The sisters' area became that community, a place to love each other and to learn to love yourself. In love, we can liberate ourselves from oppression by creating a place we need.

Figure 11

Sisterhood



Note. Photograph of Ambereen Khan-Baker and her cousin (l-r) taken at her wedding.

CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

In this chapter, I (1) state my research questions and the problem of practice, (2) introduce Liberatory Design, (3) explain how I used Liberatory Design to identify my problem of practice, (4) use Liberatory Design to understand the landscape of Muslim public school educators, (5) identify the problem of practice by examining its historical context and the current state of these practices, and (6) explore how my positionality as a Muslim educator in U.S. public schools allows me to explore the problem of practice thoroughly. For this chapter, my research questions are (1) What influences, if any, do school systems and school culture of climate have on Muslim educators, and (2) How do Muslim educators describe the impact of parents, colleagues, school leaders, students, and the community's perceptions and beliefs?

Anti-Muslim leadership practices manifest at different levels of school systems and create experiences for Muslim public school educators in which they (1) face biased school-based policies and practices that alienate them, (2) encounter microaggressions and religious discrimination from colleagues, (3) are forced to debunk misconceptions about Muslims and teach about Islam to the greater community, (4) need to support the Muslim community to help Muslim families navigate the school system, and (5) must convey public Dawah to overcome these challenges. A Muslim educator is a K–12 educator who self-identifies as a Muslim.

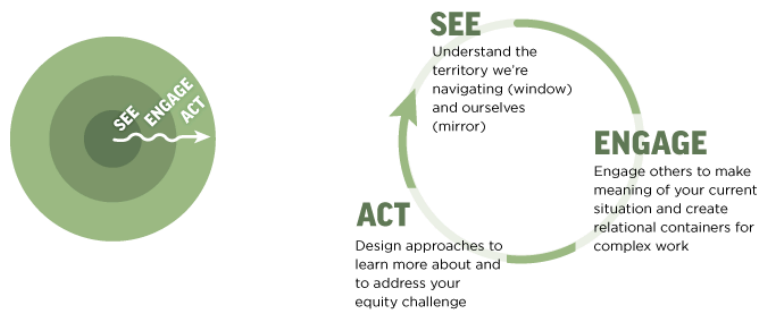
What Is Liberatory Design?

Liberatory Design is “an approach to addressing equity challenges and chang[ing] efforts in complex systems” that is meant to investigate “deeper causes produced by systemic oppression” (National Equity Project, 2023b). Liberatory Design is part of the National Equity Project's Leading for Equity Framework (see Figure 13), which “provides a frame of reference that enables leaders to navigate the complex territory of equity challenges and to develop the capacity to engage in purposeful leadership action” (National Equity Project, 2023b). Leading for Equity takes a leadership stance (see Figure 12) whereby habits are used to guide the team's

work: “How we see informs how we engage, which informs how we act” (National Equity Project, 2023b).

Figure 12

National Equity Project’s Equity Leadership (National Equity Project, 2023a)



Equity efforts often fail for many reasons: an inadequate focus on diversity and inclusion; hierarchical plans that concentrate on metrics and accountability created in the context of the dominant white culture; and a lack of depth in the equity lens, leading to ineffectiveness and sometimes backfiring because of the complexity of the challenge (National Equity Project, 2023a). At the core of Liberatory Design is a set of beliefs:

1. “Racism and inequity have been designed into systems and thus can be redesigned;
2. Designing for equity requires the meaningful participation of those impacted by inequity and
3. Equity-driven designs require equity and complexity informed processes”

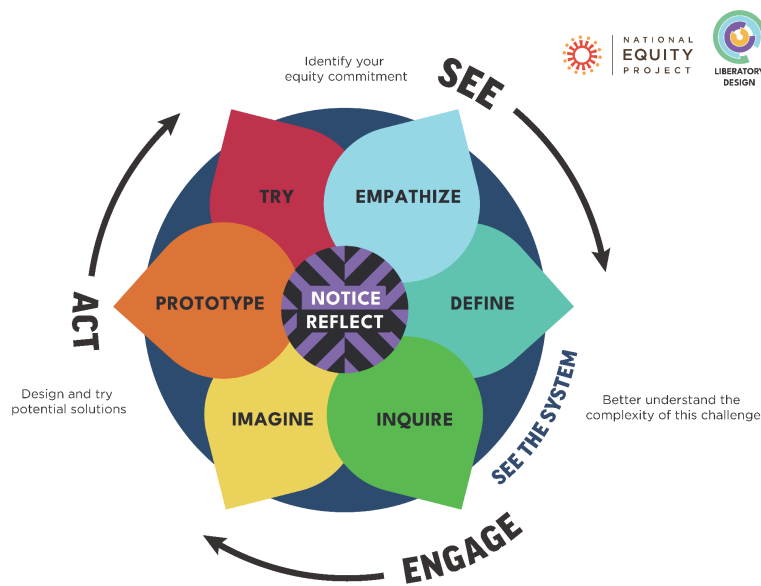
(National Equity Project, 2023a).

Liberatory Design uses the following 12 mindsets to identify specific beliefs, values, and stances that serve as a foundation and focus for design practice: “build relational trust, focus on human values, work to transform power, practice self-awareness, seek liberatory collaboration, exercise

creative courage, recognize oppression, work with fear and discomfort, take action to learn, embrace complexity, attend to healing, [and] share don't sell" (National Equity Project, 2023a). These mindsets are a way to understand one's own systems, make meaning of situations and individuals, and implement action.

Figure 13

Liberatory Design (National Equity Project, 2023a)



The Liberatory Design cycle consists of modes that provide a fundamental structure and direction to design processes:

1. See the system: Identify potential equities, and understand how they are created and how we can learn more about equity challenges;
2. Empathize: Learn more about the feelings, motivations, emotions, and experiences of individuals or communities with whom you are designing;
3. Define: Develop a perspective about the needs and challenges of the community with those closest to the challenge;
4. Inquire: Ask questions when facing challenges in order to define these challenges better;

5. Imagine: Create a space to use “what if?” questions to stimulate creative courage that will lead to solutions;
6. Prototype: Build and test critical ideas;
7. Try: Use feedback to improve implementations and to check assumptions;
8. Notice and reflect: Consider those moments throughout this process during which individuals “deepen their self-awareness and their situational awareness, as well as spur key pauses for reflecting and adapting throughout a process” (National Equity Project, 2023a).

Why Use Liberatory Design to Identify the Problem of Practice

In the fall of 2021, I took a class from the National Equity Project on learning and applying Liberatory Design with my colleague, Jennifer Locke. Jennifer and I used Liberatory Design to co-create a fellowship, the NEA Professional Practice and Policy Teaching Fellows, for educators organizing around a problem they saw in their own context.

In this program, the Fellows drafted a professional-learning organizing plan to build membership and affiliate capacity through practice-oriented supports and problem solving in the plan’s implementation. My role in the program was to train, coach, and guide these Teaching Fellows as they created and implemented their professional-learning organizing plan and to coach them as they encountered different challenges in their states. We used Liberatory Design mindsets as a way for our Teaching Fellows to examine equity challenges and engage in purposeful leadership action to address those challenges. As a result of using Liberatory Design mindsets and modes, our Fellows were able to measure improvements and make intentional changes in education.

My own experiences as a Muslim public school educator led me to my research on exploring the experiences and challenges faced by Muslim educators. As I started to research in the fall of 2022, I found only a few articles and research studies focusing on the experiences of

Muslim educators. There is a lack of scholarship by and about, and awareness of, Muslim public school educators, and that is part of the problem. If Muslim educators were more visible to researchers, then we would have more research available. Consequently, trying to identify a problem without any literature available on Muslim public school educators led me to apply the National Equity Project's Liberatory Design framework in approaching my problem of practice. When individuals look at challenges, they see only parts of the system, not necessarily all aspects of it, thereby creating advantages for some individuals and disadvantages for others. As a researcher, it is crucial to learn and share evidence-based knowledge. By employing Liberatory Design to my problem of practice, I can thoroughly examine relationships, challenges, hardships, successes, and moments of joy experienced by Muslim educators. Inequities against Muslim educators are built into the practices of school systems, and in order to interrupt those inequities and humanize Muslim educators, I have to understand their experiences.

Using the Liberatory Design cycle as a systematic approach to design processes, we can uncover Muslim public school educators' challenges, experiences, and needs, especially where little research has been done. As a member of this population, I have observed that systems are often created without taking into account or even seeing, the needs of individuals, thus creating challenges and circumstances that isolate me as a Muslim educator. As a researcher, using a human-centered approach can help deepen self-awareness and awareness of the systems that create and enable anti-Muslim racism.

Using Liberatory Design to Understand the Landscape of Muslim Public School Educators

As referenced in Figure 12, the first step of Liberatory Design is to “see and understand the territory you’re navigating” and “identify your equity commitment”(National Equity Project, 2023a). To understand the experiences of Muslim public school educators, I conducted 13

empathy interviews over four months. (See Table 1.) In Section 3, I share these findings and narratives.

Table 1	
<i>Questions Asked During Empathy Interviews with Muslim Public School Educators</i>	
Number	Question
1	Tell me about a day in the life of a Muslim educator. What parts of that day are typical? Not typical?
2	What are the parents', colleagues', school leaders', students', and community's perceptions of you as a Muslim educator?
3	What challenges or obstacles have you faced, or do you face, as a Muslim educator?
4	If you could design a solution to a challenge or an obstacle you identified, what would it look like?
5	What professional supports would you like in place to keep you as a Muslim educator?
6	What else should I have asked, but didn't, in order to understand your experiences as a Muslim educator?

I organize these six questions in a way that first asks educators about their day. In my past experiences with empathy interviews, I learned that educators were more comfortable sharing their everyday experiences and the classes they teach before answering questions about topics that may cause tension. Sharing challenges and struggles with a stranger can be difficult. By first discussing their day, I also noted places where there was some tension. For example, when an educator skimmed over not having enough of a planning period, I knew that could be a place where I could ask the educator to tell me a little bit more. The questions were worded to be open, allowing educators to share their experiences. From my experiences as a Muslim educator, I knew that community members, parents, colleagues, and students may have different perceptions, so addressing that issue with a question was important. That question allowed

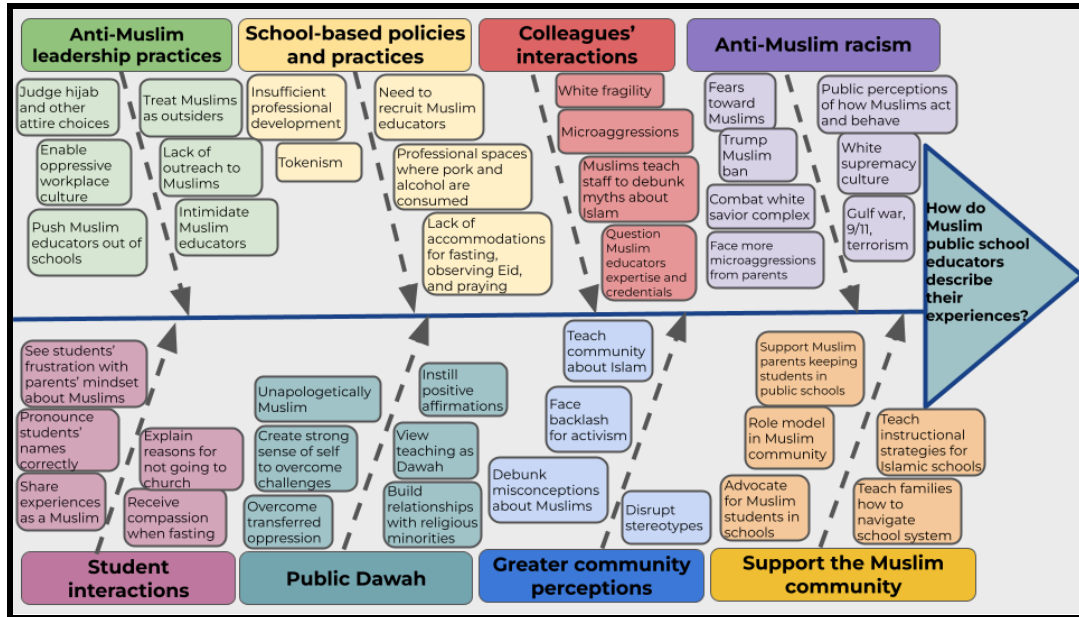
educators to share the surface-level problems; later, they would go into detail when asked the next question, about the challenges and obstacles they faced as Muslim educators. All educators received these questions ahead of time, together with their consent forms. Most of them had prepared their responses to the questions, which made them feel more comfortable.

As an organizer and an individual who helps educators create professional supports, I wanted to ask questions on designing a solution to a challenge or designing any professional supports, as this information helps build an intervention. These types of questions also assist educators in thinking through why a particular solution or professional support would be helpful. The last question, “What else should I have asked but didn’t,” opens the door for the educators to return to something they said. In coding these interviews, I discovered that answering that last question is when most educators shared how they were resilient, and thoughts that they had never verbalized to others often come to light.

Step two of Liberatory Design is to engage, to make meaning of the empathy interviews, and to “better understand the complexity of this challenge” (National Equity Project, 2023a). After actively listening to the Muslim educators’ narratives about teaching, community connections, colleagues’ interactions, and hopes they have for the future, I used the data I obtained to create a fishbone diagram to identify the root causes of their experiences and challenges visually—a diagram I later realized became a landscape scan. (See Figure 14.) To make meaningful and understand the landscape of Muslim public school educators, a fishbone diagram “identify[ies] and analyze[s] a specific problem” that “allows stakeholders to organize thoughts about potential causes and arrange the causes by importance” (Coghlan et al., 2014) A visual diagram outlining potential causes helps me explore the relationships and connections among Muslim public school educators’ experiences. By examining these relationships, I can identify the complexity of equity challenges Muslim educators face.

Figure 14

Problem-of-Practice Landscape



Note. A problem-of-practice landscape scan reflects the experiences and challenges Muslim public school educators face in their schools and communities.

Defining the Landscape of Muslim Public School Educators

Understanding the problem of practice through historical context and the current state of these practices is vital to identifying a system in Liberatory Design. Rooted in characteristics of white supremacy culture, anti-Muslim racism influences the anti-Muslim leadership practices in schools. Anti-Muslim “sentiment or action has often been understood as a reaction to religious difference, even if it may also correlate with attitudes or motivations tied to race” (Gerteis et al., 2020, p. 722). Anti-Muslim racism involves public perceptions of how Muslims act and behave, as well as historical events such as the Gulf War, 9/11, and the Trump Muslim ban—all to create fears and hatred of Muslims. In the United States, there is a culture of fear directed at Muslims that stems from white supremacy culture, as defined in Tema Okun’s essay, “White Supremacy Culture—Still Here”: “White supremacy culture’s number one strategy is to make us afraid...when we are afraid, whatever the reason, especially when we don’t have the

skills to hold that fear, we are easily manipulated by any false yet powerful sense of security” (Okun, 2021, p.7).

Muslims are the third-largest religious group in the United States and represent 80 countries. By 2050, Muslims will be the second-largest religious group (Reagan, 2020). Muslims threaten white supremacy culture primarily because they represent numerous cultures and countries outside the Western world. People are scared of change and of losing their power. Muslims are generally more educated and have a higher income than the average income of the rest of the U.S. population (Reagan, 2020). People also make assumptions on the basis of what individuals wear and the way they act, mainly when those assumptions include the idea that hijabs, and Muslim attire in general, are oppressive. In Timothy Reagan’s article, “Islam in the United States: Addressing Islamophobia in the Public Schools,” he identifies examples of Islamophobia: (1) profiling against Muslims by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, (2) attacks on Islam by religious conservatives who support conservative politicians such as Rev. Jerry Vines and Rev. Franklin Graham, (3) bullying against Muslim children, (4) erasing Islamic history and contributions of Muslim individuals recounted in textbooks, (5) censorship of supplemental resources for teachers about Islam, and (6) misinformation campaigns (2020). These incidents created a fear of Muslims and led to public perceptions of how Muslims behave and act. That fear has influenced the school system and leaders' perceptions of Muslim teachers.

Perceptions of Muslims are based on inaccurate information in textbooks and anti-Muslim attitudes (Jackson, 2011). In their article “Islamophobia in U.S. Education,” Mir and Sarrub write, “a focus on anti-Muslim racism is connected to an analysis of history and forms of dominance—from white supremacy, slavery, and settler colonialism, to multiculturalism and the security logics of war and imperialism—that produce various forms of racial exclusion as well as incorporation into racist structures” (2019). Anti-Muslim racism is not isolated but stems directly from white supremacy and imperialism. These beliefs bleed into information teachers teach to students and what students hear from the media and listen to at

home. Another issue is that textbooks make explicit connections between Islam and terrorism and that Islamic beliefs fuel Muslims' desire to perpetrate acts of violence (Jackson, 2011).

More recently, threats against Muslims have increased owing to a promise made by Donald Trump during his first campaign. He promised to ban Muslims from entering the United States. In 2017, after his inauguration, Trump signed two Executive Orders, displaying that “The anti-Muslim discourse and actions rely on and reproduce deeply gendered stereotypes about Muslims and Islam by depicting all Muslim men as potential terrorists, Muslim women as helpless victims of oppression, and Islam as inherently tyrannical, violent, and patriarchal” (Gökarıksel, 2017). These stereotypes caused individuals to have negative perceptions of how Muslims behave and act.

The various forms of anti-Muslim racism create anti-Muslim leadership practices and policies in our school systems. Muslim educators face both intimidation and a lack of support from the administration when they speak up about issues occurring in their building. Public school leaders do not counteract anti-Muslim sentiment, as they fail to create a school climate that supports, accepts, and fully embraces Muslim educators. School climate “is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 182). When Muslim educators face microaggressions and religious discrimination from colleagues and their community, they feel unwelcome. Many Muslim educators are the only Muslim educators teaching in a public school in their Muslim community. As a result, many Muslim parents and students turn to Muslim educators to navigate their school systems. As they face these challenges, Muslim educators reinforce the importance of prayer, instill positive affirmations, and create a strong sense of self in themselves. Muslim educators view teaching as public Dawah, as an invitation to individuals to worship God and inform them of Islam’s practices.

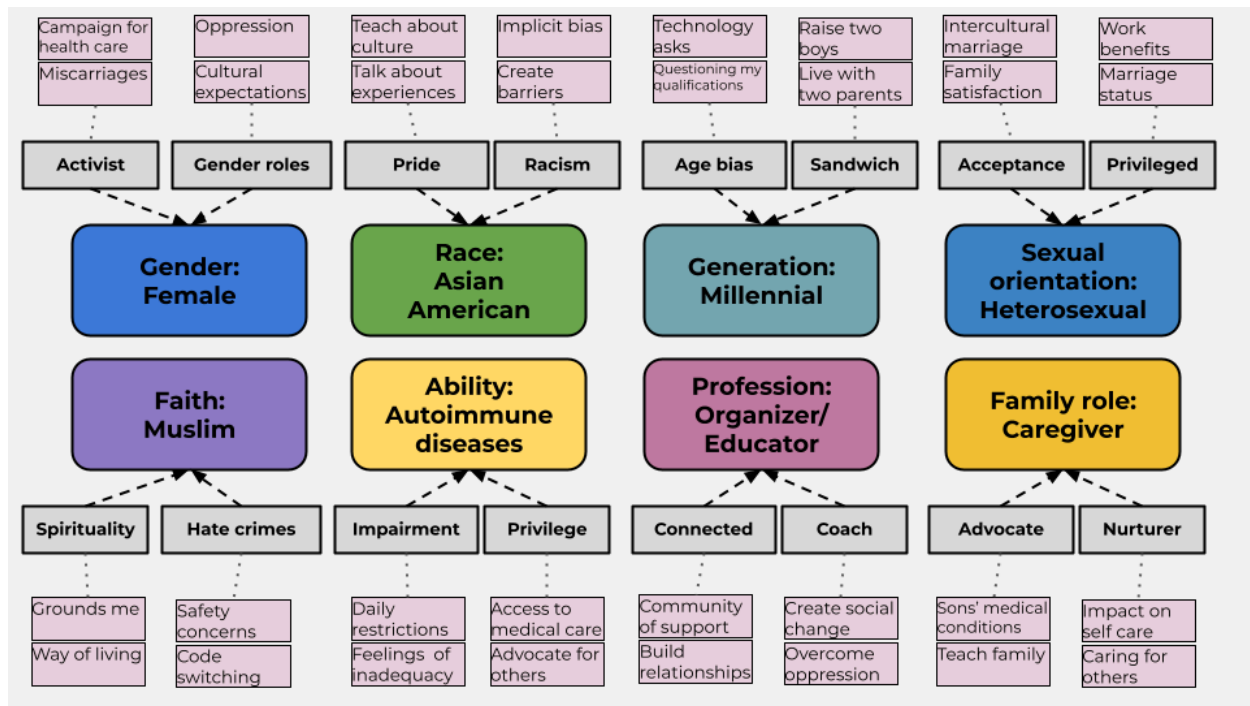
My Positionality as a Muslim Educator Teaching in U.S. Public Schools

Having my own experiences as a Muslim public school educator, I find that the process of reflexivity is essential in identifying how my social identity as a Muslim affects the research process. The Social Identity Map is a starting place to guide researchers as they explicitly identify and reflect on their social identity. The map has several complexities: “(1) the fluidity of our ever-changing social identities; (2) the abstract, intangible nature of our social identities; (3) the difficulty of knowing which facets of our social identity are more influential over time and place; and (4) how our social identities impact the research process” (Jacobson et al., p.2, 2019). Researchers explicitly naming and reflecting on their social identity and intentions can reduce their own power, promoting co-construction in a reflective setting, as researchers can “expose their unfinalizedness and admit to themselves and their readers that they, similar to the interviewees, are continuously engaged in identity performances” (Blix, 2015, p. 182).

My identity is also fluid because circumstances affect my social identity. Also, as I delve into the research process, I can better identify which parts of my social identity influence the research. In my Social Identity Map, I identify the following categories of my social identity: (1) gender, (2) race, (3) generation, (4) sexual orientation, (5) faith, (6) ability, (7) profession, and (8) family role. (See Figure 15.) Adapting material from the Jacobson et al. 2019 article, “Social Identity Map: A Reflexivity Tool for Practicing Explicit Positionality in Critical Qualitative Research,” I asked myself the following questions as I explored my positionality: (1) What past experiences and encounters associated with this identity affect my research? (2) How does this social identity influence my positionality? and (3) How does this social identity shape how I approach my research questions, collect data, interact with participants, analyze and code data, write about my research, and share my research? Using these questions as a guide, I will reflect on the professional aspects of my identity. Early in this section, I used the National Equity framework to describe my experiences as a coach and organizer.

Figure 15

Ambereen's Social Identity Map (version March 2024)



As a new English teacher, I had to teach texts that normalized white perspectives and that excluded experiences showing people of color. As a new teacher, I had no choice in teaching novels and had to teach whatever texts were available to my students. In 2009, in my fourth year, I debated leaving the classroom because I couldn't envision a career path as a teacher. School leaders have pointed at me, as a Muslim and Pakistani-American, and said, "Look, we have Ambereen. We're diverse." In my introduction, I shared some of these experiences and encounters, which affected my choices in the research process. When I started sharing them in conversations and public narratives, people knew my stories and challenges. I had operated in a system, in which I had to survive to pay my college loans and mortgage and have health insurance. I didn't thrive. And I know I am not alone in feeling this way. These experiences helped me craft questions for the empathy interview as I thought about how to solicit experiences that the Muslim public school educators I interviewed had never shared. By sharing my own stories, I also started to heal. So, these Muslim public school educators sharing their stories can help heal them, too. As a writer, I used narratives to share my experiences and those

of my family. I could convey emotions and characterizations that were not normalized in the same texts I had to teach. My administrators and school leaders never bothered to learn about me authentically. I wasn't valuable to them; I was just another person who could "manage" and "control" all the "special ed" kids, as I was just like them.

As a relational organizer, I used one-on-ones to build relationships and connections with other educators, all becoming the foundation for a community. In a one-on-one with an educator, I learned about the values, passion, and struggles that the educator faced. I felt connected to the person. It's in these stories that we know about our calling and our why. Those experiences led me as a researcher to focus on empathy interviews to uncover the experiences that Muslim public school educators have had and the struggles they face. Stories can humanize us.

Islamic Terminology

For this Dissertation of Practice, it is essential to define important Islamic terms explicitly in order to understand the experiences of Muslim public school educators fully. One of the misconceptions about Islam is that the historical and religious context of holidays and the language used by Muslims are not fully understood. As a Muslim educator, I found myself debunking myths and misconceptions concerning Islam; therefore, it is critical to educate readers. Using Islamic words emphasizes one's connection to one's faith. The context of using Arabic versus English in settings also reflects the comfort level of the Muslim educator in that environment. The following terms are grouped by categories and then listed in alphabetical order. Some of these terms are defined through my own lens as a Muslim.

Islamic concepts:

- Allah: an Arabic word that means the one who created all that exists, including the heavens and earth.

- Dawah: an Arabic word that means to invite, “God's way of bringing believers to faith” (Esposito, 2003a).
- Dua: an Arabic word that means an intimate act of worship asking Allah for support and guidance. Individuals can recite a dua privately or read collectively in a group after performing salat.
- Halal: an Arabic word that means permissible in Islam.
- Haram: an Arabic word that means forbidden in Islam.
- Iman: an Arabic word that means belief or faith, and “Assumes belief in the oneness of God, angels, prophets, revealed books, and the hereafter” (Esposito, 2003b).
- Islam: an Arabic word that means submission to Allah, a complete way of life.
- Muslim: an Arabic word that means a follower of Islam.
- Ummah: an Arabic word that means the collective community of Muslims, regardless of privilege, race, and class.

Five pillars of Islam: Mandatory Acts of worship for Muslims

- Hajj: The pilgrimage to Makkah in Saudi Arabia that Muslims must make once in their lifetime. The transforming pilgrimage consists of a series of rites and rituals.
- Ramadan: holy month for Muslims to fast from sunrise to sunset, pray, and reflect on their faith. Ramadan is the “ninth month of the lunar calendar, during which fasting is required” (Esposito, 2003c).
- Salat: an Arabic word that means prayer. Muslims must pray five times daily: before sunrise, midday, late afternoon, after sunset, and at night. Jumu’ah is an Arabic word that means Friday. Jumu’ah prayer is a congregational prayer held at midday on Fridays and is the most important prayer of the week.

- Shahāda: a “profession of faith in Allāh and his messenger; the first Pillar of Islam, proclaiming the uniqueness of Allāh, and the centrality of Muḥammad as his prophet.” To accept Islam, one must say the shahāda (Bowker, 2003a).
- Zakāt: a portion of their wealth that Muslims must donate yearly to charity. Zakāt is also described when “the believer gives a portion of his wealth to Allāh, and so can ‘purify’ the rest and use it with a good conscience” (Bowker, 2003b).

Holidays:

- Eid: an Arabic word that means festival or holiday. Muslims celebrate two Eids with the first sighting of the new moon: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

Clothing:

- Abaya: an Arabic word that means a loose dress worn by some Muslim women.
- Burqa: an Arabic word that means a garment worn by some Muslim women that covers the body and face, excluding the eyes.
- Hijab: an Arabic word that means a head-covering scarf some Muslim women wear.
- Niqab: an Arabic word that means a garment worn by some Muslim women covering their face and excluding the eyes.

Conversational phrases/exclamations:

- Alhamdulillah: an Arabic word that means “Praise be to Allah.”
- Assalamu Alaikum: an Arabic sentence that means “Peace be unto you.”
- Inshallah: an Arabic sentence that means “Allah willing.”
- Jazakallahu Khairan: an Arabic sentence that means “May Allah reward you with goodness.”
- Mashallah: an Arabic word that means “Allah has willed it” when something good has happened.
- Subhanallah: an Arabic word that means “Glory to Allah.”

CHAPTER 2: KNOWLEDGE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

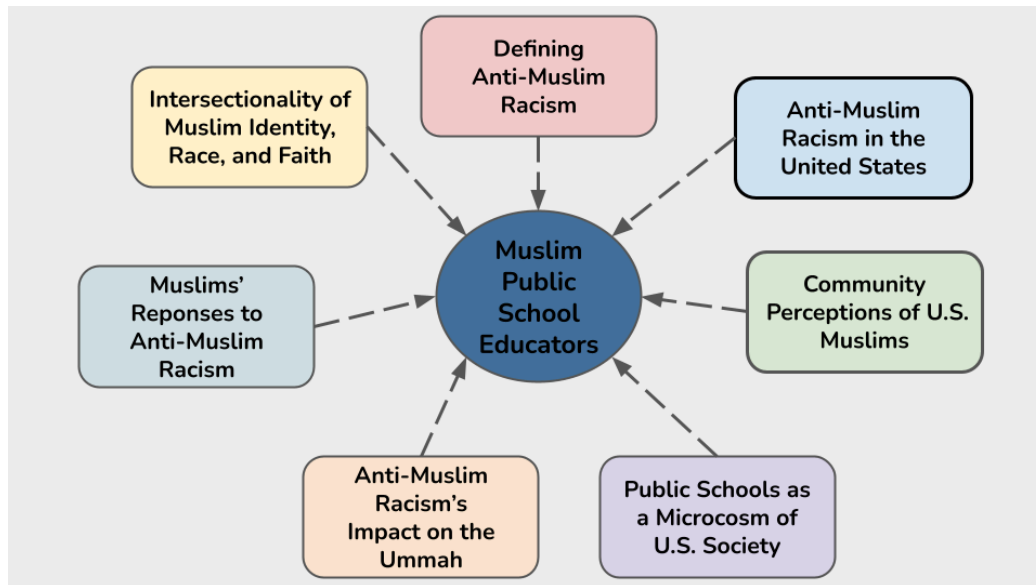
Major concepts and systems include (1) intersectionality of Muslim identity, race, and faith, (2) definition of anti-Muslim racism, (3) history of anti-Muslim racism, (4) impact of anti-Muslim racism on the perceptions of the community, (5) public schools as a microcosm of U.S. society, (6) impact of anti-Muslim racism on the ummah, and (7) Muslim responses to anti-Muslim racism. (See Figure 16.)

Understanding how the Muslim identity is socially identified and racialized is essential to understanding anti-Muslim racism. Although racial climate influences Muslims differently from the way it influences other faith-based individuals, racialization allows us to view the harmful impact of anti-Muslim racism on Muslim-American experiences. Lastly, Muslim identity in the United States is complex, with Muslims experiencing both internal and external struggles, as illustrated in later sections of this knowledge review. By examining identity first, we can understand the full impact of anti-Muslim racism on the ummah.

Defining anti-Muslim racism is vital to understanding its impact on Muslim public school educators. Defining terminology helps us understand that anti-Muslim racism is reinforced and exhibited at instructional and structural levels. Islamophobia emphasizes individual and interpersonal implications more and, while accurate, reinforced colonial implications that caused harm to Muslim Americans. Recognizing that anti-Muslim racism is a systemic issue rather than an individual bias is crucial in challenging its practices, assumptions, and reasonings (Abdul Khabeer et al., 2017).

Figure 16

Conceptual Framework



Examining the oppressive practices and policies of anti-Muslim racism helps one understand how the systems and structures that exist in the United States are meant to promote psychological and physical violence, institutional discrimination, and the fear of Muslims. Anti-Muslim hate is fueled by power dynamics, right-wing authoritarianism, anti-Muslim activists, perceived religious challenges, law enforcement targeting Muslims, and biased media. These systems and structures connect and interact with one another, and help create Americans' perceptions of Muslims, which vary on the basis of background, experiences, media exposure, and religion, affecting Muslim public school educators, students' families, and colleagues. People collectively blame Muslims for terrorism, leading to hate crimes against them, in turn causing more violence and creating a vicious cycle (Bruneau et al., 2018). Americans who view immigrants as threats to American values believe that foreigners should conform to the “American way of life,” which they also believe is superior to that of other countries (Bulut, 2016). These types of perceptions also helped Americans justify both their fear of criminals and the Muslim ban, as they perceived Islam to be a threat to Judeo-Christian culture (Kaufman, 2019).

Understanding anti-Muslim racism's history and impact on American perceptions can be applied to public schools, which represent a microcosm of U.S. society. Schools mirror societal

issues but also perpetuate racist practices, undermining human equity (Miller, 2020). School culture, influenced by principals, teachers, and parents, is crucial for student learning and reforms, shaped by norms, values, and traditions (Deal, 1998). These same principals, teachers, and parents are also influenced by anti-Muslim racism and are part of the same communities that hold perceptions of Muslims. Mosques in the Muslim community provide vital support and services, particularly in the face of anti-Muslim racism, which causes disparities in Muslims's health outcomings owing to disruptions in individual, interpersonal, and structural systems (Samari, 2016). Muslim parents often encourage their children to remain silent because they fear for their safety, while second-generation Muslim Americans are motivated to integrate into American society and are more inclusive of different religions (Haque et al., 2019; Bacchus, 2019).

Muslims are working to combat anti-Muslim racism, cultivate their ummah, and dismantle stereotypes, Muslim-American youths challenge systemic racism and promote religious inclusion through political activism and civic engagement. Muslim organizations and mosques promote interfaith programs to break down misconceptions and fear, thereby reducing prejudice against Muslims in the United States by increasing contact and dialogue among different faiths. Muslims incorporate Dawah into community initiatives, using the Quran as an indirect example and modeling Islam through their own behaviors. Storytelling and using counternarratives is a way Muslims have responded to anti-Muslim racism. Several organizations mobilized Americans to build a mass movement to diminish anti-Muslim racism and white supremacy.

Intersectionality of Muslim Identity, Race, and Faith

Racialization is critical to understanding Islamophobia because the ways people perceive and judge individuals as Muslims affect the experiences of hatred to which Muslims are subjected. People read "Muslimness onto individuals by using a combination of ideas about

culture and appearance. If the markers of Islam (hijab, jilbaab, a Muslim name, nation of origin, etc.) are absent, ‘passing’ as a non-Muslim is possible for those without conspicuous names, accents or dress, and those who do not ‘look like’ a Muslim (which means different things in different places)” (Garner et al., 2015, p. 12). Muslims are like other racialized communities, although “the existing racial climate may influence Muslims in a way distinct from what may be occurring for people from other faith-based backgrounds (Sedique, 2020, p. 677). Racialization refers to the defining characteristic of a group and is often influenced by factors such as work, cultural background, beliefs, and social organization (Garner et al., 2015). The United States, despite being the most diverse and religiously pluralistic nation–state, is also societally biased, with religious communities often divided on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, and faith tradition (Rahman, 2021). Racialization allows us to understand how Muslims are “homogenized and degraded by Islamophobic discourse and practices in their everyday lives,” regardless of their economic situation, physical appearance, or country of origin (Garner et al., 2015, p. 17).

However, racializing Islam can also de-emphasize the existence of black Muslims by overhighlighting the experiences of immigrant Muslims, who “can also appropriate black culture or seek greater relationships of solidarity with African Americans, especially African American Muslims” (Guhin, 2018, p. 95). U.S. black–white racial logic positions both black and white Muslims, revealing that Muslimness and religion influence the construction and attribution of blackness and whiteness (Husain, 2019). Rahman (2021) argues that the sociohistorical shift of Islamic power from indigenous African-American Muslims to post-1965 immigrant Muslims highlights the conflation of Islamic identity, membership, and consciousness in America, making being a Muslim a contested, problematic, and racialized category within American Islam, as African-American Islam practices represent a diverse, racialized black faith tradition that renegotiates collective religio-racial identity and consciousness. Black Muslims face a complicated racial position because of their Muslim identity, which is normalized in black culture and mainstream American society; this embeddedness inspires individuals to convert,

but black Muslim participants still experience a separation between being black and being Muslim (Husain, 2019). Both black and white Muslims are often viewed as foreign and brown when perceived as Muslim, and as non-Muslim white and black Americans when not (Husain, 2019). Structural violence that happens in the Muslim community varies with the participants' unique identities and context, highlighting the need for scholars to understand the diversity and intersections of marginalized identities in order to avoid homogenizing stereotypes (Saleem et al., 2022).

Racialization helps us understand Muslim-American experiences, but historically, race scholarship in the United States has favored black–white paradigms, ignoring diverse racial and ethnic groups that became part of American society with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Selod et al., 2013). Pakistani and Indian immigrants' experiences are not identical to those of African Americans, as South Asians migrated with professional degrees after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, gained access to white communities and economic opportunities, and have a different physical appearance and different cultural traits; Pakistani and Indian immigrants and their children are still not entirely accepted as Americans because of cultural, religious, and physical differences (Selod et al., 2013).

Utilizing strategies to challenge stigma; maintain a high-status, non-Black group position; and prove an American identity, Muslim immigrants view their Muslim identity as stigmatized and separate from racialized identity and often “imagine new forms of inclusion, new forms of groupness and linked fates” (Yazdiha, 2021, p. 315). Perceived as white and not black, Muslim immigrants use their identity as an opportunity for integration into whiteness, generating assimilationist strategies to establish their place in society (Yazdiha, 2021). U.S. Latinx have been converting to Islam since the 1920s, primarily in African-American and immigrant-majority Islamic communities, and in the 1970s a group in New York City created the first known U.S. Latinx Muslim organization, Alianza Islámica, to address their members' culture, languages, social situations, and contributions to Islamic history (Bowen, 2013).

Several factors can detrimentally affect Muslims' identity development in the United States. The role of stigma and the awareness of that stigma has harmed Muslims' identity development in the United States, causing Muslims to face discrimination by distancing themselves from their dominant group identity and adopting instead an "American" identity, as the identity of an American is synonymous with whiteness (Sedique, 2020). Religious salience and exclusivism correlate positively with a Muslim-only identity and negatively with an American or Muslim-American identity, suggesting a preference for a religious identity; however, perceptions of the "clash of civilizations," influenced by racialization and the stigma surrounding Islam, may lead some Muslims to distance themselves from a religious identity (Chaudhary et al., 2020). Negative media portrayals can affect the national identification of minority groups, potentially causing even more of an effect than personal experiences of discrimination (Saleem et al., 2019).

The landscape around Muslim identity will continue to shift and evolve. The relationship between pluralism and Muslim identity in the United States is complex, with internal struggles over pluralism and government policies influencing Muslims' perceptions (Moore, 2007). Collective identities for mobilizing identities are constantly "in flux, dynamic, and contested, internally and externally, within organizations, coalitions, and national movements" (Yazdiha, 2021, p. 315). African-American and white participants negotiate belonging, which suggests that they view the positioning of their blackness or whiteness as separate from their Muslimness (Husain, 2019). Latinx Muslims increasingly adopt the Latinx Muslim identity, promoted by various organizations and prominent leaders (Bowen, 2013).

Defining Anti-Muslim Racism

Defining anti-Muslim racism is essential to understanding how it influences Muslim public school educators. Researchers and scholars have defined anti-Muslim hate in different ways, and these definitions have evolved in accordance with lived experiences, positionality, and

research. One definition of Islamophobia is “systemic racism against Muslims and the lived experiences of discrimination against people who are perceived as Muslim” (Najib et al., 2020, p. 449). Another definition is a type of racism that “oppresses American Muslims because their perceived ‘Islamic culture’ is nefarious, and that their ‘Islamic culture’ is antithetical to ‘American culture’” (Considine, 2017, p. 8).

Islamophobia involves grouping Muslims into a single tribe and associating them with negative stereotypes, regardless of racial identity. The phenomenon is systemic at both micro and macro levels. Islamophobia manifests itself in different ways across the globe, as “Islamophobia in some non-Western societies is not so much about racism but about tribalism as it involves grouping of Muslims into a single tribe and associating Muslimness with negative stereotypes regardless of racial identity” (Ejiofor, 2023, p. 2863). Islamophobia is “a spatialized process that occurs at different scales: globe, nation, urban, neighbourhood, body and emotion” (Najib et al., 2020, p. 451). When individuals are hateful to Muslims, they group “perceived” Muslims into a single group of tribes and associate them with negative traits (Ejiofor, 2023, p. 2883). Islamophobia has also been defined as practices and ideas that combine all Muslims into a group along with characteristics associated with them: “violence, misogyny, political allegiance/disloyalty, [and] incompatibility with Western values”(Garner et al., 2015, p. 13). Islamophobia is systemic: “maintained at the micro (individual interactions) and macro levels (state policies)” (Garner et al., 2015, p. 15)

However, some researchers have disagreed with these definitions of Islamophobia and with the use of the word itself, as the definitions have gaps in their understanding of complex identities. In “Decolonising Islamophobia,” Ejiofor (2023) argues that “conceptualizing Islamophobia as anti-Muslim tribalism relieves us of the ethnocentrism embedded in the cultural racism model as it evades the problematic of transposing Western racial categories to non-Western societies where Islamophobia assumes many different forms” (pp. 2884–2885). Using the word “Islamophobia” reinforces colonial perceptions and does not exhaustively

illustrate how it intersects with race and identity. The word “Islamophobia” is, in itself, problematic, as “the use of the construction ending in ‘phobia’ also often denotes a mental disorder, moving us further toward the individual and the psychological, and further away from the social, the collective and the structural or systemic ”(Garner et al., 2015, p. 13).

Another researcher, Namira Islam (2018), defines soft Islamophobia as when individuals face being “ systematically disenfranchised from the work that liberal organizations, individuals, and groups are leading to challenge Islamophobia,” to the extent where these individuals “are prevented from accessing financial resources, leadership spaces, and strategy sessions” (pp. 7–8). By doing so, a space is created “for narratives—and, thus, policies—that alienate and target the Muslims who are not like the typical American non-Muslim, i.e., those Muslims who are ‘too religiously conservative’ or fail to meet another standard about who deserves protection from discrimination” (Islam, 2018, pp. 7–8).

For a researcher, reframing Islamophobia is fundamental to accurately portray the experiences and emotions Muslim Americans have experienced, as is noted in the next section. Anti-Muslim racism accurately reflects “the intersection of race and religion as a reality of structural inequality and violence rooted in the longer history of US (and European) empire building” (Abdul Khabeer et al., 2017). The foundation of anti-Muslim racism is that “the white Christian subject who feels racial hostility towards Muslims is above all a colonizer” and that “Whiteness, religious feeling, and imperial/colonial impulses remain conjoined in contemporary conflicts” (Razack, 2021). Understanding that anti-Muslim racism is a structural, systemic issue and not an individual bias is necessary to challenge anti-Muslim racism’s practices, assumptions, and logic (Abdul Khabeer et al., 2017).

Anti-Muslim Racism in the United States

Anti-Muslim racism stems from interconnected factors: individuals in various positions of power, the rise of right-wing authoritarianism, anti-Muslim activists and organizations,

perceived challenges to religious pluralism, law enforcement targeting and criminalizing Muslims, and biased media. This section explains each factor further. Together, these forces convey messages and act to portray hate, discrimination, and hostility toward Muslim Americans.

People in positions of sociopolitical power perpetuate anti-Muslim racism, promoting psychological and physical violence, institutional discrimination, and fear of Muslims, all leading to hostility and distrust. These individuals sustain anti-Muslim sentiment whereby “psychological and physical violence inflicted in interpersonal interactions” parallels “institutional, structural, and policy-level discrimination” for Muslims that causes harm (Saleem et al., 2022, p. 439). Individuals such as David Yerushalmi, Frank Gaffney, and Daniel Pipes have promoted fear of Muslims and consider Islam to be the source of all problems (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022). They have also promoted the belief that “Islam is primitive, inferior and teaches violence”; these scholars' attitudes created hostility toward, and distrust of, Muslims (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022, p. 199).

Following 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, right-wing authoritarianism led to aggressive behavior against Muslims. Individuals high in right-wing authoritarianism tend to act aggressively toward other groups of individuals when authority figures support aggression toward those individuals because they perceive them as threatening their cultural norms (Beck et al., 2018). Americans high in right-wing authoritarianism perceived American deaths during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as attacks on their very own majority-Christian nation, more significantly when government authority figures reinforced the approval of violence toward Muslims, such as refusing to shut down Guantánamo Bay (Beck et al., 2018). Republican politicians and right-wing media helped fund racist institutions so as to incite racist sentiments against Muslims (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022). Promoting negative stereotypes of Muslims helped gain support among those who were against the War on Terror as they viewed an enemy that its religion could identify (Sides et al., 2013). During presidential debates, Trump used language

such as “radical Islamic terrorism,” depicted Muslims as enablers of violence and foreign threats, argued against political correctness, and communicated messages that Muslims were not part of the received religious landscape (Neumann et al., 2019, pp. 4124–4125).

Contributing to right-wing authoritarianism are public officials who show concerns over threats that American Muslims would plot attacks on U.S. soil, such as threats posed by homegrown terrorists (Brooks, 2011). Muslim Americans experienced crises at the hands of “anti-Muslim activists, organizations, politicians, media and financial institutions,” whose intentions were to actively grow a network that would focus on spreading anti-Muslim sentiment and characterizing Muslims as the enemy of America (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022, p. 198). Financial institutions that provided funding to promote the fear of Muslims in the United States include “Donors Capital Fund, Richard Mellon Scaife, the Bradley Foundation, the Russell Berrie Foundation, the Becker Foundation, the Anchorage Fund, and William Rosenwald Family Fund” (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022, pp. 207–208).

During his presidency, President Obama had focused on a deeper understanding of Islam and frequently had asked Americans “to recognize and perhaps reconsider how Islam and Muslims should fit into the folds of the nation’s fabric,” a position that led to a backlash (Neumann et al., 2019, p. 4123). Anti-Muslim organizations include the Society of Americans for National Existence (SANE), the American Freedom Law Center (AFLC), ACT! for America, Stop the Islamization of America (SIOA), the Tea Party, and the Center for Security Policy (CSP), and they carried out the following activities, often in collaboration with one another: (1) urging racial and religious hate toward Muslims, (2) requesting Congress to consider Muslims as enemies and illegal immigrants, (3) reinforcing messages that practicing Muslims who believe in the Quran cannot be loyal citizens of the United States and will use the Quran to promote violence, (4) using Islamophobia to endorse leaders of the Republican party, (5) accusing Muslims of using Islamic laws to substitute for the U.S. Constitution, (6) providing training in how to misrepresent Islam to Americans, (7) introducing and advocating for various bills that banned individuals

from citing Sharia law to justify their actions, (8) attacking “officials who sympathize with Muslims,” (9) stopping construction of mosques, in particular the Islamic Center’s project in New York, and (10) spreading misconceptions about President Obama’s faith and identity (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022, pp. 200–205).

Muslims evoke fears in whites as a crucial element in the territorial and symbolic foundation of whiteness (Razack, 2021). Some Americans exhibit hate and aggression toward Muslims because they perceive Muslims to present a challenge to religious pluralism. The United States struggles to “accommodate Muslims in ways that allow them to reconcile their faith and citizenship commitments” (Meer et al., 2015, p. 526). Christian nationalist beliefs relate significantly to negative perceptions of Muslims: “Anti-Muslim sentiments in the form of general disapproval and the desire to limit Muslim worship are shaped more by beliefs than identities or behaviors” (Shortle et al., 2015). The mission of the American Freedom Law Center (AFLC), an anti-Muslim hate group, includes fighting against any individuals who undermine their Judeo-Christian principles and portraying Muslims as being at war with the Judeo-Christian civilization (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022).

The structural violence of anti-Muslim hate connects deeply to the political and historical global context (Saleem et al., 2022). Presidential discourse focusing on Islam started mainly during the Iran hostage crisis in 1979, when “the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran, the outcome of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, became a national security threat” (Neumann et al., 2019, p. 4122). Muslims can be included in the curriculum and tolerated in schools as long as they do not claim either that they are victims of racism or that they are victims of a settler-colonial project, namely, Israel (Razack, 2021).

Anti-Muslim hate has led local, state, and federal agencies to target and criminalize Muslims. In the United States, Muslims are criminalized by “framing an Islamic religious identity as a problem to be solved using state crime control logic” (Kaufman, 2019, p. 521). Law enforcement has employed methods that threaten trust between Muslim communities and law

enforcement in efforts to dismantle what they perceive as homegrown terrorism (Brooks, 2011, pp. 45–46). Anti-Muslim hate organizations, such as the Society of Americans for National Existence (SANE), “encouraged criminalizing Muslims who practice their religion in America” and investigated how Muslims advocated for Islamic laws in mosques (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022, p. 201).

Post 9/11, public opinion on Muslims intensified, leading to negative views; newspaper articles, by contrast, portrayed Muslims as victims of violence or of negative sentiments on the part of non-Muslim perpetrators, a more sympathetic perspective (Adamczyk et al., 2022). Biased news agencies and media, such as The Freedom Center, Fox News, the National Review, the Washington Times, and Christian Broadcasting, provided a forum for racist advocacy groups to disseminate false information about Muslim Americans in order to reinforce anti-Muslim hate (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022, p. 206). Media and political discourse can “other” Muslims, thereby reinforcing colonialism and spreading the idea that “Muslims do not belong in these countries: their presence is conditional, and their communities are considered suspect” (Najib et al., 2020, p. 452). During Obama's presidency, these news agencies and media reinforced these misconceptions so as to exploit anti-Muslim hate (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022). Among their claims were that (1) Muslims and the radical left are a threat to American values, (2) President Obama, accused of being a Muslim, was part of “Muslims’ strategy to take over America,” (3) the Muslim Brotherhood mobilized Muslim students’ associations, and (4) Republican politicians asserted anti-Muslim attitudes for their own political agendas” (Ali-Haimoud et al., 2022, pp. 206–207).

Entertainment portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in the United States legitimize racism, characterizing them as terrorists, patriotic Americans, or victimized Americans, thereby affecting their identities. Interestingly, positive representations in the entertainment industry have led to a new form of racism, on the surface projecting antiracism and multiculturalism, but, under the surface, legitimizing racist policies in order to present the United States as

enlightened (Alsultany, E, 2013). American commercial media present stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as either terrorists, patriotic Americans, or victimized Americans, all through the lens of terrorism; consequently, Americans then view Arab and Muslim identities through their connection to terrorism (Alsultany, E, 2013).

American news media often portray Muslims negatively as dangerous and harboring terroristic tendencies, and this portrayal aligns with popular political rhetoric and national security interests, with attacks in Muslim-majority countries receiving less media coverage (Adamczyk et al., 2022). Media sources also show Muslims as terrorists (Kaufman, 2019). Media abetment of U.S. foreign policy and military aggressions against Muslim countries reinforces “demonizing narratives” that have resulted in oppressive policies, such as “detentions, deportations, torture, [and] surveillance, amongst other tactics” (Saleem et al., 2022, pp. 439–440). Post 9/11, the tone in newspaper articles about Muslims was more negative than the tone of the average newspaper article covering other topics, owing to “coverage of events, even if skeptics may emphasize that journalists have a degree of choice over which stories to cover, how long and intensely to cover them, and what precise terms to use in their articles” (Bleich et al., 2021, p. 35). All this suggests implicit biases within the media and “that systematic, long-term associations between Muslims and negative words have a substantial impact on newspaper readers’ beliefs, emotions, and policy preferences (Bleich et al., 2021, p. 36). The media’s influence has shaped the perceptions of Americans toward Muslims.

Anti-Muslim Racism Influences the Community Perceptions of U.S. Muslims

The portrayal of Muslims in American mainstream media indirectly influences their group's worth, evincing a lack of acceptance and value, based mainly on their religious identity, and may hinder their integration into society and erode trust in political institutions (Saleem et al., 2019). People blame Muslims collectively for acts of terrorism carried out by Muslim individuals and then are motivated to commit hate crimes against Muslims (Bruneau et al.,

2018). Collective blame causes more violence and creates a vicious cycle. Many Americans view both Muslim Americans and Muslims as untrustworthy and violent, despite political leaders characterizing Muslims who commit violent acts differently from the general population of peaceful Muslims (Sides et al., 2013). Individuals involved intimately in right-wing authoritarianism and who perceive “Islam as a threat to the United States may be more important in explaining the effect of authoritarianism on endorsement [of] aggression toward Muslims,” a phenomenon that influences support for anti-Muslim policies and behaviors (Beck et al., 2018).

American National Election Study data from 2004 revealed that Americans' feelings about Muslims “appear to be more closely connected to cultural outgroups than to racial and religious minorities” and that Americans view “Muslims as part of the ‘bands of others’ in American society,” meaning that individuals who belong to minority groups view Muslims favorably and those already having negative views of outgroups would also have unfavorable views of Muslims (Kalkan et al., 2009, pp. 859–860). Data collected from the Religion and Diversity Survey, a nationally representative telephone survey conducted between September 2002 and February 2003, suggest that Americans’ “prejudice against Muslims is linked to nativist attitudes, more specifically to an anti-immigrant bias,” as they view Muslims in the United States as un-American and foreign (Bulut, 2016, p. 311). Americans who believe that “immigrants are a threat to traditional American values and those who maintain that foreigners should give up their foreign ways and learn to be like other Americans as well as those agreeing that nothing in other countries can beat the American way of life” are most likely to be highly prejudiced against Muslims (Bulut, 2016, p. 311).

Faith can play a role in the perceptions of Muslims. Thunström et al. (2021) reveal that trust is influenced by religion, with Christians being trusted more than Muslims and nonbelievers because of a Christian ingroup bias, and that the United States lacks religious diversity in the public sphere, possibly because of a lack of trust in non-Christians and strong

Christian beliefs among public officials. A research study by Sherkat et al. (2018) analyzes data from the 1996 and 2004–2016 General Social Surveys, which showed that “sectarian Protestants and those who hold fundamentalist beliefs about the Bible hold hostile views of immigrants, would curtail civil rights for Muslims, and hope to limit immigrant numbers” despite Protestant leaders recommending showing compassion to refugees and immigrants (p. 1801). The respondents’ perceptions were that “Muslims are certainly not welcome in America, and there is a presumption in contemporary American Christian nationalism that many or most immigrants are not Christian—or not the right kind of Christian” (Sherkat et al., 2018, p. 1801). Among U.S. Catholics, both nonwhites and whites oppose civil liberties for Muslims, whereas secular Americans are supportive (Sherkat et al., 2018).

Americans view Muslim women and men differently in terms of being a threat to American life. In Sarah Beth Kaufman’s study (2019) focusing on qualitative interviews in a major Southwest city during the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, respondents describe Muslims in gendered ways as physically threatening to American citizens: “The hijab is a physical marker of potential violence, while the ideological impetus is male” (pp. 531–532). To justify the Muslim ban imposed by the Trump administration, they used arguments associated with fears of crimes, and they believed Islam to be a threat to Judeo-Christian culture (Kaufman, 2019). Post 9/11 commercial news reporting often uses disclaimers and native informants to portray Muslim women as oppressed, with numerous stories detailing their suffering, including honor killings, genital mutilation, being beaten in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia for violating dress codes, and lack of child custody rights (Alsultany, E, 2013).

Community perceptions have shifted at times. In one research study examining newspapers, data revealed that Trump’s election and the Muslim ban have led to a more sympathetic view of Muslims, with increased articles focusing on their being victims of violence, a stark contrast to all the negative public opinion post-9/11 (Adamczyk et al., 2022). These articles, which discussed how terrorism perpetrated by Muslims decreased, portrayed Muslims

as victims of violence or negative sentiments from non-Muslim perpetrators following 9/11 (Adamczyk et al., 2022). The Muslim ban has further marginalized Muslim communities by restricting migration from five predominantly Muslim nations alongside policies aimed at policing and controlling Muslim communities that have labeled Muslims as suspects or terrorists (Bacchus, 2019). A research study by Chen et al. (2020) explored how twenty-two converts, deeply affected by terrorist attacks, sought knowledge of Islam and the virtuous lives of Muslims, breaking away from stereotypes and rethinking the religion. Despite not intending to do Dawah, some Muslims have appealing personalities and behaviors that are crucial in attracting non-Muslims and influencing them to investigate Islam, deconstruct biased reports, and reflect on their views (Chen et al., 2020).

Public Schools as a Microcosm of U.S. Society

What we know of anti-Muslim racism, how it is reproduced throughout U.S. history, and how it influences the perceptions of Americans can be applied to public schools because public schools are a microcosm of U.S. society, replicating issues that arise in wider societal spheres such as the home, religion, communities, economics, and politics (Fuller, 2018). Because educational institutions mirror societal diversity, like society itself they also perpetuate racist practices through their own practices, cultures, and policies that undermine human equity (Miller, 2020). Neoliberal policies and practices have significantly influenced education, making it seen primarily as preparation for an economic society (Sellars et al., 2023).

Ancient Greece's concept of *paideia*, or education, emphasized citizenship and learning under the legal and moral authority of the prevailing culture, establishing a strong link between education and a good society, reinforcing the concept that schools are a microcosm of society (Salomone, 2021). Like society, the education system has multiple functions: (1) social integration, with functionalists arguing that individuals must share a standard set of beliefs and values; (2) social placement, so that students are taught at their best level to prepare them for

their future life; and (3) social and cultural innovation, whereby education is required in order to make discoveries (*Sociology*, 2016). Public schools embody civic values, emphasize the importance of education for individuals and society, and ensure free access to education for all (Weingarten et al., 2023). Structures in the school system are similar to the structures of government, with central office structures, principals, and leaders of schools (similar to departments in government). School culture, shaped by norms, values, and traditions, is crucial for student learning and reforms, and is influenced by school leaders such as principals, teachers, and parents (Deal, 1998). Historically marginalized individuals may still face similar conditions in schools led by those with the power to legislate educational curricula and policies (Sellars et al., 2023).

Neoliberalism views education as a means to invest in the development of students' human capital (Hastings, 2019). Neoliberalism influences education similarly to the way advanced capitalist societies do. Advanced capitalist societies are defined in terms of “the sociopolitical positioning of individualized, market-based competition as the preferred governing principle for shaping human action in all areas of life at both individual and collective, societal levels” (Sharma, 2022). Neoliberal governmentality examines systematic, regulated practices that are based on economic rationality, guiding behaviors through direct and indirect governance mechanisms, often connected to self-interest and cost–benefit analyses (McAnulty, 2023). In schools, this is the good-behavior economy, in which teachers quiet classrooms and students normalize silence, utilizing gold-star charts, using Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, instilling rules for how students walk in the hallways, and enforcing self-regulation strategies for students, among other strategies for controlling students in the classroom (McAnulty, 2023). Schools implement a “zero tolerance” approach to student conduct, exacting severe penalties for minor infractions, enforced primarily by school resource officers (Bleakley et al., 2018). Such an approach increases disorderly conduct arrests and recidivism rates, producing more than 10,000 prosecutions of young people annually (Bleakley et al., 2018).

Although the current national test standards are considered educational measures, they actually limit human potential and facilitate knowledge classification (Sellars et al., 2023).

Schools are social and cultural institutions whose leaders govern, control, and manage their geographical and managerial systems, shaping their community's beliefs and values (Gibson et al., 2005). Schools are a community itself that reflects and shows the perceptions of the larger community through their policies and practices. Schools in the United States teach societal norms and values, including patriotism, punctuality, individualism, respect for authority, and competitiveness, manifesting in American students as competition for grades and rewards (*Sociology*, 2016). Schools must function as a morally coherent community and a microcosm of democracy, fostering a cohesive institutional ethos that upholds democratic rights and responsibilities at all levels (Salomone, 2021).

Social interactions occur in schools, in venues such as classrooms, playgrounds, hallways, and the cafeteria, and are similar to adults' social interactions in professional, religious, and recreational settings. Schools can drive society, fostering human growth and addressing the inequitable conditions that have been historically created and maintained (Sellars et al., 2023). Schools mirror local communities, encouraging individual identity and the collective understanding of shared beliefs and values, a sense of community based on geographical location and shared goals (Gibson et al., 2005). Like society, schools are not homogenous groups of individuals with shared identities; rather, they are collections of individuals within a shared culture (Gibson et al., 2005).

How Anti-Muslim Racism Affects the Ummah

Ummah, the Muslim community, is a complex, vibrant, and diverse community that looks different in different places across the United States. U.S. mosques are community centers that offer religious services to support and uplift the lives of American Muslims. Being part of a community and engaging in the activities of a mosque is critical for some members of the

Muslim community, because it provides social and emotional support, especially as Muslims encounter anti-Muslim racism. Muslim Americans who experience discrimination that is based on their Muslim identity or who perceive Muslims as facing discrimination as a group show more support toward other minority groups, including African Americans, immigrants, gays and lesbians, Jews, and Latinx people, signifying that experiences and perceptions of in-group deprivation can result in feelings of intergroup solidarity, rather than individual experiences of anti-Muslim discrimination (Abdelhadi et al., 2020). A research study conducted by Abu-Raiya et al. (2011) examined 138 Muslims living in the United States, found that most of these Muslims experienced adverse interpersonal reactions following the 9/11 attacks, including anti-Muslim comments, airport security checks, discrimination, verbal harassment, hate messages, and damage to mosques, all of which caused some stress.

Anti-Muslim racism disrupts individual, interpersonal, and structural systems, including stress reactivity, identity concealment, social relationships, and institutional policies and media coverage; these factors lead to adverse health outcomes and health disparities, emphasizing the need for attention and action (Samari, 2016). As a result of facing increased discrimination, hate crimes, and violence, U.S. Muslims saw increases in their mental health risks. Research conducted by Sabado et al. (2023) found that Muslims who uphold more Islamic values are less likely to seek mental health treatment; however, there is a significant positive correlation between acculturation to American values and the likelihood of seeking mental health services. Discrimination is linked to higher levels of depression, extending to Muslims (Hodge, 2015). Muslim mental health suffers because of the constant need to defend Islam, leading to stress, isolation, and a feeling of being overwhelmed; Muslims feel anxiety, fear public violence, and feel inadequate in answering questions (Haque et al., 2019). In addition, these issues exacerbate feelings of overwhelmedness and inadequacy that are due to media misrepresentations, distortions of Muslim women, and a false understanding of Muslims as a monolithic group (Haque et al., 2019). Studies showed that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Muslims relied on

religious coping mechanisms and maintained mosque attendance and religious engagement for social support, which is crucial for mental health recovery and reduced disparities (Ali et al., 2022). Muslim families face concerns about their children's future and how they will cope in an environment that does not accept them—an environment exacerbated by negative media and social media sentiments about Islam (Haque et al., 2019).

Anti-Muslim hate has affected the way American Muslims perceive themselves. One study of 145 American Muslims by Mosquera et al. (2017) found that gender plays a significant role in perceptions and emotions regarding in-group social image. In the study, participants believed that they were seen in stereotypical ways, such as frightening and oppressed, more than in nonstereotypical ways; those who believed that Muslims were seen as frightening had a higher level of anger and sadness (Mosquera et al., 2017). The study also found that responses to perceived social image as “oppressed” were moderated by gender, with female participants believing that they were perceived as “oppressed” more than males were (Mosquera et al., 2017). Muslims’ fear of victimization and perceived ethnic discrimination are significant predictors of people changing their names in order to assimilate, a move that is likely to avoid negative treatment or judgment because of their religion or being seen as different (Asfari et al., 2020). Discrimination, particularly offensive name-calling, is linked to higher levels of depression in Muslims, especially when they are criticized and targeted by law enforcement officials (Hodge et al., 2016). Education, fear of negative treatment, victimization, negative media portrayal, and neighborhood factors significantly affect perceptions of the police among first- and second-generation American Muslims (Asfari et al., 2020). The propaganda and negative attitudes toward Islam have led some Muslims to internalize this negativity (Haque et al., 2019).

Different generations and groups of Muslims face and react differently to anti-Muslim racism. Owing to concerns about their children’s safety, many Muslim parents often encourage their children to remain silent when facing stereotypes and microaggressions (Haque et al., 2019). Since 9/11, some American Muslims have had a strong attachment to both their Islamic

beliefs and their American birthright; nonetheless, they have faced increased religious discrimination that has affected their social integration (Bacchus, 2019). Consequently, being categorized, they have transformed their religious identity into a racialized group (Bacchus, 2019). Safety, prayer, and support for Muslims are critical to their psychological resiliency. Muslim college students can address issues and have meaningful college experiences when they have (1) a supportive community, (2) access to a safe environment, (3) Muslim student associations, and (4) the ability to pray (Tanhan et al., 2020). Muslim families face concerns about their children's future and how they will cope in an environment that does not accept them—a dilemma that is exacerbated by negative media and social media sentiments about Islam (Haque et al., 2019).

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, young Muslims who were social media users experienced high stress due to Islamophobia (Eckert et al., 2018). Muslim women, in particular, saw their sense of citizenship and belonging affected and were forced to act as exemplars online in order to live their faith (Eckert et al., 2018). Today, second-generation Muslim-American community leaders incorporate community-building skills learned from their post-1965 immigrant parents' generation and develop approaches to unite Muslims from all backgrounds: "Building from the creation of transnational diaspora religious communities engaging in Islamic revival, second-generation Muslims are integrating these concepts into a movement that is aimed at reframing Muslim identities" (Bacchus, 2019, p. 21). However, young Muslim-American citizens face challenges in forming relationships centered on several considerations: justice and equality; creating conviviality that entails correcting mistakes and improving oneself; accepting ignorance; and acknowledging privileges in work, school, and Muslim spaces (Welji, 2022). As a result, young Muslim-American citizens sometimes separate themselves from the Islamic community in order to connect with the social justice ethics of Islam (Welji, 2022).

Muslim women face different challenges and kinds of religious discrimination than Muslim men do. Women wearing hijabs are more likely to face religious discrimination, especially among Muslims with high English proficiency, as Muslim women may be more “attuned to the implicit and explicit verbal and behavioral messages directed at Muslims” (Hodge, 2023, pp. 9–10). During October 2016 and April 2017, in a research study conducted by Eckert et al. (2018), researchers applied intersectionality theory in conducting 15 focus groups with 61 Muslim participants in Southeast Michigan to understand the role of gender in how Muslims respond to Islamophobia. Nearly half of the female participants expressed fear or worry for themselves and their family members, particularly those wearing hijabs (Eckert et al., 2018). Both genders viewed the 2016 election negatively; however, some men showed optimism before the election, while women never expressed positive thoughts about Trump and reported higher levels of stress than men did (Eckert et al., 2018). Muslims wearing a hijab face mistreatment, as their attire conveys to Americans that their values are different from those of the dominant secular culture in American society (Hodge, 2023).

Muslim women, often as women of color, are navigating a society in which whiteness is normative, Muslimness is misunderstood, and women encounter significant obstacles in personal and professional fulfillment (Ibrahim, 2023). Muslim women face many assumptions from their non-Muslim friends that lead to not only limited support for their marital relationships, but also an encouragement to end their marriages; among these assumptions are that Muslim women are oppressed by their husbands, that any divorce would lead to losing custody of their children, and that any marital issue which arises result from their husbands’ Islamic beliefs (Haque et al., 2019). In a research study conducted by Eckert et al. (2018), six focus groups revealed that more than a third of women felt that they had to be perfect Islamic models, including online, in order to combat anti-Muslim racism, and this pressure was particularly pronounced for women with hijabs, who often displayed good manners and positive attitudes online.

A research study conducted by Dana et al. (2017) found that Muslims with high religiosity believe that Islamic teachings are compatible with political participation in the United States, including multiple acts of political participation, while those with low religiosity feel more isolated from the American political system. Muslims of high religiosity are likely to believe in integrating into politics. Similar to other immigrant-based minority groups, Muslim Americans in the United States adopt democratic values as they gain political incorporation, and this trend continues for second- and third-generation Muslims, demonstrating closer ties to the American political system (Dana et al., 2017).

Muslims Responding to Anti-Muslim Racism

Following 9/11, Muslim Americans have demonstrated their resilience by enhancing community building, engaging in civic life, and advocating for Islamic awareness (Bacchus, 2019). Muslims also focus on community and social justice to dismantle stereotypes and misconceptions. American Muslims engage with both American prophetic tradition and the Islamic prophetic model, turning their attention to community, education, and Dawah in their social justice activism directed toward addressing incarceration, poverty, racism, refugees, and the dislocation of immigrants (Seymour-Jorn et al., 2019). Muslims targeted by structural violence should be seen as resilient individuals “surviving in the face of oppressive structural violence which is in itself an act of resilience and resistance” (Saleem et al., 2022, p. 440). Daily prayer is found to be a protective factor against depression, with praying more frequently being linked to reducing the likelihood of significant depression levels, regardless of the discrimination experienced (Hodge et al., 2016). Muslims rely on family, self-care, and religion, including prayer, as the most significant sources of support during adversity (Sabado et al., 2023).

Following the 9/11 attacks, Muslims felt the desire to protect their religion by enhancing their religious identity through their religious practices, including praying, fasting, participating

in activities at a mosque, and reading the Quran, as these practices provided spiritual support, emotional comfort, and consolation (Abu-Raiya et al., 2011). Some Muslims have viewed microaggressions against Muslims positively, treating them as an opportunity to educate others about Islam and disrupt misconceptions, using personal conversations and influence within their circle (Haque et al., 2019). Discrimination can trigger a spiritual response in some Muslims, reducing its effects on depression and substance use, as spirituality ameliorates stress-related adverse health outcomes (Hodge et al., 2015). In one research study by Haque et al. (2019). Muslims responded to microaggressions by (1) assuring colleagues of their shared horror of terrorist attacks and thereby reducing tension, (2) using action-oriented solutions, (3) striving to maintain a friendly and informative demeanor, (4) addressing insensitive comments with humility and good etiquette, and (5) embodying the positive impact of Islam in their daily lives.

As a way to respond to anti-Muslim racism, Muslims have invested in the growth of building community with fellow Muslims as a way to cultivate their ummah. Integrating religiously driven communal support activities into mosque programming can boost community buy-in and self-efficacy; mosque-based support programs, combined with increased religious involvement, are most protective of American Muslims' mental health (Ali et al., 2022). These values are also at the core of being a Muslim, as taking care of the most vulnerable is essential to Muslimness. Individuals with strong Islamic values and organized mosque activities are more civically engaged, as are individuals who reinforce these same values and encourage fellow Muslims to participate in civic engagement (Read, 2015). As a way to foster a sense of shared responsibility, Muslim communities can collectively take care of their members' physical, mental, and spiritual well-being through social services and welfare, such as fostering orphans, feeding the hungry, providing vocational skills, facilitating marriage, and providing primary medical services and childcare (Wahb, 2023). Volunteer activities at mosques, such as youth outreach, committee projects, and teaching at Sunday School, are beneficial for Muslims who

struggle with mental health and social support, and these same volunteer activities strengthen community relationships (Ali et al., 2022). One Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (2021) research study, entitled “Reimagining Muslim Spaces,” supports mosques and community centers creating inclusive spaces for all community members by creating toolkits to support Muslim community leaders on topics such as women’s inclusivity, civic engagement, community racism, social services, and marital counseling.

In the aftermath of Trump’s first election, Muslim women’s responses to anti-Muslim racism go beyond identification–rejection and include multiple strategies to circumvent, compensate for, and confront stigma; Muslim women use Islamic veiling as both a religious practice for ethical self-fashioning and a cultural toolkit to present a modern self-identification (Unal, 2023). In a research study conducted by Eckert et al. (2018), two-thirds of women in focus groups faced frustration when they tried to educate others, with debates around oppression related to wearing a hijab ultimately becoming tiresome and frustrating for Muslim women, especially in social media. The process of providing informative knowledge about Islam is gendered, with men and women receiving different questions on the basis of their gender standpoint (Bacchus, 2019). Muslims use contextualizing, educating, ignoring, and being an exemplar to cope with Islamophobia online, avoiding content and utilizing humor and solidarity (Eckert et al., 2018). Women’s spiritual care networks preserve the Islamic intellectual heritage for new generations of U.S.-based Muslims, who navigate faith, practices, and values as religious minorities, always emphasizing self-compassion (Ibrahim, 2023).

College campuses facilitate information exchange, cultural diffusion, and activism, allowing Muslim student associations to introduce Islamic practices such as praying and wearing a hijab to non-Muslim students (Bacchus, 2019). Since 9/11, Muslim-American youths in immigrant communities have shifted their self-perceptions and attitudes toward their rights, citizenship, and sense of belonging as they identify as people of color and link their struggles with other racially minoritized communities (Ghaffar-Kucher et al., 2022). Refusing to be

silenced, and shifting from their parents' generation, young Muslim Americans want to challenge systemic racism, liberal multicultural nationalism, prejudiced views within their family and community, and U.S. imperialistic projects (Ghaffar-Kucher et al., 2022). Second-generation Muslim Americans actively advocate for religious inclusion through political activism and civic engagement, using their voting power to voice their religious concerns (Bacchus, 2019).

Muslim youth groups encourage second-generation Americans to revert to Qur'anic scriptures and prophetic stories to boost their faith resilience and overcome challenges in their practice of Islam (Bacchus, 2019). To reclaim a diverse ummah and focus on social justice, young Muslims utilize secular and social spaces, particularly those targeting Muslims, to build community, maintain separation from religious authority, and recruit Muslims and justice-minded allies (Welji, 2022). Second-generation Muslims address the impact of discrimination on themselves and their community by fostering spaces for discussing experiences and learning strategies (Bacchus, 2019). Young Muslim Americans expressed a sense of civic belonging rooted in their position as people of color and their support for equality and justice movements, such as the Movement for Black Lives, the DREAM Act, and environmental justice (Ghaffar-Kucher et al., 2022). Newer Muslim student group leaders are enhancing their faith in Islam on campus through rejuvenating Muslim student associations, hosting events, and engaging in interfaith discussions; these actions address faith-based needs, introduce Islam to non-Muslims, and help students express concerns about their Muslim identity (Bacchus, 2019).

Many Muslim organizations and mosques promote interfaith gatherings and programs to connect individuals of other faiths with Muslims and build relationships with those individuals to break down misconceptions and alleviate fears. Promoting intergroup dialogue and understanding among Americans and increasing contact with Muslims could significantly reduce prejudice against Muslims in the United States (Bulut, 2016). Policies promoting

religious interaction can boost trust among religious groups and are facilitated by individuals' motivation to learn about others' trustworthiness (Thunström et al., 2021). Challenging the perception of Muslims as a threat by highlighting commonalities between ingroups and outgroups can reduce anti-Muslim aggression (Beck et al., 2018). By participating in interfaith dialogues on a larger scale, gaining closeness, and forging long-term relationships, Muslims reduce microaggressions toward them (Haque et al., 2019). Muslim individuals who sought support from other Muslims and non-Muslim Americans, educated others about Islamic practices, and participated in interfaith dialogues experienced enhanced posttraumatic growth after 2001 (Abu-Raiya et al., 2011). Acting as community liaisons, Muslims advocate for antidiscrimination, diversity, and inclusivity, thereby securing political support to protect Muslim Americans' constitutional right to practice Islam (Bacchus, 2019).

Citing Prophet Muhammad (SWT) as a model for Dawah, Muslims use the practice as a religious obligation and moral responsibility that they incorporate into community initiatives and customs (Seymour-Jorn et al., 2019). The Quran is a form of indirect Dawah, as it “did not contain an intention to convert people but unconsciously answered non-Muslims’ long-lasting confusing questions that made them accept Islam” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 14). Chen et al. (2020) reveal that, when non-Muslims and Muslims become closer, direct discussions about Islam are promoted and Muslims act as guides to help non-Muslims understand the five pillars of Islam, closing the gap between fear and conversion. Another finding of this research showed that, because Muslims believe that their actions are a result of following Islamic teachings without the intention to convert others and that God cannot accept any impure deed on Judgment Day, this non-intentionality led some to convert to Islam (Chen et al., 2020).

Storytelling and using counternarratives is a way that Muslims have responded to anti-Muslim racism. Multicultural inclusivity maintains the white subject's centrality, promoting a tolerant, cosmopolitan, urban, and modern subject as the norm (Razack, 2021). Interviewing Muslim leaders in Milwaukee, Seymour-Jorn et al. (2019) used the lens of American prophetic

tradition to share stories of the Muslim community and social justice activism, and highlighted a pluralization of Muslim social activist subjectivity, incorporating civil rights, Islamic motivations, and Milwaukee's specific conditions. By claiming space and visibility through alliance building and advocacy, Muslim organizations in Milwaukee have achieved social inclusion through enabling multiple belongings, including belonging to both their identity group and larger social entities (Seymour-Jorn et al., 2019). Although citizens' ideology is unlikely to change, the media environment and political elites' discourse and interventions targeting media framing and political elite discourse may influence partisans' perception of minorities and help reduce prejudice and conflicts (Bai, 2023).

Coalition building reflects prophetic visions of America, focusing on American Muslims' identities, responsibilities, and futures, as well as on their struggle against anti-Muslim racism against a complex system of oppression and racism (Seymour-Jorn et al., 2019). In response to Muslims facing challenges with incarceration, discrimination, immigration detention, and issues surrounding the building of mosques, Muslim Advocates works through the legal system to stop anti-Muslim racism from affecting Muslims and to address issues facing Muslims in the workplace (Promoting Justice & Equity, 2023). For example, Muslim Advocates filed a complaint with the Florida Commission of Human Rights to demand that Carnival Cruise Line end religious discrimination, including humiliating an American Muslim woman forced to remove her hijab (*Promoting Justice & Equity*, 2023).

Muslims also educate others on social media, where they encourage Muslims to spread their religion and invite others to learn about it (Eckert et al., 2018). Sometimes, they feel that engaging on social media is a constant duty (Eckert et al., 2018). Muslims have become activists in various social spaces, both visible and personal, owing to the practices of Islam (Bacchus, 2019). One blog site sharing stories about Muslim educators' experiences is Teaching While Muslim, whose mission is to include social justice, antiracist, and anti-Islamophobic curricula and educators in public schools (*Teaching While Muslim*, 2023). Through their social media

platforms, they provide stories of Palestinian Muslims as counternarratives to refute the dominant narratives from the media (*Teaching While Muslim*, 2023).

In response to anti-Muslim racism, several organizations mobilized Americans to build a mass movement to eliminate anti-Muslim racism and white supremacy. One organization is MPower Change, which was founded by Linda Sarsour, Mark Crain, and Dustin Craun to combat the Muslim ban that the Trump administration wanted to enforce, and whose purpose is to push for racial justice, technology accountability, immigration reform, combating surveillance, ending wars, and access to voting (*Vision*, 2023). The organization's campaigns directly address anti-Muslim racism, provide information and steps for individuals to take, and currently include #MyMuslimFuture (anti-bullying against Muslim children), #MyMuslimVote (voter registration), #NoMuslimBanever (against Trump's Muslim ban), #NoTechforApartheid (digital organizing against companies that support the Israeli military), #BigTechsellswar (how tech companies provide tools to fuel the war on Muslim communities), and #GazaisPalestine (end Israel's bombardment of Gaza) (*Vision*, 2023).

Anti-Palestinian Racism

Decolonization aims to challenge colonial structures and ideologies while promoting Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and understanding (Qutami, 2024). Many on the left often avoid the issues around Israel and Palestine, but the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel that was launched in 2005 highlights Palestinians' colonialism and apartheid, focusing on nonviolent action and three key demands: ending Arab colonization and dismantling the Wall in Israel, recognizing Arab-Palestinian rights, and promoting Palestinian refugees' return to their homes (Bakan et al., 2024). Events that occurred in Gaza are often portrayed in Western media as a result of the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on Gaza, and this violence has been used to portray Palestinians as a threat to Israel's right to self-defense (Bakan et al., 2024).

Anti-Palestinian racism is a form of discrimination that targets Palestinians and may also affect non-Palestinian allies of Palestinians (Bakan et al., 2024). Anti-Palestinian racism has several elements: racial gaslighting, denial of the Nakba, and apartheid and inequity. Anti-Palestinian racism is characterized by stereotypes and language that dehumanizes Palestinians, erases their human rights, and refuses to acknowledge their collective identity and connection to ancestral lands in occupied or historic Palestine (Bakan et al., 2024).

Resistance to anti-Palestinian racism is often labeled antisemitic, also known as racial gaslighting, a method whereby power inequity is intentionally made unknowable (Abu-Laban et al., 2022). Racial gaslighting maintains the status quo by masking power inequities and blaming victims, rendering Palestinians invisible and repressed in mainstream media (Bakan et al., 2024). Racial gaslighting denies collective experience and memory (Abu-Laban et al., 2022). The claim that criticism of Israel is antisemitic continues to penalize individuals, causing fear among those disagreeing (Bakan et al., 2024). The Nakba, an Arabic term for catastrophe, refers to the 1948 events that forced more than 80% of the Palestinian population to flee and become stateless refugees, marking a significant societal disintegration (Abu-Laban et al., 2022).

Anti-Palestinian racism, which intensified during the past year, denies atrocities, masks inequities, and blames victims (Bakan et al., 2024). Taken as a whole, these tropes create a pattern that fosters a hostile atmosphere: Anti-Palestinian racism harms Palestinians directly but also has an indirect effect on individuals who support Palestinians (Abu-Laban et al., 2022). Naming anti-Palestinian racism as a specific form of racism is “a starting point for combatting it” (Bakan et al., 2024, p. 116).

MusCrit as a Theoretical Framework

As described in my problem-of-practice chapter, I used the Liberatory Design framework to guide my research design. I also use MusCrit to guide my research design and analysis. MusCrit is “a means to explore the experiences of Muslim Americans with a CRT [Critical Race

Theory] lens by sharing six tenets that are unique to the lived reality of this demographic” (Ali, 2022a, p. 343). MusCrit allows for narratives about Muslims: how they perceive themselves and how they interact with their community against the landscape of anti-Muslim racism.

In one narrative inquiry study, Dr. Noor Ali (2018) used Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework and methodology. Her study focused on four female Muslim-American high school students. On the basis of her use of Critical Race Theory, Ali (2022b) proposes the creation of MusCrit as a theoretical framework and methodology. The four Muslim-American high school students shared their experiences, especially against the contemporaneous landscape of the 2016 presidential election. Ali used counternarratives, a tenet of both MusCrit and CRT, as a way for these Muslim students to reclaim their voice and space as they navigate through high school (Ali, 2022b, p. 351). Ali selected qualitative research because she felt that “questions were open ended enough to capture the totality of experience in that they did not probe for struggles alone, but also stories of strength, support, and resilience so that suggestions for change could be offered” (Ali, 2018).

In a similar narrative inquiry study, Ali used another dataset and CRT as a framework and methodology to explore the lived experiences of 15 Muslim-American women who shared stories of being Muslim (Ali, 2022b). With her positionality as a Muslim-American female, she wanted to explore the Muslim-American experience: “White control over the narrative of Muslim Americans either creates a story of oppression of Muslims by other Muslims, or one of terrorism” (Ali, 2021, p. 204). In the study, she focused on students' educational backgrounds to reclaim that space, which otherwise ends up being white centered. One impact of this study was that the participants' stories shared how their lives were changing at such a pivotal time and how they were affected by political and social climates. Although their stories and experiences were different, Muslims are “considered a monolithic entity because of an association to a racialized religion” (Ali, 2021, p. 203).

As a result of conducting both qualitative studies, Ali proposes MusCrit as a way to explore Muslim-American experiences through six tenets: (1) the “systemic nature of racialized oppression against this population which is situated in historical, political, and social inequities,” (2) the role of identifiability as a Muslim, (3) gender stereotypes, (4) the importance of counternarratives for reclaiming space, (5) “whiteness as property and norm,” and (6) the importance of allies (Ali, n.d). This research method helps advance equity and antiracism, as MusCrit “would create space within the academia to acknowledge, validate, and understand the lived experiences of this distinctively marginalized population” (Ali, 2022b, pp. 349–350). Using a framework that understands the complexity of Muslim Americans is vital in storytelling.

The first tenet of MusCrit is that “the systemic nature of oppression against Muslims is centered around a white, historical, prejudiced, and monolithic representation of this population” (Ali, 2022a, p. 6). The white Christian mainstream portrays Muslims as antidemocratic, authoritarian, and barbaric, and leads to caricatured identities, the conflation of Arabs with Muslims, and the portrayal of all Muslims through the lens of monolithic essentialism (Ali, 2022a). The second tenet of MusCrit focuses on how “identifiability plays a vital role in how Muslims are treated,” with hijab-wearing women facing more racist attacks and bigotry compared with Muslim women who go unidentified as Muslims, while Muslim men with religious signifiers, such as beards and names, confront greater surveillance and threats than Muslim men without such signifiers (Ali, 2022a, p. 6). Identifiability affects Muslims differently and may compel individuals into double consciousness: “Unlike pigmentation, Muslims may opt in and out of religious identifiability to protect themselves from racialized threats” (Ali, 2022a, p. 6). The third tenet of MusCrit treats how gender plays a role in “situating oppressive stereotypes on a spectrum,” with Muslim women frequently depicted as oppressed and controlled by men, whereas, in contrast, Muslim men are often depicted as oppressive, aggressive, and irrational, seeking to control and oppress women, and are frequently demonized and vilified in popular media (Ali, 2022a, pp. 6–7).

The fourth tenet of MusCrit focuses on how counternarratives are essential to sharing Muslim stories, as many stories about Muslim experiences (1) are “untold by Muslims themselves,” (2) are “voiced over by a white perspective” that portrays them as oppressed or oppressive, and (3) function as literature in which narratives portray Muslim heroes as exceptions from the ignorant, barbaric mainstream (Ali, 2022a). Often, these narratives originate in distant Muslim countries and tell how the white West saves the protagonists from conservative, anti-education, and anti-freedom Muslims (Ali, 2022a). The fifth tenet deals with the notion that “Whiteness is property and coveted as the norm,” according to which Muslims are often perceived as lacking cultural capital and requiring “whitewashing” to be accepted (Ali, 2022a). Whitewashing practices include Muslims (1) using skin-whitening creams, wearing Western clothing, and speaking in English, (2) refraining from reacting to anti-Muslim racism, (3) self-invalidating their lived experiences, (4) self-othering and seeing themselves as outsiders, and (5) focusing on realizing the American dream (Ali, 2022a, pp. 7–8). The sixth and last tenet of MusCrit points out the idea that the “essentiality of allies in voicing the injustice against Muslims can be seen in all instances of authentic social-political activism” (Ali, 2022a, p. 8). In essence, Muslim voices must be supported by non-Muslim voices to amplify anti-Muslim racism for all to hear (Ali, 2022a).

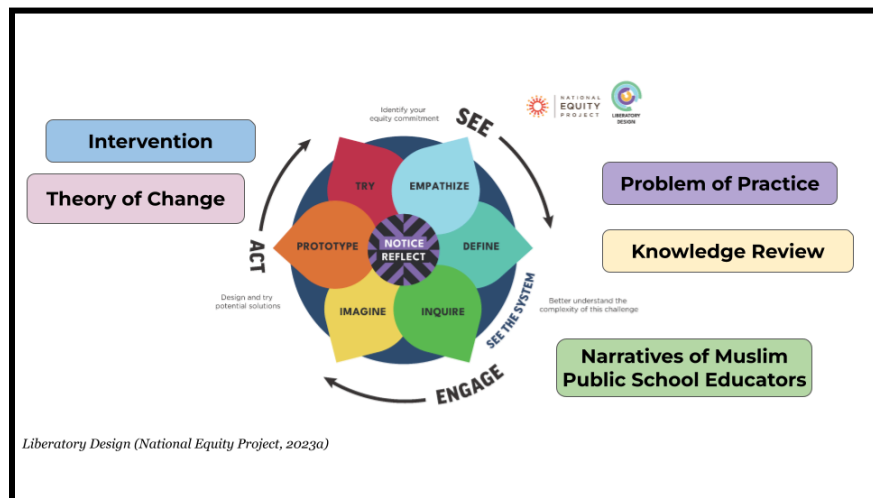
CHAPTER 3: THE STORIES OF MUSLIM PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATORS

Narrative Inquiry Grounded in Islamic Traditions

Utilizing Liberatory Design, I employed the first step: to “see and understand the territory you’re navigating” and “identify your equity commitment” (National Equity Project, 2023a). (See Figure 17.) To understand and unpack the experiences of Muslim public school educators, I conducted 13 empathy interviews over four months. In my Problem of Practice section, I outlined the questions and procedures for conducting these interviews. This section is divided into several subsections: an introduction of grounding narrative coding into my experiences and practices in Islam, the stories of 13 Muslim public school educators, and analyzing the data with the use of MusCrit.

Figure 17

DoP Alignment with Liberatory Design (National Equity Project, 2023a)



Note. Ambereen’s dissertation of practice as it aligns with Liberatory Design.

As part of Liberatory Design, my focus was on the stories, the lived experiences, and the community of American Muslim public educators. For coding my empathy interviews, I read about different types of coding and settled comfortably on narrative coding. Narrative coding draws on inspiration and creativity to create ways to explain diversity, variation, and

phenomena without eliminating them, as sometimes happens with traditional and reductionist approaches (Daiute, et al, 2004). As a writer, English teacher, organizer, and researcher, I found that the narrative approach spoke to me as both authentic and creative. Narratives are a common way for societies and cultures to communicate, and one of the purposes of language is “the creation, communication and reception of stories” (Alleyne, 2015).

Narratives are like books, but a narrative approach is committed to recorded oral stories that follow a structure typical of stories (Bamberg, 2012). In the case of empathy interviews, the oral stories have been recorded and transcribed. The way I asked the questions during an empathy interview led to a setting, problem, reaction, and, possibly, coda of some kind, but not necessarily “a happy ending.” Narrative coding is a literary and language coding method that focuses on literary terms as codes to understand participants’ stories and “is appropriate for exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences, relationships, and actions to understand the human condition through story” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 195). The common functions of narratives include (1) conveying information, (2) providing an outlet to share stories to restore a sense of order following trauma, (3) enabling groups to share stories to define a collective narrative, (4) persuading others by using rhetorical devices, (5) establishing credibility in order to achieve a goal, (6) passing on cultural heritage through storytelling, and (7) offering the storyteller’s “inner reality to the outside world and often also make things clear to narrators themselves” (Gibbs, 2018).

Narrative discourse is the manner in which stories are told and presented, and is important to analyzing stories (Alleyne, 2015). The manner in which individuals narrate their story influences their own perceptions, interpretations, and preparation for events in the future (Daiute, et al, 2004). In stories, a common theme is addressing the “who am I” question, by which characters explore their self-identity and the influences and factors that make them who they become by the conclusion of the story. In research, participants discuss factors and answers to “who am I” questions by discussing past and present events and their impact on them

(Bamberg, 2012). In a narrative showing tensions in the practices of cultural and personal narratives, symbol systems emerge reflecting cultural values that arrange knowledge and identity (Daiute, et al, 2004).

Narrative coding provides participants with a voice, as it “encourages us to take seriously the way people construct and support their identity, because through narration people tell us what kind of person they think they are or would like us to think they are” (Gibbs, 2018). Researchers are interested in stories in order to uncover the complex nature of individual experiences and their social worlds, especially for understanding historical, cultural, and personal processes (Holstein, et al., 2012). Narrative coding can help researchers understand events influencing their participants: “what a story is supposed to accomplish at this point in the interaction (‘Why this story here and now?’) or on the effect that the narrative (and its performance) may have had on the audience/recipient and how it is taken up on in the next interactive move” (Bamberg, 2012). With my research, understanding the ways anti-Muslim sentiment and school-based leadership practices affect Muslim educators is important for establishing an intervention that can create positive change.

Stories are a way for individuals to process their past experiences and share experiences with others, and “careful analysis of topics, content, style, context and the telling of narratives will reveal peoples’ understanding of the meanings of key events in their lives or their communities and the cultural contexts in which they live” (Gibbs, 2018). In storytelling, individuals can share how they are influenced by their social environment in real time as they operate in their social environment, showing us how “the way stories and storytelling both reflect and refract narrative actions and the conditions of narrativity” (Holstein, et al., 2012). When speeches are long and may not fit a conventional narrative structure but have stories, narrative coding can identify metaphors and other literary devices that make the stories clearer and more meaningful (Frost, 2009).

The importance of narratives is rooted in Islamic tradition and lies at the core of its existence. In pre-Islamic Arabic culture, professional storytellers would narrate stories and tales based on forgotten incidents with imaginary elements in a performative manner (Kahar, 2019). One of the practices of being a Muslim is telling and analyzing stories to make learnings that can provide guidance for problems we face every day. We tell stories to express our values, learn morals, develop a deeper connection to Allah, and build community, as “Reciting and listening to the Qur’an is not only an individualistic worshiping ritual but is also a social collective practice that has been scrutinized throughout centuries of Islam” (Ismail, 2023). For example, during Jumu’ah prayer, an Imam or Islamic scholar delivers a 10–15 minute sermon that focuses on a topic with a lesson that Muslims can apply to their daily lives. Muslims typically attend Jumu’ah prayers at the mosque, which plays an important role in Islam, creating the “continuity of the story-telling art/activity, owing to its status as a place of worship, teaching, and for creating religious awareness” (Kahar, 2019). To provide the community with an understanding of the topic—an understanding that can be accessible to children and adults—the Imam would recite examples from stories from the Quran or the Hadith, a collection of small stories in themselves that narrate the sayings and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him, or PBUH). Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) modeled to Muslims how he would turn to listening to the Quran and praying when he faced obstacles and challenges (Ismail, 2023).

The Quran itself has a prosaic style, is a main source of Islamic narratives, contains different kinds of narratives and literary elements of rhyming passages and colorful imagery, and recounts stories of prophets and ancient nations (Kahar, 2019). Listening to stories from the Quran can provide Muslims with emotional relief and also purify the soul (Ismail, 2023). While studying literature and secondary education in my undergraduate program at American University, I read Thomas Clearly’s (1993) *The Essential Koran*, a volume of selected chapters from the Quran translated from Arabic to English and written with the intention of dismantling stereotypes of Islam by making the Quran accessible. The Quran itself was revealed to Prophet

Mohammad (PBUH) through oral storytelling. In one of the chapters of Clearly's text, a poem entitled "Light" is based on a lengthy chapter in the Quran called An-Nur. Clearly (1993) writes, "God is the light/ of the heavens and the earth./ The simile of God's light/ is like a niche in which is a lamp,/ the lamp in a globe of glass,/ the globe of glass as if it were a shining star,/ lit from a blessed olive tree/ neither of the East nor of the West,/ its light nearly luminous/ even if fire did not touch it" (p. 82). As a student, I analyzed this text through literary elements and devices. The lamp itself is a symbol representing an individual's chest, protecting the believer's heart and lit with light from not only any tree, but a blessed one. God's light is ignited in each of us, and it is so bright, brighter than fire itself. As a result of analyzing and internalizing this chapter in Clearly's text and the Quran, I used this stanza as the basis of the novel I wrote for my master's degree at Johns Hopkins. As a Muslim, analyzing the Quran through symbols, metaphors, and character development helped me apply themes that I learned to my life. Reading and analyzing novels has helped me to do the same.

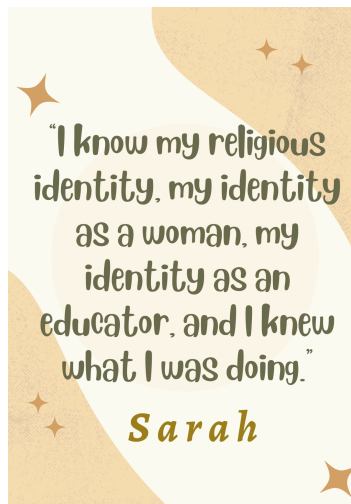
As a researcher, I spent time reflecting over the appeal of narrative coding, and I realized that, as an English teacher, I loved teaching how to analyze literature and write about texts. Students can interpret texts in different ways, connect to ideas and writings, and learn about the human condition. Viewing literature, primary texts, and nonfiction texts through literary and language devices helps us uncover the meaning and impact of a writer's message. Narrative coding is appealing to me, as I used my expertise and experiences as an English teacher, as well as my positionality as a Muslim woman, and applied them to my role as a researcher. Coding can be intimidating and long, but we can make coding enjoyable and reflective in ways that bring in other parts of our identity and knowledge. Reflecting on my notes from debriefing my empathy interviews, I heard stories with settings, time, plot, literary elements, and themes. As a researcher, I can bring all these parts of my identity to do the same as a scholar-activist in a manner that is authentic to the Muslim community.

Sarah's Story

Sarah is the only Muslim educator in her district. She has Muslim students who wear hijabs and get involved politically. But as an educator, she feels that she herself can't participate: "I listen, I support, but then I, like, don't say anything." (See Figure 18.)

Figure 18

Sarah: My Religious Identity (Source: Canva)



Sarah is a third-grade teacher in a suburban area. Her day starts with writing her objectives on the board and preparing materials to get her day right with her students before they arrive at 8 a.m. She previously taught high school, ESL, STEM, trauma, middle school, and fifth grade. She's lived abroad and taught in other countries, and her previous schools have loved the experiences that she brings to them. Now that she is back in elementary school, she provides interventions and enrichment for her students.

Sarah says that parents perceive her positively. Her surrounding area has a sizable Muslim population, as there are several medical programs they gravitate toward in her area. She can take off for Islamic holidays, such as Eid, and she likes to apply henna to her hands to celebrate the occasion. Her students marveled at her henna and attire, and said, "Wow, so cool. Where did you get it?" So often, she is asked for the contact information of the person who does henna. Sarah wears clothes to school that she considers to be a fusion—a combination of

Western and South Asian. Students outside her class love to connect with her because she speaks several languages.

Within the Muslim community, Sarah often gets questions from male parents, asking her, “Why are you not wearing the hijab?” or “Why aren’t your hands fully covered?” She responds in a way that she calls “academically salty,” telling them, “Well, you know, my business is none of your business.” She says she is here to do the work and prefers not to engage in any conflict. A parent whose child attended Saturday school wrote her an e-mail and said he did not want his daughter to be taught by a Muslim teacher who is not wearing a hijab. Sarah was livid, as she said she never expected anyone from her own community to point their fingers at her. She then slept on it and thought about it, but she knew she needed to resolve that problem immediately.

When she saw the parent again, Sarah told the parent, “Hey, that's my business. Your daughter is going to public school anyway, where women will be. They have the freedom—the freedom to dress however they want. There are three to four Muslim educators in [our state]. And you're limiting that, too. So I'm like, you have the right to your opinion. But then, I have the right to what I do. If you don't want your daughter in that program, that's fine.” When asked how she felt about this situation, she said, “I know my religious identity, my identity as a woman, my identity as an educator, and I knew what I was doing.”

Sarah said, “You expect somebody from an outsider to say something like that. My biggest fear was that you have students around you, especially girls. I focus on both boys and girls, especially girls. You have students around you who are watching how you will react and what you will say. You are the role model in the community and our society. And I didn't want it to say anything that would haunt me back. So I like to sleep on it, think about it, and then assertively do something about it.” His daughter stayed in the program.

When asked about a solution to this challenge, Sarah brightened up. She shared her passion for her work with her interfaith community, which comprises members from a

synagogue, mosque, and church. They pulled together training to support members of the community, including sessions focusing on women's mental health issues. The interfaith community is a "community center together, where people of all Abrahamic religions come, and we worship. They join the service separately, or they can do it together." The interfaith community partners with education programs with a university close by, offers volunteering opportunities and fundraising to support the community's food bank, takes care of the community garden, and provides medical services such as flu shots and testing.

Sarah would like to see more awareness and inclusiveness on the part of her colleagues. She opened up about one experience with a colleague on her grade-level team who kept commenting about "what I do, or how I do things, or what I say." She directly addressed the members of the team and appreciated how the others stepped in and said, "Hey, she's right, you know, you shouldn't think this way." Sarah has tremendous support from her administrators and has even received training from her district on understanding her legal rights as an educator. What has helped in her district is having a lot of teachers from other countries, which has brought awareness of different cultures and backgrounds. She wishes her district could retain more teachers of color, especially post-COVID-19. Increasing wages and providing more incentives for graduate-level educators would help.

Although the school day ends at 3 p.m., Sarah keeps some students after school, especially since the pandemic. Students who have transferred also stay with her after school to receive extra instruction. Since the pandemic, she can take her classes outside to teach or read. Sarah takes pride in volunteering with the interfaith community by helping students with their homework, preparing them to take college preparation exams, and working with graduates to take exams to enter graduate school. She says volunteering is just part of her life now. For Sarah, being part of an interfaith community "feeds my soul. That would be the right word. It ties in with what I do and indicates the path to give back."

Rosa's Story

Rosa has her everyday teacher duties and then, as an educator, has other layers of intersectionalities. Presenting herself as an outspoken Muslim female who wears the hijab, she deals with microaggressions daily. Rosa's current school district did not want to hire her initially. Her principal said that he didn't know what ideologies Rosa would be promoting as a hijab-wearing Muslim. Unfortunately, Rosa received similar feedback when she applied and taught in other states' public school systems.

Figure 19

Rosa: My Authentic Self (Source: Canva)



With colleagues, Rosa works hard to earn respect. Once, a male colleague harassed her female colleagues, and when she talked to him, he labeled her "aggressive." When Rosa approached the district central office, all they did was talk to him and assured her that a complaint would go into his file. Nothing came of it. After that incident, her colleague continued to make outwardly racist comments. So, while she's managing everyday teacher duties, Rosa is also dealing with these "constant layers of having to explain myself because nobody understands

where I'm coming from, or they don't see what I see as important. Or they don't see that microaggression because they're busy giving somebody an excuse.”

This part of the day keeps Rosa on edge and watching her back constantly. These are the moments where Rosa says, “I can never just be my authentic self ever. I'm always protected and guarded.”

When Rosa greeted a Muslim student with “Assalamu alaikum,” another student accused her of being too religious. She has to curb her speaking in Arabic to her students, as she got into trouble once. A student accused her of cursing him out in Arabic, which she didn't do. That resulted in an administrator observing her classroom for two days without telling her why. On the third day, Rosa approached the administrator at her classroom door and said she would see him after class. He didn't respond. Rosa reflected on the situation: “These things happen to me regularly.”

During Trump's first term, in Rosa's AP environmental science class, a group of students was disrespectful to her, using words such as “terrorists” and making light of Trump's Muslim ban policy, in order to make students laugh. After a time, the other students got tired of it. Rosa went to her administrators and told them, “You need to fix this. You need to talk to them.”

The administrators were too scared to speak to the students and their parents, so Rosa turned to the students' guidance counselor, who, as it turned out, also didn't want to help her. As a result, Rosa went through all the students' schedules to see if they could be shifted around. She didn't remove the students from her classes but split them into different sections of her AP environmental science class. One of these students came up to Rosa a year after he graduated and told her that he didn't see eye to eye with her on many issues, but that he had a lot of respect for her because she didn't give up on him.

When asked how she felt about this student's comment, Rosa said there are times when someone knows they must do the right thing. She has no regrets but does not feel proud or good because of what the students put her through. Rosa reflected on how she shouldn't have to hear

hateful things from a child one-third her age, just for them to get a laugh from their peers. She was grateful that the majority of the class didn't put up with the behavior of this small group of students. Instead, they told the students to stop saying hurtful and racist things.

Community perceptions of Rosa vary. In the community, a conservative group of Christians claims that people like her are a threat and influence students adversely. They argue that Rosa shouldn't wear a hijab and self-identify outwardly as a Muslim. The majority of Rosa's school community sees Rosa as a great teacher. Rosa said their parents give her a lot of support, as they see how much their children like her and talk about her in their conversations. Some parents who are outwardly racist won't engage with her at all and sidestep carefully around her.

When asked what would keep her in the classroom, Rosa said she wants school leaders to look at her as a teacher and a human being. Rosa sees her colleagues as trained professionals, but many are written up as not highly effective if they don't sponsor several clubs and participate in district committees. Not taking on extra responsibilities makes educators vulnerable to losing their jobs.

At her school, Rosa started a chapter of the Muslim Student Association (MSA), a group of students who self-identify as Muslims. Around Eid, they hold sessions on educating staff and students about Islam. As a Muslim educator, Rosa wants school leaders and administrators to understand who Muslims are and to understand the Muslim community. In her mosque, 32 different countries are represented. Rosa wants school leaders to learn more about Muslims and what Muslim educators go through, in order to identify better supports for educators. Muslim parents reach out to Rosa all the time to ask for help with their children and the school system, making Rosa feel like a person stuck in the middle.

School districts fail to acknowledge implicit bias, Rosa said. At her school, students have affinity group spaces; in these spaces, not all students who participate are members of the group's identity. For example, 20% of students participating in the MSA are not Muslim but rather are Christian, Sikh, or Hindu. Yet, because they are all brown, they want to be part of a

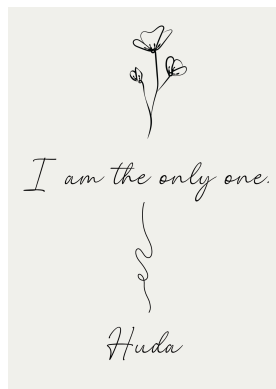
group in which they don't have to explain themselves. They are kids. Rosa sees resistance to affinity-based spaces from her district because district leaders don't understand and have no training in implicit bias. Ultimately, Rosa wants her students to create a space that feels safe for them, just as she wishes she had in her workplace. When asked about her authentic self, Rosa said, "My authentic self is somebody who can openly be Muslim. I can make a joke. I can be with my Arab students and make them feel comfortable at school."

Huda's Story

Huda's day starts at 7:30 a.m. in her classroom. Before her 17 students arrive at 9 a.m., she prepares for the day and copies various materials. As a first-year teacher, she inherited the classroom from a teacher who had suddenly left. The closet was crammed with materials for multiple grades. Huda had to dedicate much of this early morning preparation to cleaning and reorganizing. (See Figure 20.)

Figure 20

Huda: The Only One (Source: Canva)



For Ramadan, Huda decorated her classroom and had a countdown to Eid. Huda told her students about Ramadan and Eid because it was a big deal to her. Her students asked her what she would eat for Suhoor (the meal before fasting). A parent reached out to Huda and thanked her for providing another religious perspective and for teaching about another faith's

holiday and how people celebrate it. Huda loves to wear ethnic clothing to school, and her colleagues and students love the different colors, prints, and fabrics. As curious 6- 7- and 8-year-olds, her students ask broad, open-minded questions about her clothing, as well as her henna whenever Huda applies it to her hands.

Huda is the only Muslim educator in her school. She keeps a prayer mat, prayer beads, and hijabs in her cabinets. Whenever she needs to pray, she closes her door. Sometimes, a colleague or student knocks on her door, but they leave if she doesn't answer. She values her ability to do that. Huda wishes that the school system would know about Muslim educators and hire more of them. Huda wants to connect with another Muslim educator, especially during Ramadan. She feels that teaching is so draining and that her energy and patience are gone by the end of the day. She wants to connect with a Muslim educator who teaches like her and who understands her struggles. But, Huda said, "I am the only one."

Huda is still learning about her school's community. She attended Title I schools as a student, so having come to a vastly different and privileged community, she is careful of making any mistakes. Her colleagues have faced backfire for a simple mistake, and they advised her to be wary of what she says and how she presents herself in front of her students' parents.

As an individual heavily connected to different social media apps, Huda joined specific WhatsApp and Facebook groups supporting Muslim families whose children attend public schools. She's observed that many Muslim families have concerns about curriculum and content. Because they know that Huda is a teacher, they would reach out, ask questions, and voice their concerns. Huda has continuously offered the same advice: Reach out to your child's teacher, ask questions, and reach out to the school board and the county's local governance. When asked why she wants to support the Muslim community, Huda replied, "As a Muslim community, we're still the minority. We're not heard as much as a group of influential, entitled white people are. They will be heard much more than we are."

Huda is happy to be a resource for Muslim parents, but it hurts that she cannot give them as much support and resources as she wants, because she is a new teacher. She encourages parents to teach their children about their faith when they think the school is teaching or doing something against how they want to raise their children. She encourages parents to share stories from the Quran and Hadiths to make messages easy and straightforward so that young children can understand them and so that the stories won't intimidate them. Teaching at home early on is essential to setting up the foundation. Huda teaches Muslim parents to communicate in ways that make their children comfortable so that their children will come to them when they have concerns or questions. Huda would like to see more outreach to mosques and Muslim parents. She wants the district to provide resources for older siblings, who often take responsibility in helping their younger siblings navigate the school system.

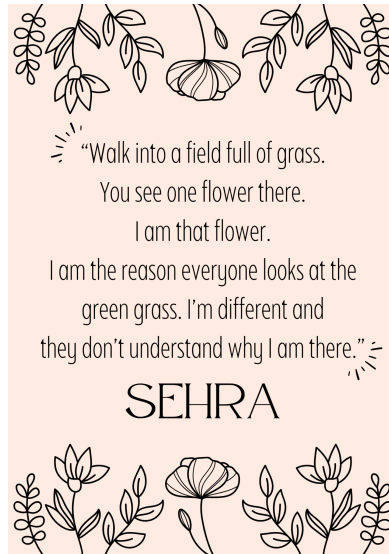
Huda struggles with possible changes coming to her school district and with some decisions that may contradict her religious beliefs. She worries about facing Allah one day: "What do I say, that just for the purpose of money, I sold my faith? And everything that I've learned throughout life about what is right, I sold that just for a few dollars? Knowing that, I don't think my conscience would let me sleep at night. I know it's wrong."

Sehra's Story

When Sehra sees herself in the mirror, she doesn't see herself as covered. She sees herself as an educator. Her students interrupt her as she teaches, to ask, "What is this on your head? Do you have hair?" Then she explains, "I'm Muslim. I'm covered. This is me. I'm here not because I'm Muslim. I'm here because I'm an educator first."

Figure 21

Sehra: I am That Flower (Source: Canva)



Sehra's children attended her school, prompting Sehra to volunteer there. She was timid and wouldn't talk to anyone. The school loved her so much that they asked her if she had a degree. Sehra said yes but didn't want to work, as she was tired of teaching in the country she moved from to the United States. In the United States, she was afraid that people would see her only as a Muslim, as a teacher who covers. Sehra was also fearful of what parents and families would say. After positive volunteering experiences, Sehra opened up and realized how much everyone loved her. The front office treated her to lunch on her birthday. Sehra realized that this was her second family and her second home. When the school offered her a teacher's assistant position, that was the first time Sehra started to not see herself in their eyes as a Muslim who wears a hijab. Sehra began to see her personality through their eyes. Now, Sehra sees herself differently: "Walk into a field full of grass. You see one flower there. I am that flower. I am the reason everyone looks at the green grass. I'm different and they don't understand why I am there." (See Figure 21.)

When Sehra was a teacher assistant, her students liked to dress up their characters in a school app wearing a headscarf or bandanas. They would show her and say, "Ms. Sehra, I'm matching with you." When they wore a headscarf to match her, she didn't stop them from doing so; it would make her smile.

As a third-year classroom teacher, Sehra wants the best for her students. Sehra's students ask her questions about her religion because she wears a hijab. Her students share how they go to church and want to know where she goes to practice her faith. When Sehra tells them she goes to a mosque, her students follow up by asking what a mosque is. Sehra says, "It's a kind of church, you know.' I do explain it, but I don't go further."

Sehra's colleagues ask her many questions about her clothes and wonder why she wears a lot of clothing, especially when it's hot. Sehra tells them that she only shows her face and her hands, "Period. That's it. Yes. Not my toe. Not my leg. That's why I always wear closed toes." As the teachers cleaned their classrooms, one colleague was confused about why Sehra didn't wear a sleeveless shirt, especially when no students or adults were around. Sehra explained that wearing loose pants and a cardigan was comfortable for her. Sehra constantly describes her clothing choices and justifies why she wears what she wears because of the lack of her colleagues' understanding of Muslim culture and the Muslim community. Although Sehra feels that her colleagues are highly educated, they are not educated about Muslim people.

When Ramadan was approaching, Sehra always wrote a long e-mail to her colleagues about the purpose of Ramadan and how people fast. She debunks misconceptions about fasting for 30 consecutive days and explains how Muslims break their fast. In a joking way, Sehra assures them that Muslims do survive fasting but then thoughtfully explains that she may need to take days off. Sehra explains that her non-Muslim colleagues get Christmas and get to spend time with their families, but Muslims don't get official time off for Eid. Accordingly, Sehra uses her personal leave to take off for Eid and pulls her children out of school. Sehra has to assure her kids that it's ok to skip school for Eid, and she explains that it's supposed to be a day of rest, a day to spend with family. Sometimes, when she takes leave for Eid, there isn't a substitute teacher, so Sehra feels the need to explain to her colleagues why they have to split her classes and cover them for her.

Sehra hopes to see school districts appreciate and recognize Muslim teachers. Students need Muslim teachers because they represent different cultures and that diversity helps students see different perspectives. Sehra speaks three languages. She wants school systems to “show up” for Muslim teachers and support them explicitly. In thinking about other Muslim educators, Sehra says that wearing a hijab identifies her clearly as a Muslim, which prompts people to approach Sehra and ask her to teach them about Islam.

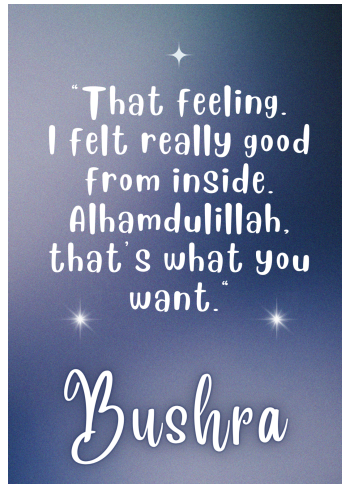
At her school building, Sehra loves to walk by the library. In the center of the library is a wall with a hijab-wearing character from a book, among different characters from other books. Sehra feels so proud of herself when she sees the mural because she sees herself in the picture: “I’m the hijabi girl.”

Bushra’s Story

Bushra starts her day with what she calls her “due diligence.” She prays Fajr, reads the Quran, and recites her list of duas. After prayer, Bushra feels she can jump into her public life. She gets up at 4 a.m. to start working, breaks for Fajr, and then gets ready for work. To Bushra, ensuring that her hijab is perfect and coordinates with her outfits is essential. For the past 11 years as a special educator, Bushra has facilitated IEP meetings and likes to present herself professionally. Feeling the pressure as a Muslim educator who wears a hijab, Bushra wants to convey her dedication to students and is a perfectionist in setting an example of Muslims. (See Figure 22.)

Figure 22

Bushra: Alhamdulillah (Source: Canva)



With fourteen students in her current caseload, Bushra has a binder for each student and uses data from her binder in conversations with parents and colleagues to support her observations. In those moments, Bushra feels that she shines. She knows that, when families enter her classroom, they may feel different. Even though Bushra has communicated regularly through e-mails, first face-to-face meetings are more intensive. Parents like to talk to her in her classroom and get to know what she teaches students. Bushra's three children are in college now, but she remembers that when they were in school she also wanted to meet their teachers. She keeps that in mind when she first interacts with her parents. She understands where parents and family members are coming from.

Bushra senses that, if she makes a mistake, it will affect her reputation. During the first IEP meeting with a principal, she made a mistake. After the meeting, Bushra apologized to the principal, who said, "If you don't make mistakes, how would you learn?" That line stuck with Bushra, who repeats the same statement to her students. Bushra is thankful that she could fast the entire month of Ramadan. At the beginning of Ramadan, one paraeducator who teaches with Bushra was deeply concerned that Bushra would be too tired to teach. At the end of Ramadan, the same educator told Bushra that she was more patient this month. Her colleagues asked her many questions during Ramadan, such as "Why are you fasting?" and "Are you a vegetarian?" Bushra eats halal, so she explains and educates her colleagues. When Bushra hears

compliments, she feels good because it connects to her Muslim identity. She feels she is doing Dawah through her actions and that Allah will accept her good deeds.

When asked about professional support, Bushra said Muslim educators want to be recognized and share their experiences. “We are doing so much right now,” she explained, “But when we go out to our community, it’s like, people just brush you off.” Bushra would like to see a network of Muslim educators meeting monthly or quarterly. She would like a forum where Muslim educators meet and discuss how to uplift the Muslim community and their community of Muslim educators. Bushra has observed how disconnected Muslim families are from public schools. At the mosque, the superintendent attended a parent meeting, and parents shared how they were struggling with understanding the curriculum and navigating the school system.

Bushra feels that Muslim educators should have a network that parents can turn to and receive support, especially if their children are receiving special education services. Muslim parents are afraid of their children being labeled if they receive services. Bushra acknowledges that parents fear the stigma of labeling but don’t understand that these services help their children succeed. Bushra wants to create an open forum for Muslim educators to share topics with Muslim families—and even just a support group for Muslim educators. That’s Bushra’s hope: open communication.

As Bushra reflected on being a Muslim teacher, she said it’s hard to balance family life and her “public life” as an educator. She is grateful to her family, which takes over responsibilities when she can’t. But sometimes it’s hard to stay upbeat. She is encouraged by seeing more Muslims become educators, and that’s her hope: to see more Muslims teach in public schools.

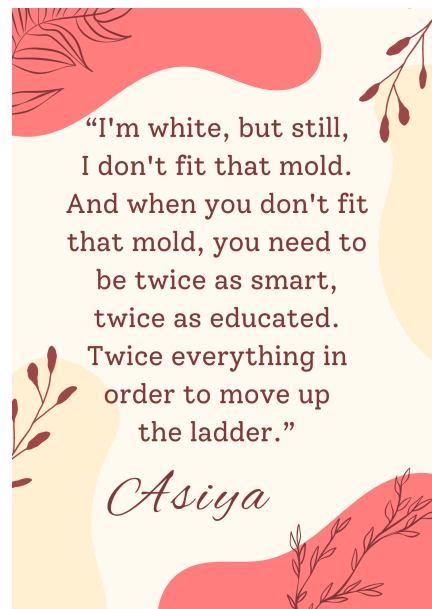
Asiya’s Story

Asiya has questioned herself about teaching in public schools: “Why am I doing this? Am I doing the right thing to teach in public schools and not teach in a Muslim school—not give back

to my Muslim community?” Every time she felt that doubt, she prayed. And every time, she goes back to the first revelation of the Quran, when the angel Gabriel told Muhammad (peace be upon Him) to “read.” As a special educator, Asiya is aware of literacy problems across the United States and considers them endemic. Every day, Asiya tests students for dyslexia and has to enroll them in special education. As an educator, Asiya evaluates and provides special education services and manages a caseload of students. So, she must teach literacy. (See Figure 23.)

Figure #23

Asiya: Twice Everything (Source: Canva)



Asiya’s students ask her lots of questions about her hijab and whether she is from a different country. She uses the opportunity to explain her faith; often, her students don’t understand her religion. Asiya describes using questions, such as “Do you go to church?” and then explains how her religion is similar to theirs. Some students would tell her she wasn’t a good person if she wasn’t Christian. Asiya would pull up Google images and videos on YouTube to show pictures of Muslims all around the world. Many students ask Asiya what her hair looks like, so she keeps a copy of Hena Khan’s children’s book *Under My Hijab*, which shows how and

why women wear their hijabs. Muslim students are excited to see her in the hallways because they haven't had a Muslim teacher in their buildings. Asiya herself was excited to have a Muslim student in her caseload finally, and he, too, fasted his first fast during Ramadan. So, she got him a book about fasting your first day and signed it.

Asiya is still looking for her next steps as a special education educator. She has a leadership certificate, took classes after earning her master's degree (all of which she paid for herself), and is qualified to be a principal but doesn't want to be one. Moving up the ladder is challenging. When asked questions, she feels that she is perceived as pointing out wrong things when she really wants to learn more. If she does share an insight, her colleagues become competitive. She wishes someone would ask her, "Asiya, what are your professional goals? What do you want to achieve?" She would appreciate a coach to think through projects. Asiya is easily dismissed for her ideas and solutions to problems she sees and is told that administrators must take care of them.

In her state, Asiya has seen a push in bilingual education for Spanish and multicultural education, but there hasn't been a focus on recruiting, supporting, and retaining Muslim educators. Potential Muslim educators need scholarships and funding to develop their careers as educators. Asiya recognizes her privilege of being light skinned, even though she is easily recognizable as a Muslim because she wears a hijab: "I'm white, but still, I don't fit that mold. And when you don't fit that mold, you need to be twice as smart, twice as educated. Twice everything in order to move up the ladder."

Therefore, Asiya created her own pathway and network through podcasts and social media, sharing her passion for literacy advocacy with followers nationwide. Her media presence has allowed her to interview researchers and top officials in the literary field about what they can do to prevent dyslexia. As a result, Asiya has received much public recognition from government agencies. Her work is featured in her state special education newsletter, which reaches more than a thousand school districts. When researchers listen to her about why IQ tests are not good,

they use her information and data in their own work and support her. Asiya knows she's the only Muslim educator in this space. She wants to see Muslim educators become involved in advocacy.

In the Muslim community, Asiya sees Muslim educators promoting private schools and vouchers, because they don't understand how important it is to fund public schools and raise children to be strong Muslims. Asiya feels that her own public school education prepared her to be comfortable in the Muslim community and develop her own identity among non-Muslims. She helps run the Sunday School program at her mosque and hosts discussions on balancing public school with an Islamic education. She sees that full-time Muslim schools need teacher training and curriculum development and wants more focus on weekend schools. She has to support Islamic Sunday schools. Asiya has written textbooks and other books, created a website with resources, and coaches instructors. Balancing public school education and Islamic education is essential for Muslim students. Asiya also teaches about the history of Islam in America to help Muslim youths develop pride in their identity. She says, "They need to walk away from public school, know about Muslim civilizations and about their Muslim heritage, and analyze biases in information provided to them."

Layla's Story

When Muslim students approach Layla in the hallway and "say 'Salam,'" Layla feels pride: "I feel for them. It gives them more possibilities. They don't feel as isolated." A teacher who teaches English as a second or foreign language, Layla finds it challenging to be a Muslim and a teacher in public schools. As a child growing up enrolled in public schools, Layla noticed that no one talked about religion and that people were religious but separated their faith from school. When Layla became a Muslim as an adult, she felt a shift. Things that she did before, celebrating Halloween or Christmas, changed for her. As a child, she participated in choirs singing Christmas songs. But Layla soon realized she didn't sing songs like "Gloria" for religious

reasons, even though they were spiritual. Layla said, “I feel like the hardest part about becoming Muslim was that now I had to make a conscious decision to break these rules I had practiced in Islam. All of a sudden, I have guilt.” (See Figure 24.)

Figure 24

Layla: Inclusion (Source: Canva)



After returning to the United States from Saudia Arabia, where she lived for five years, Layla applied for an elementary school position. The principal knew she was Muslim. Layla refused to participate in Halloween and e-mailed her colleagues, letting them know that students who were not participating could come to her classroom and color. Layla knew of religious Christians who didn’t participate. The principal interjected, saying that these students should come to the office. Layla felt that the students were punished for exercising their religious rights. She was fired the next week and then rejected from the entire district. The principal wrote up several reasons, but Layla knew it was because they were not tolerant of her. They were at ease with her wearing a hijab, but they were antagonistic to her not assimilating into their culture. Layla said, “I think that when school leaders talk about inclusion, they don't mean inclusion. Right?”

Layla’s district has increasingly become less conservative in addressing LGBTQ+ rights and embracing holidays of various faiths outside of Christianity. Staff refused to say “Happy

Eid” to students, and school leaders won’t acknowledge that they have information about Muslim holidays. When Ramadan occurs each year, Layla has to disrupt misconceptions about fasting. Administrators focus on portraying Muslims in negative ways that reinforce negative stereotypes about their own Muslim students. Layla wants to push her administrators to do more and wants them to take steps to make Muslim students feel included. But she’s conflicted: If she pushes for staff to say “Happy Eid,” then Muslim students may feel pressured to say “Merry Christmas” in return. Layla said, “I feel like it just compounds the fact that these kids feel like outsiders.”

When asked why she thought administrators acted this way, Layla said it’s that they hate Muslims. Many administrators have Trump and MAGA signs in their offices, which surprised her. Many of her colleagues have Trump stickers on their cars. The local media portray Muslims in a negative light. Layla said, if she were a Muslim student, she would be scared.

Layla’s colleagues want to teach novels and texts about Muslims in foreign countries but select texts that reinforce gender tropes. They claim that these texts are uplifting stories. Layla disagrees and contends that it’s cultures, and not Islam, that create gender stereotypes. Layla had to defend her decision not to teach these texts to students, as she didn’t want to discuss her faith with them. Her colleagues feel that they are doing good, but, counterintuitively, they are harming students. In one of her colleagues’ classes, a student was from Afghanistan, and the experience of reading a book caused her harm. Students and colleagues apply what’s horrible and traumatizing in these stories to the students and educators they work with. Layla constantly battles stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and uneducated. She points to her experiences in Saudi Arabia, where she saw women respected. Sharing these examples helped her colleagues understand her perspective.

Her community has a sizable Muslim population, and she has a lot of Muslim students in her school. Layla put her own children in Islamic school through fifth grade. She wanted them to have a solid Islamic education, which is one reason they previously lived in Saudi Arabia. Layla

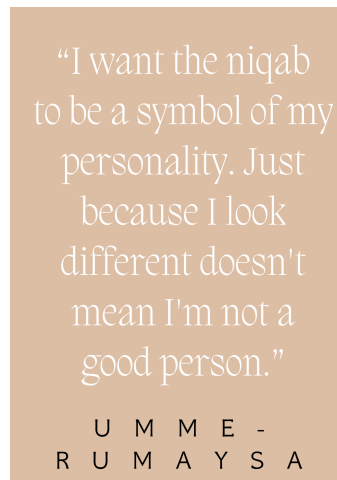
feels that, if the school district provides an accommodation for those who take Eid off, it comes with a price: an expectation of being forced to assimilate. She knows her Muslim community wants Eid off, but she acknowledges that the Muslim community doesn't see which day it is until close to the date, making it hard for a school system to establish the calendar. Instead, she wants to see floating holidays that any student or educator can take off. She wants to see policies that teachers do not give tests or homework on Eid. Currently, in her district, it's up to the individual teacher, and if most principals and school leaders have a bias toward Muslims, then they are not supportive. Layla said, "It's just not inclusive."

Umme-Rumaysa's Story

Umme-Rumaysa has loved being an assistant teacher in a kindergarten classroom for the past eight years. She's happy to be there when she enters the building, no matter what kind of traffic or awful night she had. Umme-Rumaysa believes everything she does goes back to her faith. If she smiles, she represents her Muslim values and conveys a positive aura and energy. Over the past few years, Umme-Rumaysa transitioned to wearing a niqab—a face covering. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Umme-Rumaysa started to wear a hijab with tunics and baggy pants. After a while, outside the school building, she wore an abaya, what she calls a "Harry Potter robe," using humor and an analogy for other people to understand. But she would take off the abaya in her class. Then, she started wearing an abaya all the time. Umme-Rumaysa told her principal that she would change her attire, but it wouldn't affect her performance as an educator. Her principal was supportive and assured her that the children would love her regardless. Returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic, Umme-Rumaysa started wearing a niqab, since everyone wore face masks. Umme-Rumaysa's mother was worried about her safety and told her to wear a mask instead of a niqab. Umme-Rumaysa had to assure her mother that she knew what she was doing. Umme-Rumaysa told herself, "I'm doing this for Allah. And if Allah wills, he's gonna protect me, and there's no human power that can."

Figure 25

Umme-Rumaysa: My Niqab (Source: Canva)



Some of Umme-Rumaysa's students will ask her, "Do you believe in God?" and Umme-Rumaysa responds with a yes. Her students follow up with a question, asking if she goes to church and saying that, if she doesn't, she is a bad person. Umme-Rumaysa follows up by explaining how she goes to a place similar to a church. She speaks in a vocabulary and context that make her students comfortable. When students ask questions about her niqab, Umme-Rumaysa shows her badge with a picture of her face to tell them, "I'm just like you." Her students have seen her fix her hair. When no men are around, Umme-Rumaysa will flip her niqab, and her students will see her face. Her students have drawn pictures of themselves with her as a giant blob with eyes. Umme-Rumaysa adores these pictures and frames them.

When interacting with her students' families, Umme-Rumaysa is conscious that she doesn't shake hands with men and tries to be overly friendly to come across as a good person. Because people can't see her face, she tends to be excited and passionate about her students in her tone and body language so that families can see how happy she is. Umme-Rumaysa wants parents to feel that their children are safe with her. One thing that eases the pressure is that she is not the lead teacher, so parents don't pay as much attention to her. Umme-Rumaysa feels more Americanized, despite what people think of her appearance.

She suspects everyone in her school fully embraces her as they see her transition to wearing a niqab. Umme-Rumaysa can easily step away for a few minutes to pray in her teacher's storage closet, even though she is permitted to use a room in the building. Umme-Rumaysa instead prayed quickly and returned to the classroom. She also doesn't want to take advantage of the support she's been given by her school. Umme-Rumaysa uses humor to help people open up to her.

Umme-Rumaysa wears mainly black niqabs, although she feels pressured by her friends and colleagues to buy them in different colors. Her principal commented that she was fine with her wearing abayas and niqabs but would like to see her in other colors to be more "presentable." Umme-Rumaysa thought she meant well, but it is difficult for her to find affordable, high quality, different-colored niqabs and abayas. Umme-Rumaysa prefers to buy them from Saudi Arabia or Dubai, as she finds the materials in the United States to be of poor quality. Umme-Rumaysa feels that more colors in her wardrobe could help others in meeting and accepting her at an open house, school picnic, or community event, especially if she becomes a teacher. First impressions matter; she doesn't want to be viewed as hostile. She wants to convey the idea, "I'm happy I want to be here. I'm not here because I work here. I'm here because it's an active choice. And I feel that color makes people feel like you're involved, and color shows people feel like you're excited."

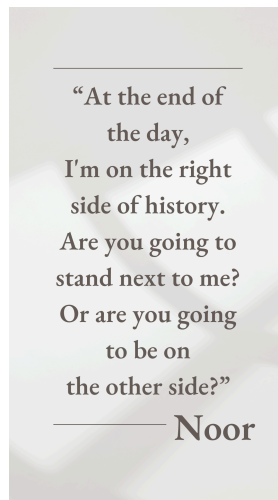
Umme-Rumaysa wants to bond with fellow Muslim educators—with "someone who gels with me." In the future, Umme-Rumaysa intends to earn her teacher's license and teach kindergarten. Ultimately, she wishes people would understand that we should be open minded and not judge on the basis of appearances: "I want the niqab to be a symbol of my personality. Just because I look different doesn't mean I'm not a good person." (See Figure 25.)

Noor's Story

Noor has been a public school teacher for more than 26 years. Initially, when she started her career as a teacher, she taught in a K–12 Muslim private school, but she left when she realized that she could give Dawah as a teacher in public schools by wearing her hijab. Twenty years ago, Noor had difficulty getting hired in public schools. One summer, Noor had 15 phone interviews, and administrators would praise her resume and recommendations. But when an administrator met her face to face, they would tell her, “I’m sure you are applying to other schools,” and wouldn’t hire her. Noor’s sibling suggested she remove her hijab for an interview, but Noor said, “If they’re not going to hire me for me, and for who I am, then I don’t want to work for them.” (See Figure 26.)

Figure 26

Noor: I’m on The Right Side of History (Source: Canva)



Noor was the first hijab-wearing teacher in her school and district, and she was often viewed as a disciplinarian. Her assistant principal constantly sent students of other teachers to her classroom, as she knew Noor could handle it. One colleague told Noor that she was nothing like what she saw in the news, as Noor was outspoken, stated her mind, and was not meek or

quiet. Noor told her how the news isn't always accurate and her husband doesn't control her. Her colleague disagreed, saying that the news portrayal was typical and truthful, whereupon Noor differed. By building relationships and establishing her reputation with them, Noor overcame her colleagues' perceptions and stereotypes. Noor humanizes herself, putting herself out there so that everyone can learn about her and community members can see that what they see in the media is not the norm.

At a school fundraising event, Noor volunteered to sell tickets with the school's business manager. The white parents and families would hand the money to the business manager instead of her. The business manager became frustrated, but Noor explained how some people don't want to interact with her, thinking that she would steal their money. After the event, Noor felt so terrible that she visited her mother in order to feel comforted and loved. Since then, she hasn't volunteered for another fundraiser.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Noor supported the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement by showing a BLM flag on her Zoom background. Parents complained, and her principal asked her to remove it. Being involved in her union, Noor understood her rights and refused to do it. The school district had to adopt a policy that all teachers must have a neutral background. So, Noor covered it up with white butcher paper. When asked by her administrator why it was all white, Noor said, "You whitewashed my wall. That's why it's all white." Then, parents and the community supported and fought for her. They rallied, protested, wrote e-mails, and made phone calls. As a Muslim teacher, Noor was humbled that these parents were helping her and she felt that this was an example of the positive impact Muslim educators can have on the community. Her superintendent was shocked, and Noor told him that he wasn't making the best decisions for students: "At the end of the day, I'm on the right side of history. Are you going to stand next to me? Or are you going to be on the other side?"

Noor is a teacher and administrator in a heavily Muslim-populated area. Muslim parents have reached out to her, even when their children are not on her caseload. They need help

navigating whatever issue they have with a class or teacher. The biggest struggle Noor sees with Muslim families is language barriers, making them feel helpless. That puts extra responsibilities on Noor, but she loves helping them, as she thinks the Muslim community must care for one another. Noor has been able to advocate for Muslim students, especially with Jummah prayer. The Muslim Student Association (MSA) arranges a different student to lead Jummah every week, and students can leave class to attend. During Ramadan, students have a place to pray every day and they avoid the cafeteria for lunch. None of this would have happened if it weren't for Muslim teachers advocating on their behalf to the administration, which is why, Noor says, hiring Muslim educators is essential.

Noor wants to be heard. She recognizes that her experiences are different from those of other Muslim educators nationwide. How can we improve Muslim educator experiences if we are unaware of them? Noor knows that her white male supervisor won't understand her challenges if she doesn't explain them. By doing so, they can identify and co-design solutions. Having a seat at the table is essential, and if Muslim educators don't use their voices, they may become frustrated and leave the classroom. If so, then, said Noor, "It's detrimental to the educator, and it's detrimental to the students that would benefit from that educator."

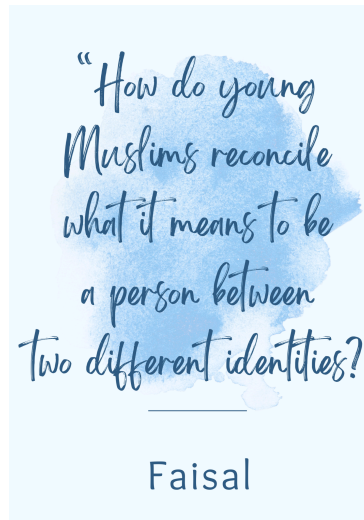
Faisal's Story

Faisal is a sixth-year teacher, an active union representative, a teacher leader, and a coach. Advocating has been challenging. Sometimes, Faisal feels that he has to turn off being attuned to what's going on in his city and neighborhood for the sake of his mental health. He has canvassed candidates running for school board and city council, attended rallies and protests, participated in union actions, and attended community events to fight for his students to access housing and food. Faisal said, "When I talk about my identity, my Muslimness, being a Muslim invokes me to fight for these things." (See Figure 27.) He feels that people want to end public education to harm his community further. Faisal dreams of seeing a future in which black and

brown communities aren't struggling, schools are fully funded, and families have housing and food stability. He wants to see his community be liberated.

Figure 27

Faisal: Different Identities (Source: Canva)



Faisal had initially applied to his neighborhood school, which has a heavily Muslim and Desi population. Still, he found out that he wasn't hired because the school didn't want a Muslim educator known for advocating for AAPI history. Faisal went through other rounds of interviews with different schools and faced the same problem. One principal even cried on the phone, letting him know he couldn't hire him. Faisal asked him, "What are you crying for?" Faisal said it's as if the principal's crying would make him feel better about being rejected for a position.

Students are curious about Faisal's cultural background and often identify him as Latino. They are surprised to learn of him as Desi (South Asian) and Muslim. The kids always ask why he fasts during Ramadan, so he shares his experiences. At lunch, Faisal can pray but has to make sure not to tell students and colleagues that he's available for tutoring or meetings. Faisal wants to pray Jummah, but he can't leave school. He even consulted a few Islamic scholars, who excused him from praying Jummah because of the context of his job and responsibilities.

Faisal is perturbed by his colleagues' invitations for happy hours, and he declines, letting them know he can't because he's Muslim. He's the only Muslim and Desi teacher in his school. Faisal feels that there is no acknowledgment of who he is in this space. He thinks no one cares about the one Muslim guy in the school, and he wishes the school would celebrate Ramadan. Faisal tries not to engage much with his coworkers, as he doesn't think they want to get to know him authentically. At his previous school, Faisal's colleagues wanted to know everything about Islam and him, and they built relationships with him. He realized that spending time with him helped them understand. Faisal faces microaggressions from his white female colleagues. He navigates carefully around his identity, as these colleagues are afraid of anyone of color and of offending Latino and Black community members. However, his white female colleagues still perpetuate the model minority in comments to Faisal and two of his Asian-American colleagues. Faisal says that these colleagues don't understand the differences between indigenous and Latinx experiences, on the one hand, and his own and those of his BIPOC colleagues, on the other.

Faisal sees several challenges in the Muslim community. He debunks misconceptions about school choice and privatizing schools, educating people on how these are efforts to end public schools. Some Muslim parents feel that their children are failing. Still, Faisal sees that giving these students' encouragement and social-emotional support is just what he needed as a Muslim-American student. Faisal builds relationships with the Muslim students he tutors, giving them space to open up about their challenges and experiences. They often want advice on dating, navigating high school social settings, dealing with violence at schools, and maintaining mental health. Their parents turn to Faisal as if he were a therapist. This level of support takes an emotional toll on Faisal, as he's conflicted in deciding among letting Muslim students confide in him, supporting their parents, and navigating the racism around them. Faisal said, "How are these young people going to turn into adults who can cope when it hits them about the violence that they've had to deal with? And it doesn't have to be physical violence, but their feelings,

emotions, or self-worth? How do young Muslims reconcile what it means to be a person between two different identities?”

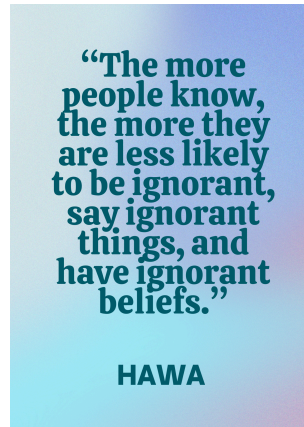
Faisal has emphasized social justice in his teaching. Through reading and writing in an ethnic studies class, Faisal’s students open up about their experiences with gun violence, discrimination, food and housing instability, and racism. Faisal feels keenly the emotions and trauma his students have experienced, compared with what he felt at the beginning of his teaching career, pre-pandemic. Faisal questions his capacity to continue: “I don’t know if I can—If I can pile on as much anymore.”

Hawa’s Story

Hawa has taught different content areas as a teacher: world history, algebra, and gifted education. As a world history teacher, she drew on her experiences and educational background as a Muslim, which helped her students understand the content better. Hawa is a perfectionist because she feels that no administrator can hurt her feelings if she is hard on herself. She wants her students to understand the importance of having a conversation, being able to negotiate, being kind, and respecting other people’s religions and viewpoints. Hawa feels that this is the way she can stop hate. (See Figure 28.)

Figure 28

Hawa: The More People Know (Source: Canva)



A colleague questioned Hawa's teaching practices and accused her of telling too many historical stories to students instead of focusing on the state-mandated curriculum. She defended her teaching practices, pointing out how the test scores of her students' improved. He continued to make microaggressions to Hawa every day. This very same colleague is someone that Hawa had to represent as a union representative when he threatened to kill his principal, also an educator of color. On Eid, Hawa attended prayers at the mosque in the morning. She didn't realize she had kept her hijab on when she entered a school building as a union representative. The front office receptionist gave her a strange look and said Hawa looked different. Hawa then took off her hijab and asked herself, "Why would you just stop and stare at me for such a long time?"

Hawa's father-in-law is an Imam in the Muslim community, and her family is a pillar of the community. As a result, many Muslim parents and families have reached out to Hawa, seeking her support and advocacy. Hawa was on the district's calendar committee, and a group of Muslims approached her to see how the school could recognize Eid as a holiday. In her fourth year of teaching, an Imam connected to her father-in-law was arrested on terrorism charges and sent to Guantánamo Bay because of a fundraiser he organized whose proceeds would be used to build a school for students overseas. The school district contacted Hawa's principal, as they found out that her father-in-law was now in charge of the mosque. The school district wanted to know if Hawa was affiliated with the mosque. Her principal was close to Hawa and knew her

family well, so he told the school that he preferred to talk to Hawa instead of school district police officers interrogating her. When he spoke to Hawa, she was shocked and asked her principal, “Are we really having this conversation?”

All day, Hawa was in disbelief that her own school district would accuse her of terrorism. At lunch, she sat with her team, all of whose members heard what happened. After spending five years in Guantánamo Bay, the Imam was suddenly released without any charges and with no communication with the families. Hawa said, “How does one think, that just because I am related by marriage to my father-in-law, and my father-in-law goes to this mosque, that I would have something to do with a terrorist action, which ended up being nothing at all?”

Hawa withdrew from social interactions at work, but one of her teammates sat with her at every meeting: “The teachers I worked with protected me. One of them was constantly next to me.” One day, Hawa was running late to a staff meeting to give a training, because her principal asked her to grab a resource. When Hawa walked into the cafeteria, she remembered the looks she received from everyone and the absolute silence that permeated the place. Later, Hawa learned that the principal told the entire staff about the terrorist investigation and not to talk to Hawa about it. Hawa reflected, “The more people know, the more they are less likely to be ignorant, say ignorant things, and have ignorant beliefs. They are hurtful to others when they don’t know.”

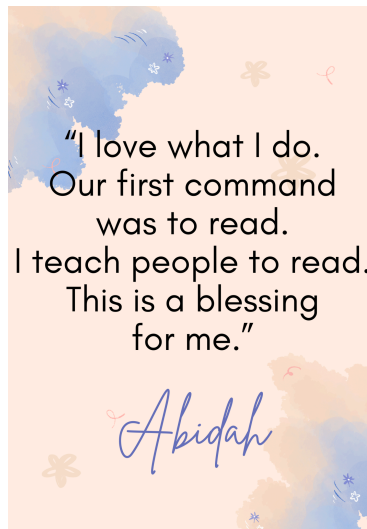
Hawa is still an educator in her district but is placed at her union. She noticed that a leader in her union would send out greetings for Jewish, Hindu, and Christian holidays but not for Muslim holidays. Hawa invited the leader to have a conversation with her and told the leader how it hurt her feelings because it excluded individuals like her. The leader asked Hawa to co-write Eid greetings to all union members. Unfortunately, they faced a backlash from some educators. The union leader forwarded the message to Hawa, saying, “I didn't realize what you go through, until now.”

Abidah's Story

Abidah loves teaching and connects it to her faith, saying, "I love what I do. Our first command was to read. I teach people to read. This is a blessing for me. And as long as Allah has me here, I'll be here for these children. And when he wants me somewhere else, I'll be somewhere else, or here fighting for my life." (See Figure 29.)

Figure 29

Abidah: Our First Command was to Read (Source: Canva)



Having taught for more than 27 years in middle and elementary schools, Abidah proudly calls herself the queen in her classroom and the parents' assistant. Abidah takes pride in creating positive relationships with her students' parents through regular communication, personally e-mailing them and giving them updates. She believes that has helped her parents stay positive with her. Abidah is more understanding toward her students when they have questions about her faith but less patient with adults. As a Muslim child living in a Christian society, she felt that her teachers treated her differently because she was Muslim. That's one reason Abidah builds relationships with all students in her building. Her presence increases diversity and provides a role model for Muslim students.

Abidah's biggest struggle is praying and having accommodations as the times change. Fajr is most important to her. Praying Dhuhr can be challenging, depending on the time and her lunch break. Initially, Abidah's principal was flexible in ensuring that Abidah had no classes on Friday afternoons so that she could attend Jumma prayer. But then Abidah noticed how her principal's attitude shifted as the people closest to her principal showed that they didn't like Abidah. Her principal began to exhibit animosity. When Fajr prayer was moved to 7:30 a.m., Abidah approached her principal, as this was the time Abidah was supposed to report to the building. The principal moved the reporting time to 7 a.m., which prevented Abidah from praying at her mosque, minutes away from the building. As some other employees did, Abidah asked her principal if she could come in at 7:30 a.m. Her principal told her that Abidah should pray at school, and she offered the custodian's office as the locale. "With all the space available in the building," said Abidah, "she's offered me the custodian's office. How do you know if the man wants me in his office?"

Abidah was encouraged to apply to the international school but learned that they didn't want a woman wearing a hijab to work there. Her district leadership didn't want her to work directly with students coming from Muslim countries. Abidah feels that these attempts are to encourage students to assimilate faster, as Abidah constantly tells the Muslim children in her school, "You're safe now." Abidah's school has a lot of Muslim refugees from different countries. Many of these students don't speak English, nor do their families. One Muslim child from Serbia had been placed in the classroom across from her. He sat all day, crying and stressed. When he saw Abidah, he lit up like, as she describes, "Like I was ice cream and cake." The student hugged her and just clung to her—for an entire month. He had been through so much as a refugee that he felt at home when he saw her. Slowly, he let go of her over time.

Abidah's principal attempted to bully a Muslim student who was fasting for Ramadan into eating lunch. Abidah overheard the conversation and said to the student, "Alhamdulillah, I'm so proud of you for fasting." The principal stopped and stepped away. If Abidah hadn't have

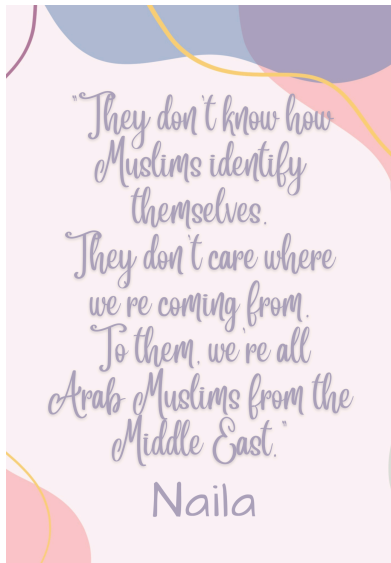
been there, the principal would have forced the student to eat something. If Abidah wouldn't have been there, she knew that someone might try to pull off her student's hijab, as was done to her as a child. Abidah had discovered a Muslim student wearing a hijab in the morning and then removing it later. Abidah said, "Sister, either you're gonna wear it or you're not gonna wear it. We don't play with this." The student told her that her teacher made her feel uncomfortable for wearing a hijab. Abidah was close friends with her teacher and approached her colleague with a question about checking in on how this student was doing in her class. Abidah's colleague paused, looked at her, and then made the connection. Abidah felt hurt and suspected that her colleague must have said things behind her back. Her colleague stopped making the student feel uncomfortable. Abidah reflected, "When my Muslim students saw me, they calmed down. You could see that in their faces. So I can't make Jummah, but Allah knows how much I am there for these children."

Naila's Story

Naila has been a middle school teacher in her district for 20 years and enjoys greeting her students at her classroom door. She's a favorite teacher among her students' parents. Naila almost left the teaching profession after a horrible first year of teaching special education without a special education certification. Like many colleagues, she debated attending public schools to teach in a charter school and submitted her resume to schools in her district. Then, she received a phone call from the principal. He pronounced her first and last name phonetically correctly when no one among her colleagues could. After the interview, Naila learned that the principal wanted to hire her instead of conducting another round of interviews. Naila described her school leadership's support in funding materials, resources, and assistive technology for students. Naila could finally feel like a social studies teacher. If she needed anything, they purchased it. (See Figure 30.)

Figure 30

Naila: We're Not All Arab Muslims (Source: Canva)



Naila's own community is predominantly Muslim. She lives in a town different from the one in which she works, which is primarily white and full of Trump supporters. Naila said, "You see these signs, these very aggressive signs on people's front lawns, the parents of my students. But the community as a whole, they're just used to me." The community contains a small subdivision of Desi families with a small mosque. The community is familiar with Muslim families, but they think everyone is Arab. Naila would hear from her colleagues labeling kids as Arabic when they are actually Pakistani. Naila responded to them, "If you want to, learn the difference." Naila continues, "They don't know how Muslims identify themselves. They don't care where we're coming from. To them, we're all Arab Muslims from the Middle East."

Because of her support for the Muslim community, when a Muslim parent sees Naila in the office, they gravitate to her. Muslim parents will make a connection, say "Salam," or nod, even when they are there to see someone else other than her. There's always that connection. Naila doesn't even think it's because they see her hijab. She believes they are just happy to see a Muslim teacher in the building with their kids. Muslim parents reach out to her with their

concerns and their hard questions, because they feel that Naila understands Muslim culture. Naila teaches a social-emotional learning class, and at an open house, Muslim parents would express concerns about the curriculum being taught to her students. Naila assures them that she is helping students become acclimated to middle school.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Naila received immense support from her colleagues and principal, who all advocated for her to teach virtually for as long as possible. Naila has asthma and has been hospitalized a few times with severe pneumonia, often without warning. All her colleagues went to her administrator and advocated that Naila stay remote. Her administrators urged everyone to come back into the building and teach but made an exception for Naila. When she returned in person to the classroom, as a backlash to students carrying rainbow flags in support of LGBTQ+, other students walked in the hallways carrying Trump flags. The following year, the school imposed a new rule when all teachers and students returned in person: no flags in the building. One of her students had transitioned, and other students had identified as LGBTQ+ and changed pronouns, causing the community to be concerned. Against the concerns, Naila argued that using pronouns wasn't disrupting the classroom and said, "We're just trying to do our job trying to get the kids through the day. We're not trying to push our own agenda on anybody."

Naila sees a lot of challenges in her school district, particularly with school leadership. She plans to retire in three years, blaming her desire to do so on the policies and educators' lack of rights. Administrators pass on responsibilities to teachers. Districts as well have added responsibilities to teachers' plates. Naila's own school district has reduced benefits and pensions. She thinks that there are no incentives for teachers to teach and feels that these actions by the school will destroy public education. Naila reflects on history and connects it—notably the Roman Empire—to her school district: "You've heard of bread and circuses? Where ancient Rome entertained the masses, the government did what it wanted. I feel like this

is where we are. We're in the era of bread and circuses. So give teachers some food and entertainment, and then do whatever you want." She paused and added, "We'll see."

CHAPTER 4: USING MUSCRIT TO ANALYZE THE STORIES OF MUSLIM EDUCATORS

Developing an Observational Field Note Tool to Examine Tenets of MusCrit

Observational field notes allow researchers “to see and record firsthand the activities in which research participants are engaged in the context(s) in which these activities happen” and can be “used as a method of data triangulation” (Ravitch et al., 2021, p. 141). As observers, researchers engage in qualitative research, documenting information as a form of data collection (Bhattacharya, 2017). In analyzing group interaction, examining individual voices within the discussion of each circle is crucial (Barbour, 2007). It wasn’t long before I realized I needed to create a tool that would help me examine each educator individually. In their research on developing an affinity group for special education teachers of color, Kulkarni et al. (2022) created a codebook based on the seven tenets of DisCrit as they saw the theory enacted within this affinity space, thereby providing a space for clarifying meaning and processing their analysis—a space that later aided in generating themes.

More than eleven years ago, as a teacher leader, I participated in developing the diversity, equity, and cultural competence for NEA Teacher Leadership Competencies. Teachers would use this tool to help them identify where they fit along a continuum, as a way for self-reflection, in order for them to identify places for them to develop leadership skills. I first met one of my dissertation committee members in this work: Dr. Hilario Benzon. In my work at NEA, I have used this scale with the competencies to help educators and staff self-reflect: emerging, developing, performing, and transforming (National Education Association, 2018). My colleague Jennifer Locke and I created a similar tool for staff to evaluate, self-reflect, and identify potential steps as they examined their professional learning culture within their organizations. These tools have inspired individuals to act, to make change, and to create awareness of their circumstances.

My colleague Dr. Adriane Dorrington discussed my methodology for this dissertation process, as well as for decolonizing the research process. She challenged me to pause, reflect, and see how I could develop a tool that would feel authentic to the research and work on Dr. Ali's creation of MusCrit. I have used our NEA Racial and Social Justice Framework for Change to reflect on our internal and external processes and to advance racial and social justice in our work with educators. The NEA Racial and Social Justice Framework for Change has three stages that apply to educators: awareness (develop a collective understanding of racism in education), capacity building (learn skills and strategies to advance racial justice), and action (apply tools and skills to organize so as to disrupt racism) (NEA Center for Social Justice, 2021). I combined aspects of the terminology and definitions of both frameworks to develop a framework for this tool.

In the tool, I created a definition for each MusCrit Tenet. The categories under "Emerging" are based on the participants' building awareness of the tenet. "Developing" relates to building capacity through engaging in individual mirror work. "Transforming" focuses on observations of the participants sharing stories of how they took action to confront systemic inequity. For example, for the first tenet of MusCrit, the systemic nature of racialized oppression, I identified emerging as "becoming aware of the systemic nature of racialized oppression," developing as "reflecting on how the systemic nature of racialized oppression against oneself is situated in historical, political, and social inequities," and transforming as "Advocating and facilitating change against systems of racialized oppression."

I used this tool to code each empathy interview. Although I coded for all six tenets of MusCrit, I am presenting the analysis for the three tenets that are most prevalent and relevant to Muslim public school educators: the systemic nature of racialized oppression (anti-Muslim racism), being identified as a Muslim (identifiability), and counternarratives. Narrowing down to these three tenets can help me reflect on the tool and refine it for a later intervention. In the sections that follow, I define each of the three tenets, using terminology from Ali's MusCrit, my

knowledge review, and my own experiences as a Muslim. Then, I provide an analysis of Muslim educators who have shared experiences as they relate to the MusCrit tenet.

Examining Integration of Anti-Muslim Racism

MusCrit asserts that the oppression against Muslims is rooted in a systemic, historical, prejudiced, and monolithic representation of the Muslim population (Ali, 2022a). The white Christian mainstream portrays Muslims as antidemocratic, authoritarian, and barbaric, leading to caricatured identities, Arab conflation, and the monolithic essentialism of all Muslims (Ali, 2022a). I perceive this tenet as describing anti-Muslim racism, which is rooted in the belief that white Christians who harbor racial hostility toward Muslims are primarily colonizers, and their religious feelings and imperial/colonial impulses continue to shape contemporary conflicts (Razack, 2021). To challenge anti-Muslim racism's practices, assumptions, and logic, it is crucial to recognize it as a systemic issue rather than an individual bias (Abdul Khabeer et al., 2017). Individuals have to navigate a system that is deeply rooted in prejudiced and monolithic representations of Muslims, requiring them to assert their identity and advocate for equitable treatment constantly. (See Table 2.)

Table 2	
<i>Examples of Anti-Muslim Racism in Empathy Interviews</i>	
Educator	Example
Abidah	Abidah's principal does not provide appropriate accommodations for her religious practices and is insensitive toward Muslim needs during Ramadan.
Naila	Naila navigates systemic challenges and inequities within her predominantly white, Trump-supporting community. She focuses on coping mechanisms rather than actively dismantling the inequities.
Hawa	Hawa confronts the exclusion of Muslim practices. She promotes respect for beliefs and practices, and challenges anti-Muslim racism despite facing biases and negative perceptions.

Rosa	Rosa actively challenges racialized oppression, creates more equitable spaces for Muslim students, and pushes for school administrators to provide training and support for Muslim educators.
Huda	Huda highlights the lack of representation, the paucity of resources, and systemic inequities.
Faisal	Faisal actively advocates for change against racism and social justice. He challenges colleagues' lack of understanding but grapples with the emotional toll.
Asiya	Asiya advocates for equity, social justice, and positive change in the education system. She emphasizes literacy and educating Muslim youths about their history.
Noor	Noor promotes positive change for the Muslim community, breaks down stereotypes, and refuses to compromise her beliefs for job opportunities.

Abidah experienced discrimination and intolerance from her colleagues and school administrators. She expresses frustration with her school principal's failure to accommodate her religious practices, such as refusing to allow her to leave early for Friday prayers. Abidah describes how the principal offered her the custodian's office as a prayer space rather than providing a suitable designated area: "With all the space available in the building, she offered me the custodian's office. How do you know the man wants me in his office?" Abidah's recognition that the school environment does not accommodate her religious practices points to systemic issues. By questioning the principal's motives, she understands that the problem goes beyond just one individual's intolerance. In addition, Abidah recounts an incident in which a young Muslim student was questioned by the principal for fasting during Ramadan, further indicating a lack of understanding and insensitivity toward Muslim students and staff.

Naila responds to the systemic challenges and inequities she faces as a Muslim educator by navigating and persisting within the existing system rather than actively working to dismantle it. She said, "I have three years left before I can retire and collect my pension. I'm

counting down.” Naila shares an experience of being harassed by a parent at a gas station, an experience she attributes to working in a predominantly white, Trump-supporting community. She expresses frustration with administrators' lack of support and discipline, as well as with the broader political and social climate that challenges her. Naila's decision to endure these issues for a few more years until retirement, rather than engaging in activism, reflects the complex realities and coping mechanisms educators use.

By advocating for equal recognition and representation of Muslim holidays, Hawa combats the marginalization and erasure of Muslim identity and experiences within the school system. For example, she asked her union president to start sending Eid greetings, which they had yet to do previously. She said, “I asked [her,] ‘Why does she send greetings for the Jewish holidays? And all the Christian holidays, even the Hindu holidays?’ But she's never sent anything for the Muslim holidays. So I said, ‘It hurts my feelings that you do. It's because you're excluding us.’ And [she] said, ‘Because I've never thought about it.’” Hawa directly confronts the exclusion of Muslim practices. She explained to the school district the importance of respecting Muslim beliefs and practices, such as not serving food to students during Ramadan. Hawa advocated for the Muslim community to get Eid off as a school holiday, an effort that took two years but was eventually successful. She spoke up against the biases and negative perceptions that some teachers and parents had toward her as a Muslim educator. Hawa takes steps to address and challenge anti-Muslim racism directly.

Rosa actively works to challenge and change the systems of racialized oppression that she and her students face and to create more equitable and supportive spaces for Muslim educators and students. She consistently calls out microaggressions and implicit bias from her students, colleagues, and administrators, even though it can be difficult and she faces pushback. Rosa asserts herself as an educator: “I demand respect, I give respect, and I demand respect back. And if you don't give it to me, I will let you know that you're being disrespectful and why.” She refuses to stay silent in the face of disrespect or unfair treatment and will not tolerate

disrespect toward her as a Muslim educator. Rosa has pushed back against her school district's attempts to limit or question the affinity group spaces for students, recognizing the importance of such spaces in fostering a sense of belonging and understanding. She has advocated for her Muslim students by creating a Muslim Student Association, which provides a safe and supportive space for students of diverse faiths to unite. Rosa has advocated for her school administrators to offer meaningful implicit-bias training and create a secure and inclusive environment for all students and staff, rather than just using inclusive language as a buzzword. Rosa battles anti-Muslim racism to foster greater empathy, accountability, and systemic change to support Muslim educators like herself.

Huda navigates complex issues at the intersection of her identity as a Muslim and an educator within a broader social and educational system, particularly in a community that is more entitled and less forgiving. She said, "Even a tiny mistake, or a blur of a word or anything, can set you back and cause a lot of backfire." Huda discusses the lack of Muslim representation and support among her colleagues and the need for more resources and professional development to help Muslim educators navigate these challenges. She addresses the systemic inequities faced by the Muslim community, emphasizing that their voices are not heard as much as those of more influential and entitled groups. She advises them to reach out to teachers, school and PTA boards, and county authorities to ensure that their voices are heard. Huda sees herself as a resource and wants to be able to provide guidance to parents and families. Despite her practical challenges and potential conflicts, Huda is determined to remain faithful to her religious beliefs and values.

Faisal actively advocates for change against racism and social justice. He was involved in his teachers' union, canvassed for local school council elections, and participated in community events and protests. Faisal challenges his colleagues' lack of understanding about issues of race and equity: "The reality is for white folks is that they come to schools, they've seen it in black and brown neighborhoods, and the ceiling is breaking or tiles, this or kids are struggling. To

them, it's just like, you know, it's like second nature, right?" Faisal expresses his willingness to challenge his colleagues' harmful decisions. Once, during a department meeting, they proposed switching to a higher-level standard. Faisal pressed back, asking for explanations. However, he also feels tired and more conflict averse lately and is considering putting up more boundaries and focusing more on his teaching, rather than engaging in broader advocacy work. Although Faisal has been an advocate against systems of racialized oppression, he has also been grappling with the challenges presented by that work and with the toll it takes on him.

Asiya is committed to using her position and platform to advocate for equity, social justice, and positive change in the education system. Asiya sees literacy advocacy as a critical social justice issue and recognizes the importance of educating Muslim youths about their history and identity. She said, "My duty is to literacy." Asiya is concerned about the high rates of learning disabilities being misdiagnosed. She believes that more support and opportunities are needed for Muslim educators to advance into leadership positions and have a voice in shaping the education system. Asiya said, "If you want to help more Muslims come to the education field, in public schools, to bring that diversity to the schools, it's important to have some scholarships or funding for people—to Muslims—to help them work up the ladder." Asiya believes that more support and opportunities are needed for Muslim educators to advance into leadership positions and have a voice in shaping the education system.

Noor advocates and facilitates change against systems of racialized oppression and uses her position as a school leader to create positive change for the Muslim community. She builds relationships with students and parents, humanizing the Muslim identity and breaking down stereotypes. Noor refuses to compromise her identity or beliefs just to get a job. She stands firm in her principles and is unwilling to hide her Muslim identity, even if it means missing out on job opportunities. She said, "I'm not going to do that. If they're not going to hire me, for me, and who I am, then I don't want to work for them." Even when it makes her uncomfortable, Noor speaks up and voices her experiences as a Muslim educator facing discrimination and

stereotypes. Noor does not stay silent in the face of injustice and calls out racist behavior and comments from colleagues and administrators, even when it puts her in a difficult position. She said, "I've gone and called them out on it. So, they've gotten very good at returning to their closet and pretending." By ensuring that her Muslim students have access to prayer spaces, accommodations during Ramadan, and a welcoming environment, Noor supports and advocates for those students. By being a union leader, she uses her rights to oppose unfair policies that target her or her students. Noor's advocacy and dedication have earned her the broader community's support, including support from school administrators and other parents. Her willingness to take a stand has inspired others to support her and the values she represents.

Intersectionality of Identifiability as Muslim Educators

MusCrit highlights the significant impact of identity on the treatment of Muslims, with hijab-wearing women facing more racist attacks and bigotry, and Muslim men with religious signifiers facing greater surveillance and threats (Ali, 2022a). Muslims can choose to maintain their religious identifiability or opt out to protect themselves from racialized threats, even though doing so is not an option with pigmentation, potentially leading to double consciousness (Ali, 2022a). Opting out of religious identifiability can, however, have its own challenges. Opting out of certain aspects of religious identifiability can lead to being questioned and challenged by Muslim community members. Separating self-perception from societal perception requires a combination of inner strength, outward advocacy, and a commitment to authenticity. By staying true to oneself and refusing to be defined by others' biases, an individual can transcend the constraints of double consciousness and live with integrity. In a predominantly non-Muslim workplace, a Muslim educator has to navigate situations in which one's own religious beliefs and practices, such as praying during the day, are not fully understood or accommodated by colleagues. In this section, I identify examples of the intersectionality of identifiability for Muslim educators. (See Table 3.)

Table 3*Examples of Intersectionality of Identifiability in Empathy Interviews*

Educator	Example
Abidah	Abidah acknowledges her unique experiences growing up and how her Muslim identity shapes her experiences. Her visibility and representation challenge stereotypes and create inclusive environments for Muslim students.
Naila	Naila's Muslim identity facilitates a sense of shared understanding and rapport with Muslim families, despite challenges from non-Muslim parents lumping all Muslims together.
Hawa	Hawa navigates her dual consciousness as a Muslim in a predominantly non-Muslim environment, facing negative perceptions due to her conservative dress and appearance.
Rosa	Rosa faces challenges in expressing her authentic self and uses her experiences to connect with and support her Muslim and Arab students.
Umme-Rumaysa	Umme-Rumaysa wears a niqab as an expression of her faith and personal choice. Despite receiving support from her school community, she faces skepticism from her Muslim community.
Sarah	Sarah challenges gender stereotypes by addressing her identifiability. As the only Pakistani and Muslim teacher in her district, she uses her awareness to set a positive example.
Faisal	Faisal faces challenges in maintaining his identity and purpose in a predominantly white workplace. To navigate these challenges, he focuses on teaching and establishing boundaries.
Bushra	Bushra navigates the impact of her Muslim identity on her professional life through appearance and communication, ensuring that her hijab sets her apart and counters biases, thereby presenting a positive role model.
Sehra	Sehra faces challenges, such as perceptions from parents, colleagues, and the community; navigating celebrating Muslim holidays, and recognizing the intersection of gender and Muslim identity.
Asiya	Asiya grapples with her identity and double consciousness, navigating situations in which her religion may conflict with the dominant culture.
Layla	Layla acknowledges her identity as a hijab wearer, attracting students who recognize her as a fellow Muslim.

Noor

Noor recognizes the impact of others' perceptions on her job prospects and refuses to compromise her identity or beliefs, even if it means missing out on opportunities.

Abidah acknowledges her identity as a Muslim and the unique experiences that come with that identity. For example, growing up, Abidah "noticed things" and how she was "identified as being one of those Muslims." She "watched people treat [her] differently than they [did] the other children," understanding how her Muslim identity was viewed as an "other" within the dominant societal norms. Abidah describes how her presence and visibility help create an environment in which Muslim students can "just be children in the building, as opposed to be[ing] the Muslim children in the building." She reflects on how her Muslim name and hijab make her identifiable as a Muslim and how that identity has influenced her experiences as an educator. Abidah's identifiability as a Muslim woman supports and empowers Muslim students within the education system. Her visibility and representation are crucial for challenging stereotypes and fostering more inclusive and understanding environments for Muslim individuals.

Naila notes that she stands out as different from her colleagues by wearing a hijab, which she describes as "an identifier on me all day." She remarks that she is "always on guard," not just because she is Muslim but also because she is a female. Naila shares that Muslim parents in the community tend to "automatically gravitate toward me" or greet her with a "Salaam." In discussing challenges with Muslim parents, Naila notes that they are more comfortable asking her than other educators the "hard questions" about what she is teaching. Her Muslim identity facilitates a sense of shared understanding and rapport with Muslim families. Naila also discusses how non-Muslim parents in the community often lump all Muslims together, referring to her students as those "Arabic kid[s]" rather than recognizing their diverse backgrounds. Being identified as a Muslim woman creates both challenges and opportunities in Naila's role as an

educator. Her religious and gender identities intersect to influence how she is perceived and how she navigates relationships within the school community.

Hawa advocates for change while also navigating the complexities of her identifiability and double consciousness as a Muslim in a predominantly non-Muslim environment. Hawa notes that, in the Muslim community, there are perceptions of her as not being "religious enough" because she doesn't cover her hair or dress in a very conservative way, even though she considers herself very conservative. Hawa mentions that she doesn't post certain things on Facebook or ask her mother-in-law about them because she knows that the Muslim community may perceive her negatively for not adhering to certain cultural/religious norms. Hawa is aware of how others in the Muslim community may view her on the basis of her outward appearance and religious practices, and she tries to manage that perception. In dealing with the aftermath of a spiritual leader's arrest on charges of terrorism, Hawa reflects on how that situation might have gone very differently if she didn't have a supportive principal who understood her as an individual, rather than just associating her with her in-laws. Hawa experiences the burden of having her identity and actions viewed through the prism of her religious and familial associations, rather than being evaluated solely on their own merits. This double consciousness is a common experience for those from underrepresented or stigmatized groups.

Rosa is very aware of how others perceive her, owing to her identity as a Muslim woman who wears a hijab. She is "constantly on edge" and is never able to be her "authentic self." Rosa is aware of how her identifiability as a Muslim woman influences her interactions with students and colleagues, such as making her cautious about expressing her Muslim identity openly. She states, "My authentic self is somebody who can just openly be Muslim; I can make a joke. I can help my Arab students who are refugees, who are brought to me to speak to them and make them feel comfortable at school." Rosa uses her identity and experiences to connect with and support her Muslim and Arab students. When Rosa cannot be her authentic self, it prevents her from building meaningful connections and providing the support she believes is so crucial.

Wearing a niqab has both positive and challenging impacts for Umme-Rumaysa as a Muslim educator. Umme-Rumaysa feels that wearing the niqab is an expression of her faith and a personal choice, both of which she is comfortable with. She believes that the niqab helps her maintain a professional boundary and focus in the classroom, as she can "leave her demons at the door" and be fully present for her students. She feels that the niqab has been well received by her school community, including her principal, colleagues, and students, who have gotten to know her personality beyond her appearance. Umme-Rumaysa also faces some resistance and skepticism from her own Muslim community and family members, who express concerns about how wearing a niqab may be perceived. Her main challenges stem from navigating the intersection of her religious identity and her professional role, both within her own community and with the broader school community.

Sarah indirectly challenges gender stereotypes through her actions and approach. Her reflections on the perceptions and reactions she has faced as a Muslim woman suggest an acknowledgment of how her identifiability as a Muslim shapes the way she is treated and viewed within her community and professional setting. Sarah discusses the importance of being a role model and how she had to carefully consider her reactions to the challenges she faced in order to set a good example for her students. She mentions that, as a Muslim educator, she is the only Pakistani and Muslim teacher in her district, setting her apart from her colleagues. Sarah's awareness of her identity as a Muslim woman shapes her interactions within the community, leading her to avoid potential conflicts strategically: "I just need to quickly do my job and go, because...it's better not to engage in any conflict." Sarah's ability to discern when to engage and when to disengage when dealing with bias and discrimination helps protect her from further harm.

To preserve his identity and purpose as a Muslim educator working for change, Faisal is engaged in an ongoing process of self-reflection and separation from how society and his colleagues view him. Doing so is a part of the challenge he is grappling with. Faisal expresses an

awareness of seeing himself through the eyes of others as both a Muslim and an educator. He notes how his Muslim identity is often overlooked or ignored by his predominantly white colleagues. Faisal grapples with maintaining his sense of self and Muslim identity in a workplace that doesn't always recognize or validate it. He describes feeling "tired" and more "conflict averse" about advocating for change, suggesting the toll it takes on him. Faisal thoughtfully considers navigating these challenges, including "putting up more boundaries" and focusing more on his teaching rather than broader advocacy work. Faisal said, "I don't bring much of my Muslimness into the classroom anymore. Or the baggage that comes with being Muslim." This shift is a coping mechanism for Faisal to establish boundaries and protect himself, rather than constantly having to navigate the lack of understanding or support from his predominantly non-Muslim work environment.

Bushra is very conscious of how her Muslim identity shapes her experiences and perceptions as an educator, and she actively works to navigate identifiability in her professional life through her appearance, preparation, and communication style. Her Muslim identity is a central part of who she is as an educator, and it significantly influences her daily experiences, professional approach, and sense of purpose in serving her community. Bushra is conscious of wearing a hijab at school and of how it sets her apart, so she tries to present herself professionally and in a coordinated fashion. She said, "Alhamdulillah, I wear a hijab at school. So, Alhamdulillah, I'm putting myself out there. I also tried my level best to be professional, even with my hijab. I must ensure it matches, coordinates, and looks okay because I don't want it to be awkward." Bushra is aware that people may have certain perceptions or assumptions about her as a Muslim educator, so she tries to be extra prepared and data driven in her work in order to counter any biases. Bushra feels a sense of responsibility to be a positive representation and role model for her students and community.

Sehra focuses on her experiences as a Muslim educator and her challenges, such as parents, colleagues, and community perceptions. She sees herself first as an educator, not

primarily as a Muslim. Sehra wants her students to love her personality and see her as a good teacher, not just focus on her Muslim identity. She said, "I see myself as an educator. This is what I've been looking at myself. Unless one of the students interrupts me. They'll say, 'What's this on your head? Do you have hair?' This is when I'm like, 'Hey, I'm Muslim. I'm covered.'" Sehra faces challenges and questions from colleagues and parents about her attire, such as questioning her wearing a headscarf and conservative clothing. She explains that this is part of her Muslim identity and culture, which they don't always fully understand. Sehra has to navigate celebrating Muslim holidays, such as Eid, which, unlike Christian holidays, such as Christmas, are not officially recognized by the school system. She has to request time off and create her family celebrations. Sehra has an underlying awareness that her gender and its intersection with her Muslim identity shapes how she is viewed and treated by others.

Asiya engages in self-reflection about her identifiability and double consciousness as a Muslim educator. She reflects on how students, parents, and colleagues perceive her and how her identity as a Muslim woman who wears a hijab can prompt questions and curiosity from others. Asiya makes efforts to educate them about her religion and identity. She said, "*Under My Hijab* is a nice picturebook that I keep in my office to show them because a lot of times they'll ask me, 'Well, what does your hair look like?' And I say, 'Well, I can't show you my hair, but I can show you this book.'" She grapples with how to approach situations in which her religious identity may conflict with that of the dominant culture, such as when a principal wants to lead a prayer at a staff celebration. Asiya considers how to navigate these situations without feeling like she is preaching or imposing her beliefs. She feels dismissed or overlooked for her ideas and professional aspirations, potentially because she needs to fit the typical mold of a school administrator. She knows how her identity may shape how she is perceived and treated but does not entirely separate herself from how society views her. Asiya remains committed to advocating for change and representation within the education system, rather than distancing herself from it.

Layla acknowledges her identifiability as a Muslim and notes that, as a Muslim educator who wears a hijab, she found that her students were "kind of surprised" when they saw her, indicating an awareness on her part of how her visible Muslim identity sets her apart. Layla recognizes that her visible Muslim identity sets her apart from other teachers and that Muslim students can identify her as a fellow Muslim. She said, "I have kids that will come up and say 'Salaam alaikum' to me,' which is good." Layla is aware of how her Muslim identity is perceived differently in different school environments, with some being more open and accepting than others.

Noor exhibits a strong sense of self-reflection and awareness around her identifiability and the concept of double consciousness as a Muslim educator. She is conscious of how others perceive her appearance and hijab, a perception that affects her ability to find employment in the public school system. Because of the biases and stereotypes that others hold, Noor recognizes that she has to be "150% better than any other candidate" just to get her foot in the door. She does not allow others' perceptions of her to define her. When a teacher comments that Noor is "nothing like what we see in the news," Noor firmly asserts that the news does not accurately represent the reality of who she is. She refuses to internalize the negative stereotypes that others project onto her. Noor also refuses to compromise her identity and beliefs to get a job and is unwilling to remove her hijab or hide her Muslim identity, even if it means missing out on employment opportunities. She said, "If they're not going to hire me, for me and who I am, then I don't want to work for them." Noor is willing to challenge the biases and excuses used to deny her employment and refuses to accept vague or unsubstantiated reasons for not being hired, pushing the interviewer to be accountable for their decision. She recognizes that, despite her accomplishments and reputation, she still faces significant challenges in finding employment because of her Muslim identity and appearance. Noor is baffled that these biases and struggles persist even today.

How Counternarratives Illustrate Nuanced Experiences of Muslim Educators

The fourth tenet of MusCrit emphasizes the importance of counternarratives in sharing Muslim stories, because many such stories are left untold by Muslims, portrayed as oppressive by a white perspective, and used as literature to depict Muslim heroes as exceptions from the ignorant mainstream (Ali, 2022a). Narratives often originate in distant Muslim countries, describing how the white West rescues protagonists from conservative, anti-education, and anti-freedom Muslims (Ali, 2022a). Counternarratives interconnect with the other tenets of MusCrit. Stories humanize us, challenge assumptions, and lift spirits, and are essential for underdogs in pluralist societies, as they require white support for change movements (Delgado, 1989). In order to create change, these stories demand allies, or co-conspirators, who will uplift the narratives the stories present.

When I think of counternarratives, I think of stories individuals tell that capture their emotions, feelings, and experiences, and that we have not heard through dominant narratives in the media or in an organization. For example, recounting how Muslim parents in the community recognize and connect with Muslim educators challenges the notion of Muslim educators and the Muslim community as outsiders. Sharing personal experiences and stories can allow Muslim educators to give voice to the challenges and obstacles they face, rather than having their experiences go unheard or dismissed. By sharing specific incidents of microaggressions, implicit bias, and unfair treatment, such narratives can illustrate the realities of what Muslim educators encounter on a regular basis. Telling stories may help build empathy and understanding among educators' colleagues, administrators, and the broader community about the lived experiences of Muslim educators. Sharing stories could inspire and empower other Muslim educators who face similar struggles, letting them know they are not alone. (See Table 4.)

Table 4

Examples of Counternarratives in Empathy Interviews

Educator	Example
Abidah	Abidah shares her experiences with conflicting prayer schedules and school rules, emphasizing Muslim professionals' unique challenges within the education system.
Naila	Naila shares her experiences navigating stereotypes and prejudices, highlighting her positive connections with the Muslim community. Despite challenges, she remains committed to her students and her love for teaching.
Hawa	Hawa shares her Muslim experiences in the classroom in order to challenge stereotypes and address common misconceptions and prejudices about Muslims. She shares information about Islam and traditions, citing textbooks and personal experiences.
Rosa	Rosa shares her challenges and advocacy, including facing microaggressions, uncovering implicit bias, and navigating hiring processes. She aims to be seen as a dedicated educator, embracing her Muslim identity as a core part of her identity.
Umme-Rumaysa	Umme-Rumaysa shares her transition to wearing a niqab, challenging dominant media narratives and leading by example. She demonstrates the importance of maintaining religious practices in the workplace.
Sarah	Sarah shares her experiences of racialized system challenges and transformation into a positive role model who advocates for equity and inclusion for teachers of color.
Huda	Huda balances her religious beliefs with curriculum expectations, integrating faith into teaching practices, such as celebrating Ramadan and increasing cultural awareness.
Faisal	Faisal is cautious about sharing his Muslim identity in his school, avoiding identity politics and thus being overlooked by white colleagues. He shares stories about his Muslim students and their experiences outside of the classroom.
Bushra	Bushra shares her Muslim identity and experiences in her work, aiming to create community support. She educates colleagues and parents about her practices, including fasting and consuming halal meat, in order to promote understanding.
Sehra	Sehra shares her experiences and reflections on her Muslim identity, emphasizing the importance of honesty and self-awareness in professional settings despite challenges and perceptions from colleagues and students.
Asiya	Asiya shares her personal experiences and challenges, and educates students about her Muslim identity, clarifying her American

	background and dress choices based on religious beliefs.
Layla	Layla shares her challenges navigating religious holidays, pronouns, and diversity initiatives in public schools. She acknowledges her Muslim identity through wearing a hijab, thereby balancing religious and cultural integrity.
Noor	Noor recounts rejection, discrimination, and the ongoing struggle to be seen and accepted for who she is, highlighting the real-world impact of stereotypes.

Through personal anecdotes and reflections, Abidah provides insight into her experiences as a Muslim woman and educator and into the unique challenges she faces in practicing her faith and supporting her Muslim students. Abidah discusses the difficulties associated with her prayer schedule conflicting with the rigid school schedule, and shares an incident in which the principal questioned a young Muslim student about fasting during Ramadan. She relates how she intervened to support the student. Abidah reflects on how, as a Muslim child growing up in a Christian-dominant society, she noticed that she was treated differently than other children were. Her stories help give voice and visibility to the challenges faced by Muslim professionals in the education system.

Naila shares her stories and experiences as a Muslim educator straightforwardly, highlighting the positive connections she feels with the Muslim community and the challenges she faces in navigating stereotypes and prejudices. Her willingness to recount these experiences suggests comfort in sharing her Muslim identity and perspective. Naila discusses the daily experience of wearing a hijab, describing it as "an identifier on me all day" that sets her apart from her colleagues, even if she doesn't feel that it makes her stand out in other ways. She recounts an incident in which a parent confronted her at a gas station, making assumptions about her ability to speak English owing to her Muslim identity. Naila notes that Muslim parents in the community tend to recognize and connect with her, often greeting her with a "Salaam" or making eye contact, indicating a shared cultural understanding. She shares how she

has had to navigate concerns from Muslim parents about the content she teaches, particularly around social-emotional learning and LGBTQ+ topics. Naila is willing to discuss the nuances of navigating her Muslim identity within the school context. Despite the challenges she faces, her love for teaching and her students, as well as her determination to endure until retirement, speaks to her resilience and commitment.

Hawa shares her own stories and experiences of being a Muslim, both in the classroom and with her colleagues, as a way to provide context, build understanding, and challenge stereotypes or biases. She shared information about Islam and Muslim traditions when teaching world history, as her religious background allowed her to provide additional context and stories to help students better understand the material. Hawa recounts an incident in which, because of her last name, a student asked her if she was Muslim. She freely acknowledged that she was Muslim and was happy about it, suggesting that she was willing to be open about her Muslim identity with her students. Hawa drew on her own knowledge and experiences as a Muslim to provide additional context and information to her students. She said, "And so I was able to share from, like, one of the things I like to do, when I was teaching, was quote directly from textbooks, right? Not only the textbook I was using, but directly from textbooks because I live." When the mosque her father-in-law was associated with was involved in a terrorism investigation, Hawa reflected on how that situation might have gone very differently if her principal had not understood and protected her as an individual. Hawa's stories directly address common misconceptions and prejudices about Muslims.

Rosa focuses more on the challenges she faces and her advocacy as a result of her lived experience as a Muslim educator. She describes the "typical parts" of her day as a teacher, as well as the "atypical parts," in which she has to constantly be on edge and guard her authentic self because of her Muslim identity. Rosa recounts specific incidents in which she has had to call out microaggressions and implicit bias from students, colleagues, and administrators owing to her Muslim identity. She shares her experiences of having to be cautious about speaking Arabic

to her Arab students or greeting her Muslim students with "As-Salaam-Alaikum" because, when she does that, it is perceived as her being "religious" or "not wanting them to know what she's saying." Rosa discusses her challenges in getting hired as a Muslim educator and proving herself more than other teachers do. She wants others to see her as a capable, dedicated educator whose Muslim identity is a core part of her identity, not a liability or source of suspicion.

Umme-Rumaysa is open about her transition to wearing a niqab and widely shares her stories with her students and the greater community. Her appearance alone exemplifies how counternarratives provide more information and stories that go against dominant narratives in the media. Umme-Rumaysa describes how she gradually transitioned from wearing regular tunics and pants to a "Muslim outfit" like a "Harry Potter robe" and eventually adopting the full niqab. She is dedicated to maintaining religious practices within her work environment and is conscious about not "abusing" her time to pray during the school day, trying to be quick and not disruptive. Her approach is more about leading by example and building understanding on an individual level.

For Sarah, this empathy interview is the first time she talked about her experiences as a Muslim educator. Sarah is transforming as a leader in a racialized system but does not spend time developing a story and speaking about it. She recounts incidents where male community members have questioned her choice not to wear a hijab or cover her hands fully, challenging her religious expression. Sarah is cognizant of the importance of being a positive role model, especially for her female students, in navigating challenges and responding to bias. She takes on leadership roles within her district and university to support initiatives that promote equity and inclusion for teachers of color and Muslim educators.

Huda shares her own experiences and perspectives as a Muslim educator. She grapples with balancing her Muslim identity and religious beliefs with the curriculum and expectations placed on her as an educator. Huda finds ways to integrate her faith into her teaching practice authentically. For example, she celebrated Ramadan in her classroom, decorating and engaging

the students in learning about the holiday. Huda discussed how she celebrated Ramadan in her classroom and said, "I made [it] a big deal." She says that one parent appreciated her efforts to teach their child about a different religious perspective. Huda aims to increase cultural awareness and appreciation.

Faisal is guarded about openly sharing his personal stories and experiences of being Muslim. However, he will share specific stories and perspectives when the situation feels more supportive. Faisal notes that he "doesn't bring much of [his] Muslimness into the classroom anymore" or discuss "the baggage that comes with being Muslim." He is more hesitant to share his Muslim identity and experiences. Faisal says he is "also really wary of identity politics" and doesn't want to be defined solely by his identity as a "BIPOC person." He wants to avoid having his Muslim identity be the central focus. Faisal expresses that his Muslim identity is often "overlooked or ignored" by his predominantly white colleagues, who don't seem to ask about or acknowledge that part of who he is. This lack of recognition and understanding may contribute to his reluctance to share his stories openly. Faisal shared stories about his Muslim students, describing how emotional they were when he could pronounce their names correctly. He is willing to share specific stories whenever the context and relationships allow it.

Bushra is open about sharing her Muslim identity and experiences, both in her daily work and in her hopes of creating more community support and understanding. She educates her colleagues, as well as parents, about her Muslim practices, such as fasting during Ramadan and eating halal meat, to help them understand her identity and experiences. Bushra discusses her daily routine of doing her Fajr (morning) prayer, Quran recitation, and Istighfar (seeking forgiveness) before starting her workday, because her faith is essential to her life. She begins her day with religious practices such as prayer and Quran reading, as her Muslim faith is central to her identity. Bushra's identity as a Muslim woman is not just a personal characteristic, but a core part of her professional purpose and commitment to making a positive impact. She is acutely aware of the importance of her representation and the responsibility that comes with it.

Sehra shares her own stories and experiences as a Muslim educator. She openly shares her experiences as a Muslim woman working in the education system. Sehra is willing to discuss and reflect on how her Muslim identity influences her professional and personal life. Her narrative suggests that sharing one's experiences as a Muslim, particularly in professional settings, can be most impactful when it comes from a place of honesty and self-awareness. Sehra shares her perspective of seeing herself first as an educator rather than primarily as a Muslim, until students directly ask about her hijab: "What's this on your head? Do you have hair?" Sehra responds to these questions patiently and is willing to discuss her challenges, such as questions and perceptions from colleagues, parents, and students about her attire and religious practices. She does not let her challenges deter her from being true to herself and her beliefs.

Asiya's willingness to share her personal stories as a Muslim educator is a powerful act of representation, education, and advocacy that has the potential to challenge biases, inspire others, and contribute to more equitable and inclusive educational spaces. By sharing her experiences, Asiya can give a firsthand account of her unique challenges and considerations as a Muslim woman in education. She shares how she adapted her schedule and routines during the Ramadan fasting period, taking naps in her office to manage the challenge of working while fasting. Asiya describes how she educates her students about her Muslim identity, clarifying that she is American and dresses the way she does because of her religious beliefs, not because she is from a different country. She said, "Many times, they'll think it's because I'm from a different country. And I'll first say, Do I sound like I'm from a different country? And they'll say, 'No, you suddenly don't sound like you're from a different country,' okay? Well, I speak English, so I'm an American. And so I'm not dressing this way, because I, you know, I'm from a different country. I'm just this way because of my religion." Asiya's stories about educating her students on her religious identity and dress demonstrate how she actively dispels assumptions and promotes understanding of Muslim culture and beliefs.

Layla recognizes that she has a Muslim story and acknowledges the different ways her

Muslim identity is perceived and received in various school environments. She describes her decision to convert to Islam and the shift in her worldview and experiences, compared with when she was not Muslim. Layla describes the internal conflicts and struggles she faces as a Muslim in navigating issues such as religious holidays, pronouns, and diversity initiatives in the public school system. She acknowledges her Muslim identity through wearing the hijab and how that practice sets her apart from other teachers. Layla expresses a sense of being caught between competing values, expectations, and norms, both as a Muslim and as an educator working in a public school environment. She grapples with issues like religious holidays, dress codes, curriculum content, and the school's approach to diversity and inclusion, all while trying to maintain her own spiritual and cultural integrity.

By openly sharing her own stories and experiences, Noor provides a powerful and authentic voice counteracting the challenges that Muslim educators can face. Her willingness to be vulnerable and transparent helps to break down stereotypes and humanize the Muslim identity. Noor recounts specific incidents, such as the fundraiser in which people refused to interact with her directly, thereby demonstrating the real-world impact of stereotypes and biases. These stories help to personalize her experience as a Muslim woman. Recounting her struggles to find employment in the public school system, Noor openly discusses the discrimination and biases she faced when trying to get hired as a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, especially 20 years ago. Describing her experiences as the first hijabi teacher in her school and district, Noor talks about how the students and staff initially reacted with surprise and uncertainty when they saw a Muslim woman as their teacher and how she had to work to build her reputation and overcome those perceptions. Highlighting the challenges she continues to face, even in her current role, Noor shares that, despite her qualifications and experience, she still encounters resistance and discrimination when applying for administrative positions. She is transparent about the ongoing struggle to be seen and accepted for who she is.

Looking Ahead: How the MusCrit Observational Tool Helped Me as a Researcher

Using the observational tool helped me define each tenet of MusCrit and understand what each tenet looked like through the lens and experiences of Muslim educators. I explored what each tenet meant to me and how I had experienced each one in my personal and professional life. Out of this process emerged my own writing process, in which I started journaling events and experiences for my introduction to this DoP. Using memos also helped me process my emotions and experiences. In addition, this chapter's analysis helped inform my later chapter on implications, as I would consider recommendations to make changes to these tenets on the basis of my data analysis. The process enabled me to finetune this tool for my intervention, which I will describe in that chapter. This research helped me inform the next step of my DoP, which is my theory of change.

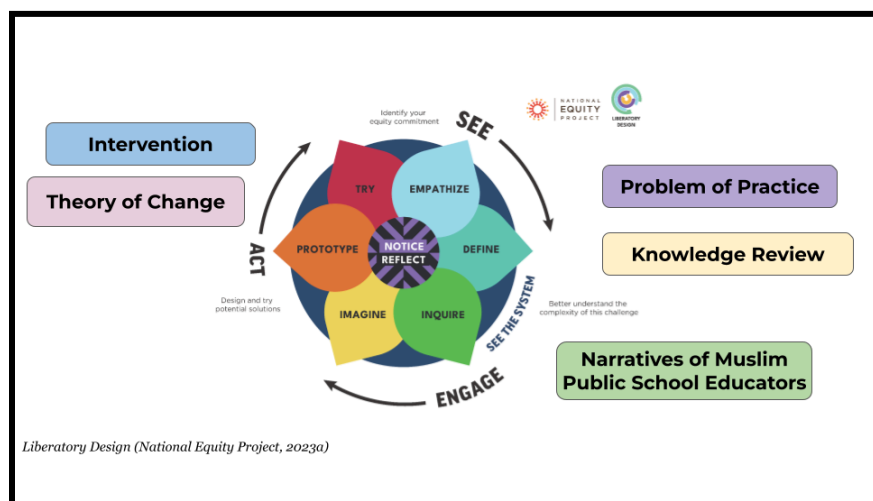
CHAPTER 5: THEORY OF CHANGE

Framing a Theory of Change

My theory of change is guided by my theoretical framework and is based on (1) the main assumptions I drew from experiences I’ve had as an educator and organizer, (2) insights from stories narrated by Muslim public school educators, and (3) key findings from my knowledge review. A theory of change is different from a theory of action. A theory of action essentially articulates the “how” of a change, whereas a theory of change articulates the “why” of a change (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Designing a theory of change is an iterative process that continues throughout the intervention, testing it against data and insights from the improvement process and refining it on the basis of new learning (Shift, 2023). Developing a theory of change aligns with the Liberatory Design process, which addresses equity challenges and efforts at changes in complex systems by investigating deeper causes of systemic oppression (National Equity Project, 2023b).

Figure 31

DoP Alignment with Liberatory Design (National Equity Project, 2023a)



Note. Ambereen’s dissertation of practice as it aligns with Liberatory Design.

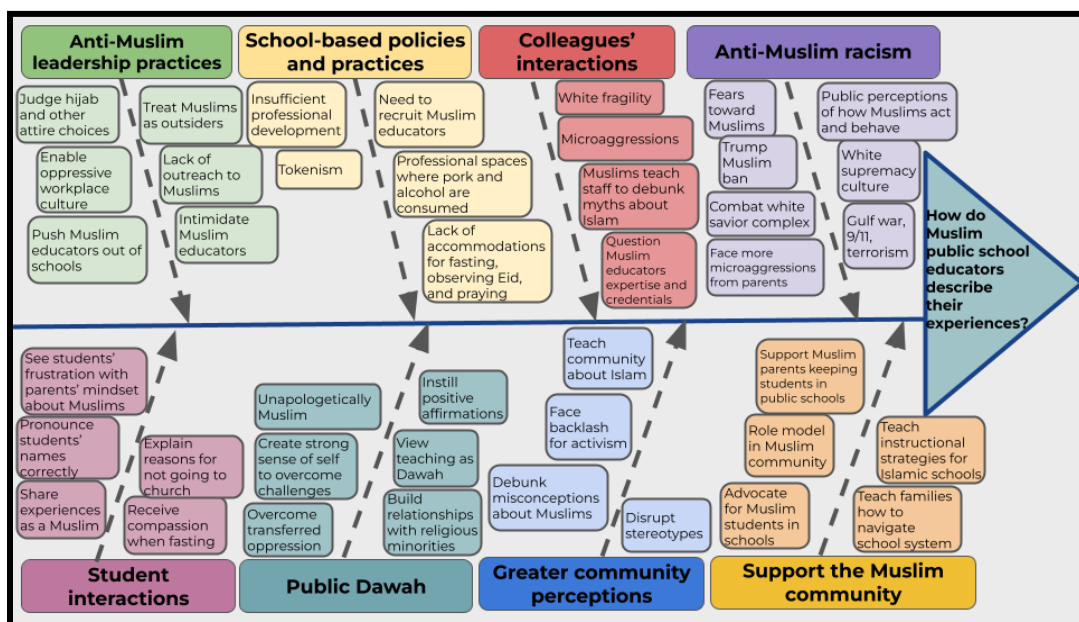
Aligning with the use of Liberatory Design, developing a theory of action is part of the “act” stage, in which we can imagine (create space to stimulate creative courage) and prototype

(build and test ideas) (National Equity Project, 2023a). (See Figure 31.) In my experiences with improvement science, I've used driver diagrams to articulate a theory of change and explain my rationale behind it. For all these reasons, I have decided to identify this chapter as a theory of change instead of a theory of action.

My problem of practice, part of the “see” stage of Liberatory Design, focuses on how Anti-Muslim leadership practices manifest at different levels of school systems and create experiences for Muslim public school educators in which they (1) face biased school-based policies and practices that alienate them, (2) encounter microaggressions and religious discrimination from colleagues, (3) are forced to debunk misconceptions about Muslims and teach about Islam to the greater community, (4) need to support the Muslim community to help Muslim families navigate the school system, and (5) must convey public Dawah to overcome these challenges. A Muslim educator is a K–12 educator who self-identifies as a Muslim. (See Figure 32 for a visual of a landscape scan illustrating my problem of practice.)

Figure 32

Problem-of-Practice Landscape



Note. A problem of practice landscape scan reflects the experiences and challenges Muslim public school educators face in their schools and communities.

My assumptions are based on major concepts and systems outlined in my knowledge review that include (1) the intersectionality of Muslim identity, race, and faith, (2) a definition of anti-Muslim racism, (3) the history of anti-Muslim racism, (4) the impact of anti-Muslim racism on the perceptions of the community, (5) public schools as a microcosm of U.S. society, (6) the impact of anti-Muslim racism on the ummah, and (7) Muslim responses to anti-Muslim racism. In discussing my drivers, I will identify assumptions from my knowledge review.

Reflective and guiding questions can help create a driver diagram, break down a theory of change, and identify primary drivers (Shift, 2021a). In developing my theory of change and the driver diagram, I used the following research questions to guide the process:

- RQ 1. How can using the National Equity Project's Lens of Systemic Oppression help gain a better understanding of the influences of anti-Muslim racism as it intersects with Muslim public school educators?
- RQ 2. How can storytelling and mindfulness of body and emotion in an affinity-based space increase Muslim public school educators' belonging, awareness, and sense of empowerment?

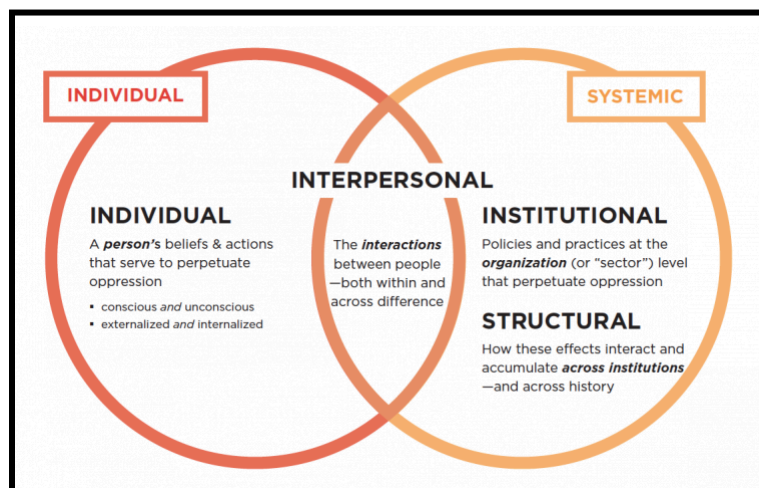
Using the Lens of Systemic Oppression to Guide a Theory of Change

In accordance with the Liberatory Design mode "Imagine," I used imagining to journal possible ideas, utilizing "What if?" questions stemming from findings from the narratives and my problem of practice. I started with questions such as "What if Muslim educators told their stories?" and "What if Muslim educators had a community space to share their experiences? How could they grow as a community? and What if we can see the systems in which their challenges exist?" I followed up with questions such as "What could this look like? and What would this feel like?" In these imaginings, I reflected on one of the critical frameworks of

Liberatory Design: the Lens of Systemic Oppression. I’ve used this lens before to help my teaching fellows and colleagues examine their systems and see how oppression affects educators. One of the challenges that our Teaching Fellow program addressed was that, when individuals create professional learning experiences for educators, they do not identify equity challenges and, hence, do not engage in purposeful leadership action to address them. In the program, we examined and discussed the National Equity Project’s Lens of Systemic Oppression and used the ensuing conversations to identify equity challenges in Fellows’ work. The answers to the preceding questions led Fellows to identify an equity challenge to focus on in implementing their professional learning opportunities. Through these conversations and using these tools, Fellows could make connections to their work and identify how both internalized and transferred oppression were playing out in their states. Using the National Equity Project’s Lens of Systemic Oppression can help me, as a researcher, identify places and circumstances in which Muslim public school educators face oppression. I can employ those places and circumstances in an intervention.

Figure 33

National Equity Project’s Lens of Systemic Oppression (National Equity Project, 2024)



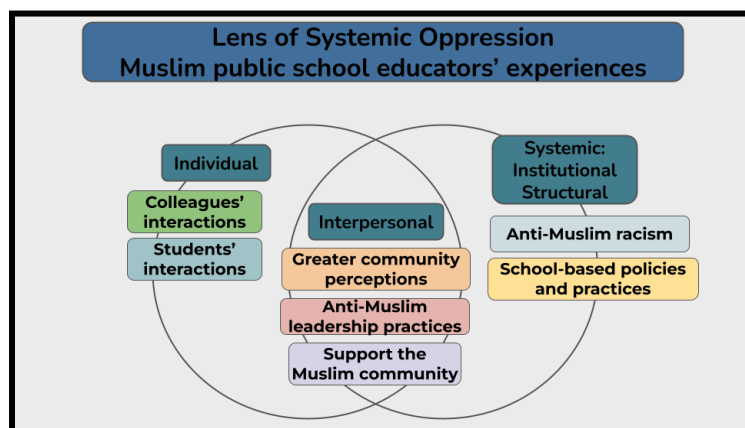
In the National Equity Project’s Lens of Systemic Oppression (2024), the word “lens” is a metaphor to symbolize how an individual can examine an event, an experience, or data through

a perspective. A lens can help us explore how various forms of oppression, such as race, gender, class, language, and sexual orientation, can hinder progress and prevent action toward specific goals. In this framework (see Figure 33), systemic oppression happens at four levels: (1) individual: a person's conscious and unconscious beliefs and actions that perpetuate oppression; (2) interpersonal: the intersection of individual and systemic levels of oppression; (3) institutional: harmful policies and practices that perpetuate oppression; and (4) structural: the macro relationship between institutions (National Equity Project, 2024).

Using this framework in order to gain a better understanding of the influences of anti-Muslim racism as it intersects with Muslim public school educators, I identified the main elements under each category. (See Figure 34.) Anti-Muslim racism is a systemic issue rooted in U.S. and European empire building and is characterized by structural inequality and violence; understanding this issue as a systemic one is crucial to challenging its practices and assumptions (Abdul Khabeer et al., 2017; Razack, 2021). Using the Lens of Systemic Oppression framework can help me, as a researcher, not only to see that the experiences of Muslim public school educators are based on their colleagues' interactions or what the community perceives about them, but also to illustrate that underlying all these experiences is a form of systemic racism: anti-Muslim racism.

Figure 34

Lens of Systemic Oppression and Muslim Public School Educators' Experiences



Note. Applying the Lens of Systemic Oppression to my landscape scan illustrating Muslim public school educators' experiences.

As a researcher, I found that identifying the levels of systemic oppression that were related to my problem of practice helped me identify assumptions for my theory of change from my knowledge review. Also, it helped me reflect on how this intervention can advance antiracism. From the empathy interviews, I learned about the experiences, perceptions, and challenges that Muslim public school educators faced. In the empathy interviews, I learned new things from Muslim public school educators' responses to possible solutions to their challenges. I identified the professional supports they would like to have to retain them as educators.

Theory of Change and Intended Impact

The theory of change that will guide my intervention is as follows:

IF WE	empower Muslim public school educators to share their authentic identities and experiences in an affinity-based space,
THEN	Muslim public school educators will use storytelling practices, practice mindfulness of body and emotions, and create community,
AND WE WILL SEE	those Muslim public school educators create their own ummah, build a network of support, reflect after mindfulness practices, and share stories of their experiences as Muslim public school educators.

Within this aim statement, I developed aims for how Muslim public school educators address each level of systemic oppression in order for the intervention to advance antiracism:

- **Individual:** Muslim public school educators will share examples of colleagues', students', and families' conscious and unconscious beliefs and actions that perpetuate oppression against them.
- **Interpersonal:** Muslim public school educators will share stories about the intersectionality of oppression between individuals and their school systems.

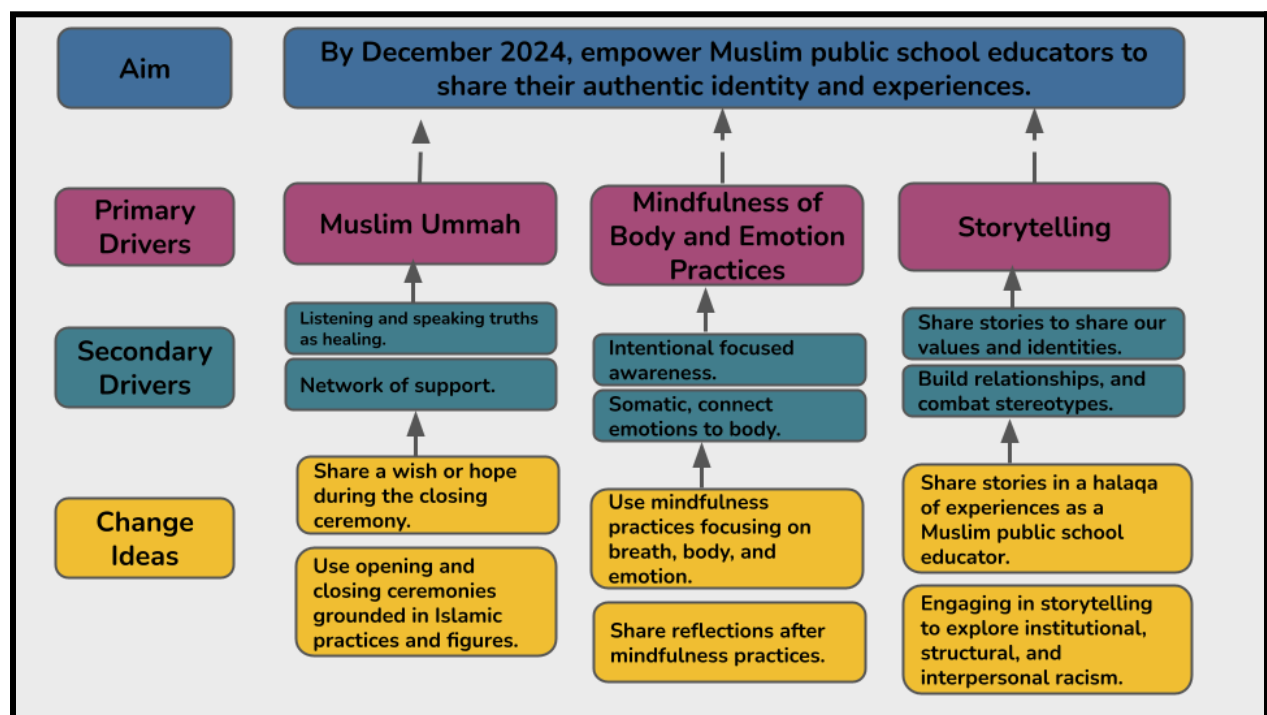
- **Institutional:** Muslim public school educators will share the extent to which Anti-Muslim policies, norms, and practices have affected them.
- **Structural:** Muslim public school educators will use storytelling to create a network, call forth awareness, and identify how they can collectively heal as an ummah.

Driver Diagram

Using my imagining responses, knowledge review findings, and empathy interview findings, I developed a driver diagram and a theory of change. (See Figure 35.) A driver diagram is a tool used to “break down your theory of change, organize it into different components, and track your improvement efforts against that theory” (Shift, 2021a). A driver diagram “illustrates the theory of change for an area of improvement, and if the theory is sound, the change ideas that address the primary and secondary drivers will lead to improvement” (Soar et al., 2022, p. 180).

Figure 35

Driver Diagram



Note. This driver’s diagram details this research study’s aim, primary drivers, secondary drivers, and change ideas.

Aim Statement

Driver diagrams start with an aim and should consider what matters to the individuals touched by the problem of practice (Soar et al., 2022, p. 181). The aim statement should answer the question “What are we trying to accomplish?” (Milder et al., 2022). Aim is defined as “the desired result that a group of people envision, plan, and commit to” achieving (Shift, 2021b). It should have goals that are SMARTIE: “specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, time-bound, inclusive, and equitable” (Shift, 2021b). The aim of my driver diagram is as follows: By December 2024, empower Muslim public school educators to share their authentic identity and experiences. The word “empower” means “to promote the self-actualization or influence of” (Merriam-Webster, 2024).

In this driver diagram, drivers describe leverage points and primary factors in a visualization that shows how these drivers interact with change ideas (Shift, 2021a). Primary drivers are the things that drive toward an aim: “big-picture areas that drive progress toward the aim” (Milder et al., 2022). When creating drivers, I used Shift’s “Creating a Theory of Change” guide (2021a) to ask myself, “What conditions need to be true to achieve your aim?” and “What are the factors that will facilitate or impede your ability to improve?” Secondary drivers are subfactors that influence primary drivers, allowing the practice to be adjusted or improved in order to enhance the performance of the primary drivers (Milder et al., 2022).

Providing findings from empathy interviews is vital to identifying change ideas, as “the best change ideas are generated by those who have a profound understanding of how the system works currently” (Soar et al., 2022, p. 182). Therefore, in the sections that follow, I explain each driver and provide learnings and assumptions from both my knowledge review and the empathy interviews conducted with Muslim public school educators. Then, in my intervention section, I

outline and explain change ideas and methods of data collection.

Driver #1: Muslim Ummah

Creating a space for Muslim public school educators to be in community together can establish a network of support where listening and speaking truths can be healing. Muslim commonality is crucial for social identification, as Muslims share a common religion and are an ethnic minority group; this commonality extends beyond just religion, fostering a sense of belonging (Dana et al., 2017). Muslims address anti-Muslim racism by building community and cultivating their ummah, such as providing mosque-based support programs with increased religious involvement, protecting American Muslims' mental health, and presenting core Muslim values (Ali et al., 2022). Muslims utilize secular and social spaces to build community and recruit justice-minded allies, addressing the impact of discrimination (Welji, 2022; Bacchus, 2019). Racial affinity learning spaces for educators help them address unhealed trauma from white supremacy, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression, and embody wisdom, love, joy, and creativity, fostering collective healing and solidarity (Pour-Khorshid, 2018).

During empathy interviews, Muslim public school educators lamented the fact that they were the only Muslim educators in their school. Huda said, “I am the only one,” and wants to connect with other Muslim educators who can understand her struggles. Sarah described how an interfaith community of religious minorities provides support for one another. Recognizing a need for a Muslim affinity-based space for herself, Rosa created a chapter called the Muslim Student Association for her students who self-identify as Muslim. Rosa wants her students to create a space that feels safe for them, just as she wishes she had in her workplace. Bushra intends to develop a network of Muslim educators to support Muslim families and shore up support groups in order to see more Muslims teach in public schools. In her advocacy work, Asiya recognizes that she is the only Muslim in this space and wants to encourage Muslim educators. Umme-Rumaysa wants to bond with fellow Muslim educators—with “someone who

gels with me.” As the only Muslim teacher in his building, Faisal feels that there is no acknowledgment of who he is in this space. Cultivating a space for Muslim educators to listen, heal, and be part of an ummah can help them feel empowered.

Driver #2: Mindfulness of body and emotion practices

Storytelling requires identifying and unpacking experiences, which can bring up negative and positive emotions and feelings. Calling awareness to where we feel emotions in our body can help us be in the moment and connect together as a community. In all of the interviews, there were similar experiences that Muslim educators faced. In an affinity-based space, it is crucial to use mindfulness of the body to connect together in order to become liberated from anti-Muslim racism and feel empowered. Muslims mental health issues can suffer because of the constant need to defend Islam, and those issues can lead to stress, isolation, and a feeling of being overwhelmed; Muslims can experience anxiety, fear public violence, and feel inadequate in answering questions (Haque et al., 2019). Anti-Muslim racism disrupts individual, interpersonal, and structural systems, producing stress reactivity and identity concealment, and affecting social relationships, institutional policies, and media coverage; that disruption leads to adverse health outcomes and health disparities, emphasizing the need for attention and action (Samari, 2016). Salat is found to be a protective factor against depression and provides spiritual support, emotional comfort, and consolation (Hodge et al., 2016; Abu-Raiya et al., 2011). Discrimination triggers a spiritual response in Muslims, which reduces the effects of that discrimination on depression and substance use, as spirituality mediates stress-related adverse health outcomes (Hodge et al., 2015). The first step in gently healing from trauma is to gain awareness of that trauma, by slowing down, leaning into uncertainty, and staying present (Menakem, 2017). Naming emotions through asking questions can help us be aware of our emotional landscape and help us practice self-compassion to change how we relate to ourselves and each other (Trachtenberg, 2023).

During empathy interviews, Muslim public school educators shared experiences of anti-Muslim leadership practices, anti-Muslim racism, and negative interactions with the community, displaying a need for attention. In particular, Rosa shared how the constant microaggressions keep on her edge and watching her back. Faisal shares that he has to turn off being attuned to what's going on in his city and neighborhood for the sake of his mental health. Faisal's support of the Muslim community and attentiveness to the racism around it takes an emotional toll on him, to the point where he has questioned his future in teaching, as he is unsure of how much he can take on. Because of the challenges and trauma she has experienced, Naila is planning to retire as soon as she is eligible.

During empathy interviews, Muslim public school educators expressed the idea that using mindfulness in their practices, in the form of salat, helped them feel what they sense at the moment and grounded them in their spiritual beliefs. For example, Bushra starts her day with what she calls her due diligence by praying the Fajr prayer, reading the Quran, and reciting a list of duas. That is the time of day during which she grounds herself in salat and brings awareness to her feelings and body before starting her "public life." When Asiya feels doubt about teaching in public schools, she prays and recalls the first revelation of the Quran, when the angel Gabriel told Muhammad (peace be upon Him) to "read." As with Asiya, Abidah's importance in prayer helps her call awareness to what she is feeling and experiencing in the day. Salat grounds her, so Jumma prayer is essential to her.

Driver #3: Storytelling

Sharing stories fosters meaningful relationships, overcoming white supremacy, separation, and human value hierarchies (DeWolf et al., 2019). Storytelling is a way to build relationships, break down misconceptions, humanize individuals, and respond to anti-Muslim racism. Promoting intergroup dialogue and understanding among Americans and increasing contact with Muslims could significantly reduce prejudice against Muslims in the United States

(Bulut, 2016). Muslim individuals who sought support from other Muslims and non-Muslim Americans, educated others about Islamic practices, and participated in interfaith dialogues experienced enhanced posttraumatic growth after 2001 (Abu-Raiya et al., 2011). *Teaching While Muslim* (2023) provides stories of Palestinian Muslims as counternarratives to refute the dominant narratives from the media. These authentic, accountable, and healthy connections enable collective actions to bridge divides and transform communities (DeWolf et al., 2019).

During empathy interviews, Muslim public school educators emphasized how sharing their experiences helped combat anti-Muslim racism in their school buildings and community. By holding sessions for staff and students to learn about Islam, Rosa wants school leaders and administrators to understand who Muslims are and to understand the Muslim community. In order to identify better supports for educators, Rosa wants school leaders to learn more about Muslims and what Muslim educators go through. Because her colleagues fail to understand Muslim culture and the Muslim community, Sehra constantly describes her clothing choices and justifies why she wears what she wears. By sharing her experiences in Saudi Arabia, Layla battles stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and uneducated. By unpacking their concerns through stories of her experiences, answering their questions about her niqab, and using humor, Umme-Rumaysa builds relationships with her students. By building relationships and establishing her reputation with her colleagues, Noor overcame their perceptions and stereotypes by humanizing herself—putting herself “out there” so that everyone could learn about her and community members could understand that what they see in the media is not the norm.

Muslim public school educators expressed hesitancy in publicly sharing their stories or in desiring to share their experiences. Even though Sarah was confident of her identity, she was unsure of how to participate politically and in advocacy, saying, “I listen, I support, but then I, like, don't say anything.” As a new teacher, Huda hesitates to make mistakes for fear of backlash from parents. Huda wants the Muslim community to be heard. When asked about professional

support, Bushra said Muslim educators want to be recognized and share their experiences.

In addition, some Muslim public school educators emphasized the importance of using stories to create change in their communities and of recognizing the need to train other educators to do the same. Acting as an organizer and advocate in his community and union, Faisal said, “When I talk about my identity, my Muslimness, being a Muslim invokes me to fight for these things.” Even though Noor regularly shares her experiences, she is aware that other Muslim educators do not, and she asks herself, “How can we improve Muslim educators’ experiences if we are unaware of them?”

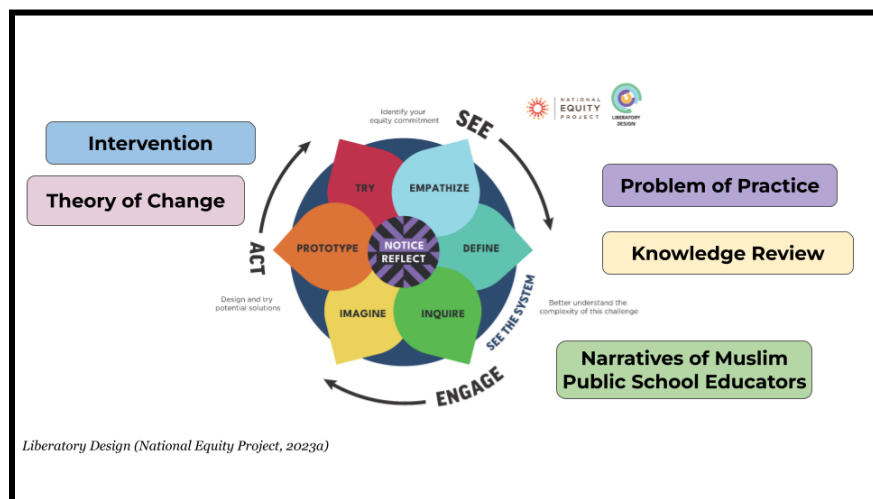
CHAPTER 6: INTERVENTION

From Theory of Change to the Blueprint of Intervention

This chapter expands on the previous one of moving beyond the theory of change to actual implementation. The problem of practice, the knowledge review, and empathy interviews of Muslim public school educators drove the theory of change. Anti-Muslim leadership practices in schools alienate Muslim educators, leading to biased policies, microaggressions, and religious discrimination, and compelling Muslim public school educators to debunk misconceptions and support Muslim families. Empowering Muslim public school educators to share their authentic identities and experiences in an affinity-based space can lead to storytelling, mindfulness practices, community building, and the creation of a network of support. In Liberatory Design, developing an intervention is part of the “act” stage, in which individuals use two design modes: prototype (build and test ideas) and try (gather feedback on intervention in order to check assumptions) (National Equity Project, 2023a). (See Figure 36.) In this chapter, I will outline my intervention on the basis of the theory of change presented in the previous one.

Figure 36

DoP Alignment with Liberatory Design (National Equity Project, 2023a)

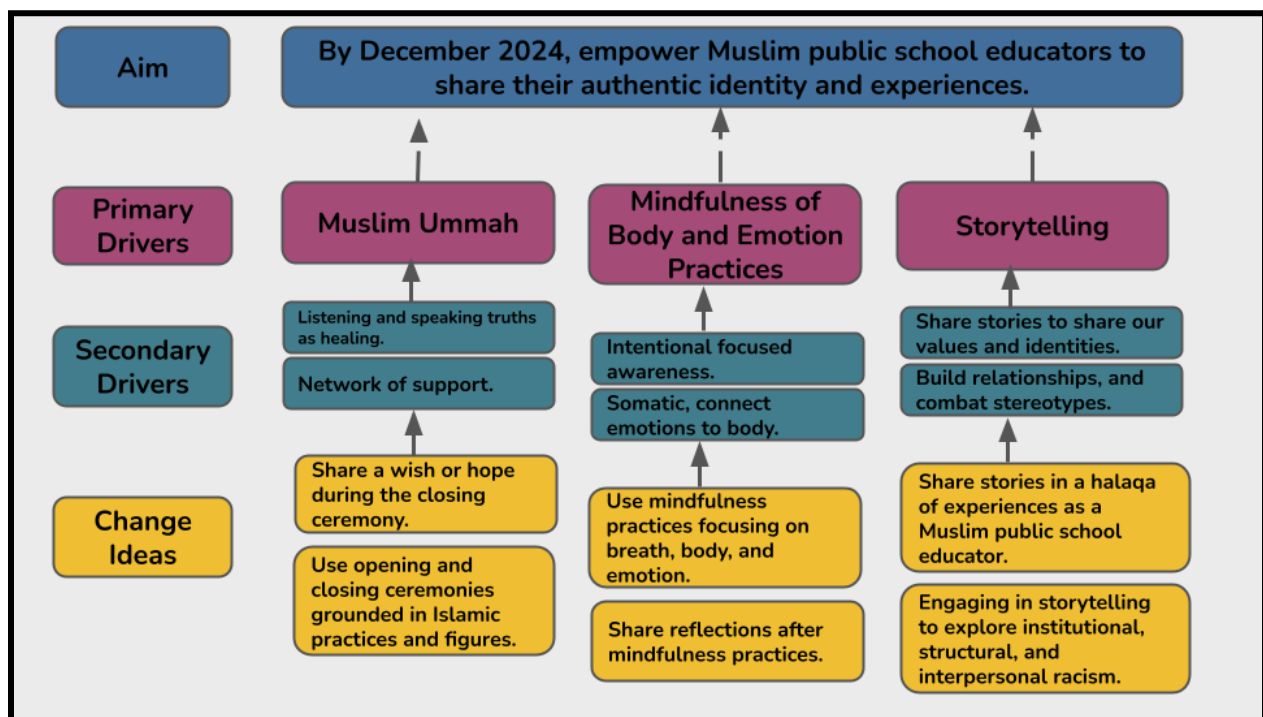


Note. Ambereen’s dissertation of practice as it aligns with Liberatory Design.

Returning to my driver diagram, I will discuss change ideas for each primary driver. My driver diagram has three primary drivers: Muslim ummah, mindfulness of body and emotion practices, and storytelling. (See Figure 37.) For my driver on Muslim ummah, I identified two change ideas: sharing a wish or hope during the closing ceremony and using opening and closing ceremonies grounded in Islamic practices and figures. For the driver on mindfulness of body and emotion practices, Muslim public school educators will use mindfulness practices focusing on breath, body, and emotion, and will share their reflections on this intervention. With storytelling, Muslim public school educators will share their own experiences and challenges around institutional, structural, and interpersonal racism.

Figure 37

Driver Diagram



Note. This driver's diagram details this research study's aim, primary drivers, secondary drivers, and change ideas.

In the improvement process, my PDSA test objectives or research questions are the following:

- How do Muslim public school educators' belonging, awareness, and sense of empowerment increase through sharing storytelling in a halaqa?
- How does storytelling facilitate Muslim public school educators' identification of individual, interpersonal, institutional, or structural systemic oppression in their separate contexts?
- How can using mindfulness of body and emotion practices help healing?

Qualitative research uses “systematic and contextualized research processes to interpret how humans view, approach, and make meaning of their experiences, contexts, and the world” (Ravitch et al., 2021, p. 4). Elements of qualitative research include methods (ways we collect data), methodology (“blueprint of the research study”), theoretical perspective (the lens by which we try to understand our research), and epistemology (“the way we know of our world”) (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 6). Qualitative researchers can use four practices to decolonize the research process: “(1) exercising critical reflexivity, (2) reciprocity and respect for self-determination, (3) embracing ‘Other(ed)’ ways of knowing, and (4) embodying a transformative praxis” (Thambinathan et al., 2021). Oral traditions, including folktales, legends, and mythologies, have been used for millennia for intergenerational transmission of culture and knowledge, thereby promoting relational epistemology and balancing power dynamics (Nakhid, C. et al., 2023). In reimagining our ways of knowing and meaning-making as a researcher, incorporating holism into my methodology “integrates all aspects of learning—the emotional (heart), spiritual (spirit), cognitive (mind), and physical (body)” (Safir et al., 2021, p. 17). This core stance resonates deeply with Islamic practices of connecting to one’s heart, spirit, body, and mind as a way to become closer to Allah.

From the empathy interviews I conducted, I realized the power of storytelling as a way to center Muslim educators’ voices, simply by asking questions and giving space to those educators to share their stories. Ravitch et al. (2021) wrote, “We think particularly of the need—indeed the right—for marginalized and deficitized individuals, groups, and communities to tell their own

stories and lead agentic self-advocacy that pushes back, with valid and credible data (and with allies when wanted) in hand, against hegemonic policies and broader constraints that have intensified in the current sweep of top-down conservatism worldwide” (p. 24). As a researcher, I realized that the stories I heard from Muslim public school educators are not the ones we hear in mainstream media, especially given our current climate. With the change of circumstances facing Muslims after October 7, there was both an urge and a pushback to share stories and experiences. In reflecting on the present, I reflected on the past, in order to dream the future possibilities of this intervention. Oral storytelling has been part of Islam since its origin, and true to this indigenous practice, I have incorporated that as a foundation for this intervention. Oral traditions and methods are considered affirming when they generate authentic knowledge that resonates with the community and when they are valuable and relevant to the research area (Nakhid et al., 2023). Muslims can reestablish their Islamic identity by understanding and constructing knowledge, reflecting on that knowledge, and living in Islam in a globalized plural world (Ahmed, 2014).

Halaqas: Muslim Public School Educator Affinity Circles

In this intervention, I used practices from restorative circles, affinity-based spaces, and traditional halaqas to create a halaqa for Muslim public school educators. “Halaqa” is an Arabic word for circle. For the North and South American First Nations, circles based on the “medicine wheel” provide a sacred space for individuals to share truths and stories in four areas: mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual (DeWolf et al., 2019). Components of circles can include “values that nurture good relationships” and “key teachings common among Indigenous communities” both of which allow participants to connect with their own core self and that of others (Boyes-Watson, et al., 2020, p. 27).

Individuals create affinity spaces where “people who share a similar identity come together to process feelings, connect, build community, strategize, and heal” (Johnson, 2023, p.

29). Circles comprise a “carefully constructed, intentional dialogue space” with structural elements that enable connection, empowerment, and understanding among participants (Boyes-Watson et al., 2020, p. 27). Being in a positive relationship is a form of healing that includes “the feeling of being recognized, heard, respected, and valued” (Boyes-Watson et al., 2020, p. 8). Circle processes cannot eliminate racial inequity and biases; however, they afford a means for individuals affected by these racial inequities to investigate them (DeWolf et al., 2019).

Racial affinity learning spaces for educators helped them address unhealed trauma from white supremacy, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression, as well as embody wisdom, love, joy, and creativity, thereby fostering collective healing and solidarity (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Affinity spaces over Zoom can create a collective space for venting, processing, and being, emphasizing the importance of allyship, self-care, and collective support (Kulkarni et al., 2022). Even so, the term “affinity-based space” needs to accurately characterize the spaces that individuals can create for themselves. Researchers Stovall et al. (2023) argue that affinity spaces are insufficient for describing the collectively built spaces of Black teachers and that these spaces should be called pro-Black fugitive spaces, as a way to rehumanize and sustain them.

Although this intervention focuses on Muslim affinity, I define this affinity group as a form of halaqa. Halaqa is an Islamic oral pedagogy instituted by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him (PBUH)) in his training of early Muslims, first in Dar-al-Arqam and later in his mosque in Medina (Ahmed, 2020). Nowadays, the practice is ubiquitous in Muslim communities (Ahmed, 2020). Holding up the Qur'an as the reference point, early Muslims adopted halaqa as a spiritual circle-based practice in traditional Islamic education (Nakhid, C. et al., 2023). Halaqa can refer to a spiritual leader's circle that includes both students and specific Islamic content or reflection (Halaqa, 2004). Halaqa honors the sacred, spiritual, and transformative nature of knowledge that values the beliefs, cultural aspirations, and collective autonomy of Muslims in achieving their educational goals (Ahmed, 2014).

Grounding the circles in Islamic practices is important to authenticating Muslims' identities, but I am cognizant that Muslims who attend these circles may have varying degrees of awareness and religiosity regarding how they observe as Muslims. Therefore, I have chosen to call this intervention a circle for the purposes of marketing, but for the purpose of this research, I will use the term “halaqa” in my methodology. The purpose of the halaqa used in this intervention is not to teach about Islam, but to ground ourselves in it. I’ve attended halaqas in different formats. Growing up, I attended a Friday night halaqa with my grandfather at a mosque near our house, where a sermon was given in Urdu, and sometimes in both Urdu and English, around a particular topic. Individuals could ask questions, but it was teacher focused. During Muslim youth overnights and evening events, I participated in halaqas with fellow Muslim sisters around topics related to growing up, challenges we were experiencing, and sudden tragedies (such as the death of a friend our age). Those spaces were informal, were participant led, had Islamic knowledge embedded in them, and were focused on our experiences, stories, and feelings. All of these halaqas opened with a recitation from the Quran or Hadith and closed with a ceremony that included a dua. The purpose was to share experiences, be in community, and practice a form of faith-based mindfulness. In the United States and in virtual space, halaqa has also been called by different terms, including the term “conviction circles,” which provide resources by Islamic scholars to American Muslims in order to have in-depth faith-based conversations (Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, 2024). The curriculum for halaqa can vary from academic subjects such as Quran, law, grammar, literature, philosophy, logic, and astronomy to community settings like family life and women's empowerment (Ahmed, 2020).

This intervention utilized practices from restorative circles, affinity-based spaces, and traditional halaqa. As discussed in the knowledge review, Muslim Americans' identity is socially identified and racialized. Stigma in the United States has hindered Muslims' identity development, leading to discrimination and a shift toward an "American" identity, synonymous

with whiteness (Sedique, 2020). American Muslims engage with both the American prophetic tradition and the Islamic prophetic model in their community and in activism aimed at social justice (Seymour-Jorn et al., 2019). Utilizing a variety of different strategies, Muslim public school educators can share their authentic identities and experiences to claim a space as ummah during halaqa.

Context of Facilitation, Site, and Participant Selection

Halaqas took place during September and October of 2024 from 8 to 9 p.m., EST, on Monday evenings, via the Zoom platform. The group met for sixty minutes and included six Muslim public school educators who serve in various roles within their schools. Because of IRB protocol, the locations of public school educators were not disclosed in order to protect the educators' identities.

I recruited Muslim educators through social media platforms and professional networks, including LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. I used a flyer that contained my contact information and a link to an interest form. The interest form included questions to determine eligibility and availability to participate in the intervention. For those who qualified, I followed up with an e-mail detailing the research study and the consent form. About sixteen individuals completed the interest form, with ten qualifying to participate in the research study. Out of those ten, seven educators submitted the consent forms, but one backed out right before the first halaqa because of conflicting teacher responsibilities.

The intervention sought to create relationships among Muslim public school educators as they started the new school year, with the first anniversary of October 7 approaching and during the 23rd anniversary of September 11, the latter two events been complex ones for Muslims, especially with the presidential election looming. I facilitated each halaqa and provided questions to encourage storytelling. A few days before the halaqa, I sent out an e-mail reminder with the storytelling questions and the Zoom link.

Each halaqa had the following structure: a review of research protocols; an opening ceremony and check-in question; mindfulness of emotion, body, and breath; rounds of storytelling; and a checkout and closing ceremony. At the beginning of each halaqa, I reminded educators of the purpose of the study and of its research procedures, risks, benefits, consent, confidentiality, and participation. This reminder ensured that all participation was voluntary and that educators could withdraw at any time without any adverse consequences. (See Figure 5 for an outline of the halaqa.)

Table 5

Description of Components of a Muslim Public School Educator's Affinity Halaqas

Topic	Duration	Description
Review of research protocols	5 minutes	Reviewed IRB-approved research protocols, to emphasize confidentiality and consent.
Opening ceremony and check-in	10 minutes	Educators called themselves into this space, reflecting over a Hadith and a check-in question, the latter of which may be "How are you feeling?"
Mindfulness of body and emotion	5 minutes	Educators engaged in a mindfulness practice focusing on breath, body, and emotion.
Storytelling	35 minutes	Participants participated in two to three rounds of storytelling to share experiences as a Muslim public school educator. Each halaqa was centered on a theme.
Checkout and closing ceremony	10 minutes	Educators shared an affirmation to recognize and strengthen each other, self-reflected on sharing during the halaqa, and responded to a quote stated by a contemporary Muslim individual prominent in American Muslim culture.

Opening and Closing Ceremonies: Grounding Ceremony in Hadith

After reviewing the research protocols during each halaqa, Muslim educators engaged in an opening ceremony. Opening ceremonies "invite participants to break free from the normal

barriers that separate them from each other and to bring their full selves into the space” (DeWolf et al., 2019, p. 62). Ceremonies connect us with our spiritual beliefs and are cleansing experiences that aid racial healing (DeWolf et al., 2019). Hadith—the words, actions, and traditions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)—is a significant source of religious law and moral guidance for Muslims and helps Muslims understand the practices of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Sayeed, 2024). Muslims rely on the Quran—the direct word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)—and Hadith to understand the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Hamdeh, 2019). Each individual Hadith provides a snapshot of Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) life that enables Muslims to increase their faith by listening, learning, and exploring the stories (Qadhi, 2023). Muslims use Hadith to understand the context of when, where, and how verses of the Quran were revealed, helping them connect more deeply to the Quran.

Each Hadith tells a story. By grounding our opening ceremony in Islam, we can reconnect to its oral traditions. At each halaqa, educators read one Hadith and responded to, and reflected on, a question concerning the meaning of the Hadith as it applied to them as Muslim public school educators. Included in the welcoming ceremony was a check-in question, “How are you feeling?” Grounding the opening ceremony in spiritual practices, such as discussing and relating to Hadith, helps individuals maintain their faith in a higher power and can contribute to racial healing (DeWolf et al., 2019).

After discussing topics in the halaqa, the group conducted a concluding exercise to indicate and mold the departure from this space (Johnson, 2023). Educators responded to a quote from a contemporary Muslim individual prominent in American Muslim culture, such as Mehdi Hasan, Iman Omar Suleiman, and Ibtiyah Muhammad, with a question for educators to share an insight, a challenge, or emotions from that day’s halaqa. Educators shared an affirmation to recognize and strengthen one another. Closing ceremonies help educators acknowledge the storytelling they have engaged in together, emphasize the community's

interconnectedness, and provide a transition for participants to return to their everyday lives (DeWolf et al., 2019). Muslim educators shared a hope or wish for one another as they left the call.

Mindfulness of Body and Emotion

During each halaqa, educators engaged in a mindfulness practice focusing on breath, body, and emotion. An opening ceremony with mindfulness practices combats white supremacy culture practices that exist in our workplaces: The invitation “serves as an antidote to white supremacy culture” (Johnson, 2023, p. 82). Understanding trauma as a wound is essential to racial and collective healing in a halaqa: “Traumatic stress is an emotional wound that results from experiencing a highly stressful, horrifying event over which one feels they have no control; in which one feels powerless and threatened by injury or death to oneself or others” (DeWolf et al., 2019, p. 9).

If Muslim educators deal with systems and structures that reinforce anti-Muslim racism, then a possible antidote to such racism is to provide space for racial healing. A few strategies to heal trauma are to seek emotional and spiritual safety, create nurturing relationships, “engage with spiritual and faith-based practices,” create opportunities for emotional release, reflect on the root causes of trauma, and build social and spiritual networks (DeWolf et al., 2019, p. 13). The circle process itself is a mindfulness practice, as it “encourages educators to slow down and be present with themselves and others” (Boyes-Watson et al., 2020, p. 8). Practicing mindfulness while under stress and while experiencing trauma can help us use kindness, wisdom, and compassion in how we respond to other individuals and care for ourselves (DeWolf et al., 2019). Through practicing body awareness, individuals may heal from wounds or trauma inflicted upon them by white supremacy (Johnson, 2023). The practice is aimed at restoring humanity and unity (Johnson, 2023).

Halaqa Storytelling Topics

Each halaqa had a storytelling theme and progressed from sharing about one's past, to exploring present experiences and challenges, to identifying examples of institutional and structural racism, to envisioning empowerment and collective dreaming. (See Table 6.) Sharing stories can lead to developing meaningful relationships that, in turn, can “confront and overcome white supremacy, separation, and hierarchies of human value and develop authentic, accountable, and healthy relationships from which to plan collective actions to bridge divides and transform our communities” (DeWolf et al., 2019, p. 45). Storytelling is increasingly valued in Indigenous communities in preserving and safeguarding knowledge, as Eurocentric ways of knowing are deemed culturally irrelevant or inappropriate (Nakhid, C. et al., 2023).

Themes for halaqas focused on exploring the past, sharing about the present, and dreaming of the future. In Sunday school as a teenager, I studied the importance of prayer and the concept of time under an Islamic scholar. I resonated with the idea that the power of our prayers today could help the past, especially Prophet Muhammed's (PBUH) time, could influence tomorrow, and could change what might happen the next day. To me, our duas are vertical, influencing not only who we are today, but the generations before us and the generations ahead of us. My dad has always stressed to me to pray, not just for my children, but for their children and their children's children. In writing this dissertation, one of the realizations that came to me is that my children are the children that my grandparents dreamed for me. My children are here as a result of all our prayers, especially because I had experienced infertility. It's part of our faith as Muslims to pray for those who have passed and those who will come after us.

This whole notion of being interconnected to one another, living and dead, helped ground me. In studying the Quran, I found that certain verses recall events in the past and connect them to the challenges currently facing the Muslim community. In a way, stories shared in the Quran and Hadith become universal messages, become part of our everyday life, and help

us think about the future and our own future in the hereafter. The act of collective prayer can change anything. Prayer is the collective hope, spirituality, and love that is a form of ultimate worship. As a result, I wanted to incorporate that aspect of Islam into the themes, focusing on exploring and sharing educators' past and present realities, dreaming collectively of the future, and empowering the educators and reconnecting their identities.

Table 6

Storytelling Topics for Muslim Public School Educator Halaqas

Halaqa	Halaqa Storytelling Topics
1	Our values, our circle: Exploring values and identity.
2	Who are we?: Exploring our pasts and people.
3	Our present: Exploring our identities as Muslim educators.
4	Our present: Navigating white spaces as Muslim educators.
5	Empowerment: Dreaming our possibilities together.
6	The story of our ummah: Reflecting and connecting back to the community.

The first halaqa focused on exploring values and identity and creating the halaqa space. Muslim educators reflected over a Hadith and answered the following questions: “Why are you an educator? Why are you here in this space?” In sharing their reasons for becoming an educator, Muslim educators told how they decided to become an educator, identifying significant individuals who influenced them and evoking the names of those who supported them in their journey. I initially had planned for rounds of storytelling and for creating community care practices, but there was not enough time. Also, there was an immediate trust among these Muslim educators that made it seem appropriate to honor their stories and one another.

The second halaqa focused on the theme “Who are we?: Exploring our pasts and people.” Educators shared responses to the following prompt: “Who are the individuals who influenced

you as an educator, past, present, and future? Individuals can include family members, community members, role models, friends, educators, and students.” The purpose of this halaqa was to explore ancestral relationships, cultural rituals, and educators’ “personal sense of belonging and identity” (Boyes-Watson, et al., 2020, p. 334). Activating ancestors is a potent ritual because, despite our perception that we are traveling through this world alone, we actually carry all of our ancestors with us in community, as their “blood courses through us, as do their stories of struggle and resilience” (Johnson, 2023, p. 156). Exploring our families and our pasts helped establish connections and relationships among the educators.

The third halaqa shifted from educators discussing the past and establishing identity to contemplating their present as teachers, with the theme “Our present: Exploring our identities as Muslim educators.” In this halaqa, Muslim public school educators shared their experiences as educators as those experiences relate to their identity, in particular to when they consciously became aware of their identity as a Muslim in their workplace and what they wish others knew about their Muslim identity and gender. Lastly, they shared stories as to what they wished they themselves understood about their Muslim identity. This halaqa was built off discussing values and pasts as individuals to focusing in on their experiences as a Muslim educator. One purpose of the halaqa is to discuss aspects of identity—how individuals feel when they are seen by others—and to collectively explore the effects of race (Boyes-Watson, et al., 2020).

The fourth halaqa focused on the present by examining how to navigate white spaces as Muslim educators and how to dig deeper into the educators’ experiences to identify possible examples of institutional, structural, and interpersonal levels of oppression. This halaqa explores how Muslim educators “navigate what they see and experience among one another and among students without fear of misunderstandings or retribution” by non-Muslim educators (Boyes-Watson et al., 2020, p. 347). Discussing experiences as they relate to racial identity can help with healing: “The first step to racial healing is to connect with our own stories of race, what we have been taught, and what we believe to be true” (DeWolf et al., 2019, p. 42).

The fifth halaqa moved toward thinking of the future, dreaming of possibilities together as a form of empowerment. Freedom dreaming symbolizes revolution, reverberating through intergenerational movements and community care reimagining (Noire, 2023). Freedom dreams “are born when we face harsh conditions not with despair, but with the deep knowledge that these conditions will change—that a world filled with softness and beauty and care is not only possible, but inevitable” (Tourmaline, 2020). By envisioning and imagining wellness, empowerment, and humanity through “what if” questions, we can start seeing a world we want to be part of.

The last halaqa focused on reflecting on and connecting back to the community, reinforcing the interconnectedness of passing on to our students what reflection taught us. By reflecting on the story of this space that educators have created, educators have collectively constructed narratives of their own ummah. Educators answered the questions, “When you look back at your career as a Muslim educator, what do you want your students to remember you as?” and “What stories do you hope they share?” They also shared responses to potential offerings to their own students now that educators have participated in this space. This last halaqa is focused on spreading their own messages and looking ahead into the future.

Methods of Data Collection

Creating research protocols is essential to helping me identify what I value as a researcher. I used analytic memos, halaqas, observational field notes, and qualitative interviews in this study. Research protocols or instruments “are tools that you use to collect the study data” (Ravitch et al., 2021, p. 130). In alignment with the use of liberatory design, developing an intervention is part of the “act” stage, in which we gather feedback on the intervention in order to check assumptions (National Equity Project, 2023a). The methods of data collection that I outline are framed by “street data.” As a form of asset-based experiential and qualitative data,

street data requires focused listening and observation and “emerges at eye level and on lower frequencies when we train our brains to discern it” (Safir et al., 2021, p. 57).

Analytic Memos

Given my positionality as a Muslim female educator, I already have a relationship with the data—a relationship that reflects similarities between my lived experiences and those of my participants. Using memos can “help to clarify thinking on a research topic, provide a mechanism for the articulation of assumptions and subjective perspectives about the area of research, and facilitate the development of the study design” (Birks et al., 2008, p. 69). As part of applying the National Equity Project’s Liberatory Design framework, using analytic memos helps me better understand the complexity of the experiences of American Muslim public school educators. Part of investigating deeper causes is to reflect on and interact with the data.

As a facilitator incorporating mindfulness practices into a halaqa, I also needed to practice mindfulness for myself and give myself moments to pause and reflect. Taking time to reflect in a memo is an act of pause and reflection in itself. As I facilitated the halaqas, I used mindfulness practices that helped me support my core values and intentions for growth: (1) mindfulness of breath, (2) mindfulness of emotions, and (3) kindness and gratitude. Since taking a mindfulness class with Dave Trachtenberg in the summer of 2023, I started paying attention to my breath. Taking several breaths and paying attention to how my body reacts has helped me with crises and calming myself down. When I feel threatened and my body wants to respond quickly, paying attention to my breath helps me.

Mindfulness of emotions helped me when I felt emotions in my body as I reacted to situations over which I had no control. As a way to process researching and experiencing anti-Muslim racism, I started using body scans daily to see where I felt emotions and why I felt them. If I feel a negative emotion, I pause and reflect on it. With positive emotions, I felt more in the moment, feeling the joy and appreciating it. As I think about mindfulness values, I believe

that patience, kindness, interconnection, and in general, living in experiences, will help me with my everyday life. In reflecting after facilitating, I asked myself the following questions: (1) How am I feeling? How am I *really* feeling? What's on my mind? (2) How am I experiencing a sense of healing or well-being from hearing stories of fellow Muslim educators? Why am I experiencing it this way? and (3) Which mindfulness practices and values helped me in my intentions for growth? As a facilitator, I needed to process my own emotions in order to support those of educators. When that doesn't happen, I have seen facilitators unintentionally cause harm.

After reflecting on my mindfulness, I focused on the content and stories conveyed by Muslim educators in the halaqa and asked the following questions: (1) Which stories were interesting, which were insightful, or which resonated with me? (2) What images, feelings, reactions, and meanings did I see? and (3) What themes of transformative knowledge did I hear? In reflecting on using narrative inquiry, I wanted to focus on the moments, images, and reactions that I observed. Capturing those small moments provide the opportunity to reflect on more prominent themes. By focusing on individual stories, I can capture nuances to help create a collective narrative. Lastly, by focusing on "transformative knowledge," I am also reinforcing the importance of oral storytelling and collective knowledge critical to Islam and Indigenous practices.

In my experiences as a facilitator, I have always debriefed facilitating a training or a presentation to see what went well and what didn't. This reflection is crucial to any facilitation that has more than one session. In my Building Teams and Growth Culture class of spring 2024, our facilitator, Dave Trachtenberg (2021), implemented inclusive facilitation modalities and practices to help embody social justice values within us. In facilitating this space, and as a researcher, I wanted to reflect on how I used or practiced the following values and embodiments: collective wisdom, whole-person honoring, culture of curiosity and humility, generative and strength-based, celebrating identity, community building, nonhierarchical

facilitation, well-being embodied, people before process, earned authenticity and trust, honoring lineage, and inviting gratitude and joy (Trachtenberg, 2021). Questions that guided my reflection were (1) Which inclusive facilitation values and embodiments resonated with me or aligned with my facilitation? (2) Which facilitation values and embodiments am I more attuned to, do I feel more connected to, or resonate with me more? and (3) Did any difficulties arise for me?

Lastly, I reflected on my positionality and identity as a researcher. One limitation that researchers sometimes succumb to is that they do not profoundly explore their positionality and “how their positionality shapes the course of the research and the relational accountability of the researcher” (Mayor, 2022). Even though I am an insider as a female Muslim educator, I have to explore my biases and examine my own engagement with the data. In reflecting on my identity and positionality as a researcher, I asked myself, (1) How do these stories relate to my life, values, and personal growth as an individual and researcher? (2) What are my biases and assumptions, and how do they influence the research? and (3) What other parts of my identity (as it relates to MusCrit) are shaping or being shaped by the research process?

Researchers may feel overwhelmed with emotions and feelings while conducting qualitative research, and memos help researchers process those feelings by “recording impressions, ideas, hunches, and potential codes or themes” (Given, 2008). Hearing the experiences of fellow Muslim-American educators was triggering for me: Listening to them describe similar experiences and the pain they felt made me realize that their experiences were so close to mine. As Muslim educators, we experience complex trauma, including multiple traumatic experiences over different periods, and “a brain locked into a constant state of emergency may struggle with encountering and learning new (potentially disruptive) ideas” (Davidson, 2021, p. 8). I felt the urge, however, to engage educators in conversations during the empathy interviews. I resisted the urge and used memos to converse with educators' thoughts, expressions, and emotions. Reflecting and writing down my thoughts after hearing and

transcribing each interview helped me understand themes, the research process, and my positionality, which in turn helped me address the limitation of being, at the same time, an insider and outsider.

Halaqa as a Research Method

Research methodologies that affirm communities' modes of being and knowledge respond to their evolving realities, practices, experiences, and aspirations (Nakhid, C. et al., 2023). As a form of street data, stories transmit “histories, lessons, and other knowledge to maintain a historical record and sustain cultures and identities” (Safir et al., 2021, p. 62). Engaging participants in self-discovery can facilitate sharing their experiences and insights, thereby enhancing the overall data generation process (Barbour, 2007). Group interviews allow observing and facilitating communication among research participants and “collect data that may not arise in an individual interview because of the group dynamics and interactions” (Ravitch et al., 2021, p. 148). Focus group comments are influenced by context, group dynamics, and members' responses to others' contributions, and provide an understanding of how views are formed (Barbour, 2007).

A halaqa is both a form of focus group or group interview and a research methodology in itself. Halaqa is an example of “Affirming Methodologies,” a theoretical, epistemological, and methodological concept that recognizes the value of indigenous and local knowledge construction practices (Nakhid, C. et al., 2023). Researcher Farah Ahmed (2014) argues that halaqa is a research method, a way to develop Islamic research principles within a critical “indigenous” framework, as it is a more authentic research method than group interviews or focus groups, because it allows participants to articulate their own epistemological and ontological context. Halaqa, a method that values human potential, does not view participants as complex “material subjects” but instead encourages profound meaning realization and personal growth (Ahmed, 2014). As part of employing halaqa as a research method, I will use

narrative inquiry to write all six meetings as stories. I will further explain the connections between narrative inquiry and halaqa in Chapters 7 and 9.

Post-Intervention Qualitative Interviews

Subsequent to the intervention, I interviewed each educator at least one week after the last affinity circle. Interviews afford “deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized data” that provide “insight into individuals’ lived experiences; [an] understand[ing of] how participants make sense of and construct reality in relation to the phenomenon, events, engagement, or experience in focus; and [an] explor[ation of] how individuals’ experiences and perspectives relate to other study participants” (Ravitch et al., 2021, p. 126). These interviews were “in-depth opened,” focused on “digging deep into one’s experiences,” with the researcher using questions prepared in advance “as probes to peel away a superficial understanding of one’s experiences to [reach] a deeper understanding of one’s experiences” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 127). With an affinity-based space, it is crucial to identify and provide space for educators to share their experiences outside of the affinity, especially after they have had time to process and reflect on those experiences.

The interviews also provided a snapshot of the educators’ experiences, especially in the context of the anniversary of October 7 and the presidential election. The interviews sought to help the educators understand how mindfulness aided them in sharing their experiences, how they would like to use storytelling to share their experiences, and how they felt empowered to share their authentic identity. The interviews took place on Zoom, and I recorded and transcribed them. I analyzed the qualitative interview with the use of the MusCrit tool.

Limitations

Focus groups have a few limitations. First, educators may be hesitant to share their experiences in a group setting. Also, ensuring that all shared experiences remain 100 percent

confidential is challenging. In addition, facilitating an affinity-based space posed limitations because the educators did not connect in person and missed the face-to-face human interactions that can help build relationships and trust. In-person side conversations and social interactions happen naturally before and after a meeting. Another limitation is that this affinity space recruited teachers across the entire country, whereas there is some benefit to focusing instead on one geographical area to see if teachers could meet in person. Only Muslim educators who self-identified as women participated (with the exception of Faisal participating in the empathy interviews), as no individuals who self-identified as male completed the interest form. Small sample size is another limitation, as only six individuals participated in the halaqas. Yet another limitation is that I am both an insider and an outsider. I have my own experiences as a Muslim public school educator but am heavily connected to various Muslim communities within my area. As discussed before, using analytic memos helped me process my identity and feelings.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I described the steps I used in creating an intervention centered on my problem of practice. The chapter discusses the theory of change for empowering Muslim public school educators to share their authentic identities and experiences, focusing on the "act" stage of Liberatory Design, in order to combat anti-Muslim leadership practices (National Equity Project, 2023a). Oral traditions in education research, such as halaqa, not only offer a more authentic and participatory environment for communities to explore their learning processes, but also connect educators to their own experiences and worldviews (Nakhid, C. et al., 2023). This chapter discussed the protocols involved in the intervention, including practices from restorative circles, affinity-based spaces, and traditional halaqas, to create a halaqa for Muslim public school educators. In the next chapter, I use narrative inquiry to share the individual and collective experiences of educators who participated in the halaqas, followed by an analysis of those educators and the halaqa space.

CHAPTER 7: RESEARCH AS A STORY: THE HALAQA NARRATIVES

Research can become a story. Using narrative inquiry with the empathy interviews I conducted earlier this year, I employed literary elements in the narrative research to analyze the data. A method of conducting social research called narrative building involves configuring data into a range of diachronic, or storied, formats (Barone, 2007). At the 2024 American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference, I attended an all-morning workshop on narrative research. Meeting researchers and asking them questions about how they used narrative research helped me understand the importance of using storytelling to examine collecting data and generating themes through storytelling. Unlike fiction, which employs similar literary devices, narrative research accounts strike a balance between storytelling interests and literal information, analyzing and reporting research results in numerous formats (Coulter et al., 2009).

Narrative inquiry offers a lens into studying storied lives: “Participants use stories to interpret their experiences with the world, of a certain event, or the world in general” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 93). Narrative construction is a research approach in which the “recasting of data into a storied form is more accurately described as an act of textual arrangement than of analysis” (Barone, 2007, p. 456). Using participants’ recollections of their experiences as a basis, researchers can uncover, comprehend, and create stories by utilizing the framework of narrative inquiry (Bhattacharya, 2017). Point of view is the perspective through which a narrative is told. It presents the relationships between researchers and participants, and the participants’ relationships with one another, with researchers as writers and participants as characters (Coulter et al., 2009).

The sections that follow are narratives of all six halaqas. I wrote each session as a narrative for each halaqa in the first person. At AERA, in my narrative workshop, I used imagining to envision three educators I interviewed in my empathy interviews: Rosa, Faisal, and Huda. I wrote page after page, imagining what a conversation could look like and feel like. I felt

alive, writing out the dialogue and their discourse, from describing their casual joking at the beginning to their deeper conversations about the challenges they faced in their workplace. This exercise helped me realize how powerful it would be to capture the educators' conversations, emotions, and nuances through storytelling.

In narrative research, the writer assumes a position of privilege in deciding which character will "speak" the story, often juxtaposing this account with the marginalized position of the participants, and researchers can make literary decisions to mitigate the researcher–participant relationship (Coulter et al., 2009). In qualitative research, validity “refers to the ways that researchers can affirm that their findings are faithful to participants’ experiences” (Ravitch et al., 2021, p. 166). To ensure validity and mitigate the researcher–participant relationship, I used participant validation strategies, a “process-oriented and person-centered approach to challenging interpretations by creating the conditions for study participants to speak into and about a study” (Ravitch et al., 2021, p. 176). After each affinity circle, I wrote a narrative using narrative inquiry and shared the narrative with each educator. I asked each educator to review the document and answer these questions: (1) Does my storytelling feel right and accurate? If not, can you explain why not? (2) Does the collection of experiences shared in our circle and its interpretation feel true and meaningful? and (3) Am I missing anything? Part of co-constructing narratives is to share stories with educators as a way for them to engage in the research process.

Educator as a Spiritual Practice: Exploring Our Identities

Earlier that day, I spent a few hours reviewing the slide decks, checking each slide for grammar mistakes and adjusting images. I still couldn't believe that this intervention was about to start. I had dreamed, envisioned, planned, and carefully constructed questions and themes for each halaqa for months. I painted an image of what this space could be in my mind, of the hopes

and possibilities it could have for fellow Muslim educators. I held onto this idea of connecting individuals in a space where they could share their experiences, challenges, and joys.

I kicked my kids out of my bedroom, assigned responsibilities to my husband, and said to them in my teacher's voice, "If anyone comes into my bedroom, I am not talking to you for a week." I texted our dads (who live with us) a less threatening message and put my phone on "Do not disturb." Ethics are important to me, and I wanted to ensure that I followed IRB protocols and maintained confidentiality to protect these Muslim educators. Of course, those were empty threats to my boys, and I was stressed. I felt the weight and responsibilities that I felt I owed to my Muslim community. This was much more than just an intervention or a dissertation; everything in my almost-forty years intertwined and came down to this: I could create a space I have always wanted. And that dreaming and hoping led me to this moment.

As I opened Zoom, I carefully placed my notes all around me. I had my facilitation notes and my researcher memo's questions printed with plenty of space to handwrite notes, and I used all three screens to show the slide decks. It felt like the first day of school all over again. I took a deep breath. What if no one showed up? What if I got the pseudonyms wrong? What if I misled the group and everyone hated me? What if I messed up IRB protocols? I took a deep breath. And then a few more.

A notification popped up. Someone was in the waiting room—and then a few more. As I let educators into the Zoom room, I quickly changed their real names to pseudonyms. And then it was a group of six. I realized I knew all of them somehow, but none knew anyone else. I immediately felt this connection, and I was filled with hope.

I smiled, took a deep breath, and smiled again. Six educators were in this space with me. Asiya is an educational diagnostician who manages special education services. Umme-Rumaysa is a second-grade teacher. Hawa was a middle-school teacher and currently held a leadership position. Iman and Kadija are high school English teachers. Sarah is a third-grade teacher. After

spending ten minutes reviewing IRB protocols, I read a Hadith and asked these check-in questions: “Why are you an educator? Why are you here in this space?”

Asiya was the first to answer. “My mother was an educator,” she said. “I grew up in a Muslim school and remember feeling at home there. Remember just feeling like one big family,” Asiya said. “In high school, I joined Future Teachers of America. I enjoyed the idea of the good service that teaching brings to special education. I felt like the next stage of the civil rights movement would be disability rights.” Asiya paused, looking at the screen. “What’s the second question?”

Hawa smiled. “It’s in the chat: ‘Why are you here?’”

Asiya nodded. “I want to support Ambereen and what she’s doing because I have found that this needs to be studied. I wear a hijab. It’s easy for me to get a job, especially in special education, but it is challenging for me to move up. We need to identify the barriers to moving up and getting into leadership positions.”

Umme-Rumaysa raised her hand. “I’ll go next. I love what you said, Asiya. I’m not originally from the States, but I grew up and attended school here. I am a nurturer. I want to help students. I am a multilingual learner and did not know English when I came here. Some teachers were on board, while others would help me halfway through and give up. I realized I wanted to give back and help students like me. I teach in a Latino community with students who don’t speak English. Helping my students out and working with them on their level gave me the peace of mind that I’m making a difference. The way I dress”—Umme-Rumaysa paused and gestured to her black hoodie and niqab—“It’s a stepping stone; like before, I would just wear Western clothes, like a long tunic with baggy pants. Little by little, I had an open abaya, which is like a long robe that’s open on the front. I call it my Harry Potter robe.”

Everyone laughed. Umme-Rumaysa continued, “Just to make my students understand what it is. I’ve always worn the hijab since I was in seventh grade. I want people to see that this is my Dawah. What you see on the news about people from other countries is not true, and that

people are like me. Someone like me who's dressed like this, I talk to men, I talk to women, I talk to whoever. I am open to any question. My biggest motto is that it's not what you ask. It's *how* you ask. You can ask me anything you want, as long as your tone means you're inquiring rather than pointing fingers. That was one of my reasons for being an educator: I want people to see all sides of humanity.”

Asiya asked, “What grade do you teach?”

“Second grade,” Umme-Rumaysa said. “Why am I in this space? It was so much fun last year when Ambereen interviewed me. I was in a calm, comfortable place where I could sit back, drink some chai, and be like, yeah, this is what happened, and that's how the classroom is. But now that my role has changed, it's like a new experience, and I want to give back. I want to help a fellow Muslim and demystify what a Muslim educator is like.”

“It’s hilarious,” Hawa said, “I was supposed to be a lawyer, not a teacher. So, every time I think about it, I laugh. Last payday, my dad reminded me I should be a lawyer. I'm making nowhere near what he expected me to make.” Hawa laughed. “Nevertheless, I became an educator because it takes an extraordinary person to take on the endeavor of being an educator. I'm a middle-school teacher—now teaching adults. I wanted to be an educator without considering the financial ramifications. I told my Dad, 'But Dad, do you see they get a raise every single year?’”

Hawa laughed again. “So not true. Not true at all, especially in my state,” Hawa said. She rolled her eyes. “Not where I live. Asiya, am I saying your name correctly?”

“Yes,” Asiya replied. “Asiya is the pharaoh's wife.”

“Awesome,” Hawa said. “Thank you. I don't want you to feel discouraged, because I think I went through a year and a half of feeling discouraged. Then, I realized I wanted a leadership position, and nothing would stand in my way. Here's a problem, though: Once you acquire that leadership position and you're the only Muslim woman, it's lonely.”

Hawa's voice shifted. "I'm not going to lie to you guys. It's a lonely space. When it comes to culture and religion, you won't find many folks. I was born in Guyana in South America, and I am telling you, I just hugged this woman the first time I met someone in leadership from my country. I was excited to meet someone of my own culture finally. She just happened to be a Muslim woman. She inspired me to do more."

"So why am I here in this space?" Hawa asked. "I am here because 100% I want to help, and I want to spread the word that Islamic educators are good people. They want to help children. They want to ensure that our students are successful. They want to be in leadership positions. They have a voice that should be heard in this space. The Muslim mind is a beautiful thing. I'm excited about this, and Ambereen, I hope you spread the word."

Umme-Rumaysa paused. "I'm going to go off of what you said. Tell me your name again."

"Hawa."

"Hawa, as you said, a Muslim mind is incredible," Umme-Rumaysa said. "We put our heart and faith in Allah, who will guide us no matter what. We try our best, but we have our Lord. We have a higher power who will guide us because He knows our intentions are pure. We're helping for the sake of children. It's all about the children. It's about the children succeeding. It's about the new generation. It's about what's going to happen when we're gone. Then how is the world going to function if teachers don't shape students?"

Initially, Kadija wasn't sure of a pseudonym. Kadija nodded and said, "Ok, I changed my Zoom name to Kadija."

"That's a beautiful name," Iman said.

"It's a common name," Kadija added with a smile. "In college, all my friends were education majors. I've always liked school. I went to public schools and then Islamic schools on the weekends. I teach in a very Muslim city, and a lot of my students and the staff are Muslim. It's a supportive environment. I feel very affirmed in my identity. But I want to keep growing. First, I met Ambereen at AERA and am interested in getting my Ph.D., inshallah, one day. I

want to learn how to create and develop affinity spaces. Lastly, a lot of Muslim and non-Muslim educators have been getting attacked and hacked due to their support for Palestine and what's happening right now in Gaza. Some were reassigned. It's disheartening to see the disregard for Muslim lives by the school district and the country." Kadija paused. "I don't know how people in the south teach. God bless y'all. I would get fired super quickly."

"What do you teach?" Asiya asked.

"High school English," Kadija replied.

"More power to you," Umme-Rumaysa said. "You're in high school. I could never. My comfort zone is kindergarten."

"Like Kadija, I also teach high school—specifically, English," Iman said. "Kadija, when you mentioned connecting with your students, I felt the same." Iman paused and laughed. "I'm laughing because today I was teaching rhetorical appeals. I had this appeal, and it was like, appeal to logic, right? There was a picture of Mr. Spock from *Star Trek*, and the students had blank faces. And I'm like, 'Do you all know who this is?' Nothing. And I'm like, 'Does anybody watch *Star Trek* anymore?' I think that I'm probably older than most of you here today. I've been teaching for almost thirty years."

Iman continued. "I didn't start out being an educator. I started as a teacher. There's a difference. I gradually became an educator along the way in my career. The distinction is a job and a kind of way of being. Being an educator is a spiritual practice for me. Not necessarily telling students what to think, but how to think—like how to learn and develop their own critical-thinking skills—is so important for me. I tell them, 'What I teach you in this classroom is not as important as that exit sign above the door when you walk out. What are you taking with you into the world?' I see my role as somebody who facilitates student learning, not telling them what to believe but how to learn for themselves."

A moment later, Iman continued, "No one has asked me what my experience has been as a Muslim public school teacher in all my years of teaching. Unless you visibly present as

Muslim—a Muslim teacher—it's straightforward for people not to know that you're Muslim. I live in these two worlds: this world of being Muslim in my Muslim community and then going into the public school and assimilating into the culture of the public school that is often at odds with Muslim culture. Trying to know who I authentically am as a Muslim while still fitting into the culture of a non-Muslim school is something that's been a challenge for me. I hope to explore that more in this space.”

“Hey, Assalamu alaikum, everyone. My name is Sarah, and I teach third grade,” Sarah said. “My family moved here from overseas when I was a child, and there weren’t many Muslim or ESL students then. I’m the only Muslim educator in my entire state. I was originally going to become a police officer.” Sarah paused. “I realized I didn’t want to do that after my third year of college. School was a safe place for me. I loved being there more than at home with my family. It is tough when you are the first child in the family, in the first generation, and you're growing up trying to keep your Islamic culture, but then also your ethnicity, your ethnic culture, and then also trying to assimilate. That was one of the reasons I chose to be an educator and be in this space. I want to join a group of Muslim educators to learn from their experiences and develop friendships.”

I took a deep breath and said, “I’m sitting here listening to your experiences and thinking, 'I'm feeling this way, and I think everyone is probably sitting with many different emotions.' Mindfulness is a way of connecting to yourself and in the present moment, just as a way to break away from the day.”

I closed my eyes. “You can close your eyes.” I adjusted my chair so that my feet pressed firmly into the floor. “I’m just doing a little grounding through my feet, touching the ground. I’ll lead through a couple of breaths and then pose a question about some storytelling we’ll do. So, if you get comfortable, feel free to close your eyes. Or, if you want to keep your eyes open, you can focus on a central point somewhere.”

I took a deep breath. “The first breath is for ourselves: who we are and the stories you shared. So take a breath in, then out.” After a minute, I continued. “The second breath is for our community here. For the space we’re collectively building, these relationships we’re building. Take a deep breath in and out. Our last breath is for the gifts we give to each other, our students, our families, and our colleagues’ families. Take deep breaths, in and out, and then think about a gift you wished you could have given.”

I took another breath, knowing I, too, would model how to be vulnerable as a facilitator. “When I think about a gift I want to give, I think about a time with my cousins these past few years. I wish I could have given them the gift of my time and my being able to be there for them in the moment. So that’s a gift I wish I could give.”

Asiya said, “One of the conflicts I’ve felt is how to bring together being Muslim and being in public schools. I was torn between teaching in Islamic schools and public schools. I’ve prayed about it. I put my head in sajdah.” Asiya made a motion with her head, bending slightly forward. “The first thing that came to me was ‘iqra.’ That is the first word ever revealed, ‘iqra.’ And I said this is my religion. This is my jihad. This is my duty. Literacy. The most beautiful gift for anyone Muslim, not Muslim, old, young. The Prophet always said you can free a slave by teaching them to read. He always wanted to raise our intellect by seeking knowledge. The Quran models the way to teach literacy with phonemic awareness. When you teach the Quran, you learn phonemic proficiency. You recite, you memorize. It rhymes. It has all of the phonological awareness elements as the basis for literacy. And then have that critical thinking. There are ayahs in the Quran about the deaf, dumb, and blind. They didn’t understand. I hope I can give that gift to you all to let you know that it marries both worlds in every way. Everybody here is involved with literacy.”

“I love what you said, Asiya,” Iman said. “As an English teacher, I’m not necessarily teaching phonemic awareness, but teaching students how to read critically and closely. That’s an essential skill. I’m happy that is your calling.”

As I realized that the time was approaching nine o'clock, I had to rush to the closing. I omitted the last slide and activity and went with a request that I used in my mindfulness classes, which is something natural to me in my faith as a Muslim. I asked the group, "Share a hope, a wish you have for everyone for this next week. You can unmute or share in the chat. Share your wishes for everyone as we go through this next week, and then we can end."

"My hope for everyone," Umme-Rumaysa said, "is that they find barakah, blessing, in their time because that's what I'm desperately trying to hold on to. I pray that Allah grants that to all of us and that we find fulfillment in our week."

"I hope," Iman said, "that everyone permits themselves to say no to an ask that somebody gives you if you don't want to do something and it doesn't align with what's important to you. I hope you can say no because we say yes to too many things."

"I wish everybody a safe week," Kadija said, shaking her head. "I'm sorry. I've been in a pessimistic era of life, and everything just makes me sad. I was just thinking about the students in Georgia. So I hope everybody stays safe in their school environments because we have no gun control and no hazard pay either, but I'm just being sarcastic."

"Kadija, I agree with you," Hawa said, nodding. "I lived two blocks away from a school shooting. I pray that everyone has a safe week, and I pray for patience this week."

"Going off with what you said, Hawa," Sarah said, "I hope everybody has an easy week because kids are going crazy."

"Thank you, everyone," I said. "I wish all of you a peaceful, restful week without drama. I'll see you all next week and follow up with a reminder email and agenda, inshallah."

I stayed on in case anyone had a question, while almost everyone left the Zoom room just as quickly as they had joined. Hawa and Umme-Rumaysa stayed on.

"Ambereen, thank you for the last-minute reminder." Hawa laughed. "I was going over my daughter's homework, and then I was like, I have to jump on."

I laughed as well. "I get it. I had three alarms set."

Umme-Rumaysa said, “I was so exhausted. But coming here, the breathing, the community building—I felt I was close to these women, even though I've never met them. Just hearing their stories, I feel like I'm strong. Inshallah, this is going to be good and beneficial. Ambereen, this will be another one of your bonuses in the hereafter. If we stick together as one ummah, we can overtake whatever wants to bend or change us. We must carry a huge burden: being kind to others, helping others, and guiding others.”

Three Cups of Tea: Our Pasts and People

“I was supposed to go to law school. I finished my master's degree in political science, and the natural path would be law school, right?” Hawa pondered with the group. She was sitting in her living room, her background blurred. Sarah, Kadija, Asiya, and Iman all nodded.

I asked the group to share stories about past, present, and future individuals who supported and influenced them in some way as educators. Hawa continued: “I changed my mind, and I became an educator. I was hired at a school I attended, and I was 24”—she laughed—“but I looked like I was 16. I still knew all the kids there, since it was in my neighborhood. God was looking out for me because I was placed teaching sixth grade in the gifted and exceptional student education program. My team had these four women, and we taught the core subjects. We were the ‘A’ team, these women.”

Hawa took a deep breath and pushed her hair out of her eyes. “It's like they took me under their wing. A lot of things were new to me. These women made it easy; they were all significantly older than me. They are all now retired. Unfortunately, one of them passed away. They saw in me what I wasn't seeing. In my 10th year, only one was still teaching, and she told me, ‘You have until the end of the year when I retire, and you are no longer going to be here either.’ I said, ‘Where am I going to be?’ And she was like, ‘Well, not here. You need more.’ They collectively pushed me to find a job. A month before school ended, they found me a perfect job with our union, and I told them no.”

Hawa laughed. “They went ahead and applied for me! They knew my personal information anyway because we were part of a team. These ladies truly changed the trajectory of my life. I ended up getting the job. They had so much confidence in me. I am blessed to have them as my support system. They’ve been there for every single one of my children’s births. They were at my wedding. Everything. They were at my side when my parents were getting divorced. That was tough stuff. It’s a blessing to have them. I don’t know how much longer I will have them.”

Asiya shared next: “One of my professors taught us about curriculum-based measures, which were new then. This is the first I have heard of them. After I started my podcast, I asked her to be a guest. I was proud to have had her, and she introduced me to well-known educators in special education. They agreed to be on my show. I find myself very privileged. What person gets to be taught by every great professor you know in the field? Even for an hour or two hours or a couple of weekly conversations? They are inspirational. They don’t think anyone listens to their knowledge. But by being part of my show, I can tell them, ‘Yes, I hear you. I will make sure people listen to it for years to come.’ It’s a big honor. It’s influenced everything.”

“Hawa,” Sarah said, “As you were sharing your story, I thought about the code we have in our school: ‘It takes a village to raise a kid.’ No matter how old we are, we always need a village, and we also support a village. That resonated with me. I was going to criminology school to become a detective and into forensics.” Kadjia shook her head and mouth, no. Sarah continued: “Well, yeah, I changed my mind. I was inspired to become a teacher because, when I first moved here, we didn’t have many teachers who taught ESL and there was no one from my background.”

Sarah’s voice dropped. “I was lonely as an ESL child. The ESL teachers couldn’t support me well until my favorite teacher came along in middle school. She could teach all the core subjects and not pull us out of our classes. During my experience working with her, she taught

me how to be empathetic and patient. I apply that to my students because they need it. Her teaching still resonates with me.”

“I love what everyone has shared,” Iman said. “I’m trying to see if a thread is running through, because that’s how my mind works. It seems to me that the people who influence us as educators are the people who value us as human beings first. That feeling of being valued as a human being is so powerful. That’s the foundation for any knowledge you gain, or learning that you do, or anything right: to feel valued as a human being.”

“In high school, I was in the IB program,” Kadija said. “I had two educators. One of them was Mr. M. He was a sponsor for the Muslim Student Association, which I became president of. He never taught me, but he’s always been a mentor in organizing and supporting some students. My history teacher was great because he was the first to tell me that I was excellent in different ways. There was a lot of emphasis on being good at science and math, and he was very encouraging. When I went through moments where I had some teachers that I struggled with who were racist, he was supportive of me during that period. He still texts me.”

“I also had a teacher who supported me in high school,” Iman said. “Mrs. G taught English my sophomore year. English has always come easily, but she has encouraged me to improve my strengths. She made me work hard in a subject where I didn’t have to work hard before. I appreciated that because she saw that there was something that could be improved upon. Whenever I think of an effective teacher, I think of her. I try to channel her into my teaching.”

Kadija gestured toward Asiya. “I’ll end with an example like what Asiya was talking about. When I started teaching, I was 22 and had a group of teachers in my school. They were young, early-career black women teachers. We ran that school by supporting each other. Anything racist, homophobic, sexist, whatever happened, we were there to check them. People already knew not to come into our classroom with exclusionary language. We went up against Zionists together. It was rough. They tried to bully me because I’d been supporting a Palestinian

student who was talking about her experience going through checkpoints. Our group of black women teachers just held each other down. We still talk. We still have our group chat.”

“You are lucky to have other Muslims you work with,” Asiya said. “I don’t have that in my school. I often feel like I’m the only one.”

“Yes, very lucky,” Hawa said. “I have no one, literally, no other Muslim at all.”

“There’s one other Muslim teacher at my school and one para educator. This is a staff of 120 teachers,” Iman said. “Yeah, definitely feeling in the minority.”

“I have to tell you all something,” Hawa interjected. “I need help with this situation. I was at a school today. I visit schools to check working conditions and if teachers need specific professional development. I was at a school today, and I don’t know why, but all of the Indian and Muslim people avoided me like the plague. It’s like, ‘Hi, I’m Hawa. I’m from the union. I’m here to help you. Would you like a snack?’ And they look at me, turn around, and walk away.”

“Is it because you’re from the union or...?” Asiya asked.

“I don’t know; I’m trying to figure that out,” Hawa said. “I researched, and we have quite a few Muslim teachers in our school district. The only way we could get Eid off was based on the number of Muslim educators and the number of Muslim students.”

“It’s the union. They see you as the union person,” Sarah said. “It might also be that you are in a leadership position.”

“Three cups of tea,” Asiya said, referencing the memoir by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin. “If you just jump into talking about union, you haven’t had three cups of tea first.”

“I never say here, ‘I’m here to save you.’ I don’t ever believe that,” Hawa said. “I don’t think that union membership is about saving somebody. It’s about being a part of a professional organization, a sisterhood, and a brotherhood.”

“Can I jump in real quick?” Kadija asked. “In workplaces, many people have been burned by people who share the same identity.” She went silent for a minute. “I experienced this a lot when it comes to older, black administrators, where they burn you. Afterward, you say, ‘Okay, I

don't know your intentions.' We work in school environments where educators of color have to go above and beyond to get the positions that they are. It's survival mode. I experienced that with one of my assistant principals. Sometimes, she's hard on black women. Some of the things that happen in the classrooms of white teachers' classes, like the things that she would dig me on, she doesn't say anything to white women. I'm a little guarded when I see older black women in positions of power."

Kadija gestured to her hair. "That same administrator wrote up a friend of mine for helping a child do her hair. As a black woman, why would you do that? Given the history of our hair? Why would you write up a teacher for building relationships with their students? That could have been a conversation, but you had to write her up to flex your power."

"That's a good point about not wanting to be in the spotlight," Iman said. "Even if you know the attention is positive, it's still a lot of attention on you. If you're already part of a minority group, and there are already possible suspicions about who you are and what your motives are, then do you belong here?" Iman asked. "Stereotypes about a person may lead them to not invite more attention, especially from people in leadership positions. Muslims have been overlooked or mistreated. That undermines the trust in individuals and the system as a whole."

Hawa unmuted herself and said, "I appreciate everyone's honesty. I've been struggling with this."

Iman nodded. "I was in a leadership position at my school for fifteen years. Something happens when you go into leadership. There's an automatic, built-in lack of trust when you enter leadership. Teachers don't see you as trustworthy because you do not have the same teaching or professional experience they have daily. And an adversarial relationship that is built in, like teachers versus leaders. I don't think it should be that way."

"Like my students would say, 'you're the cops, you're the feds,'" Kadija said with a smile. "Trust is hard. It needs to be built and developed."

“Funny, you all bring up trust.” Hawa smiled. “Everyone from other cultures welcomes me.”

“I would add,” Iman interjected, “Muslim leaders need to be more empathetic to Muslim educators and adult learners, especially when they seem distant or unwilling to engage.”

Hawa smiled. “I will bring three cups of tea to my next school visit tomorrow.”

Asiya nodded. “You just need to have tea together.”

I unmuted myself and pasted a snapshot of the closing slide. “Would anyone like to read the closing quote?”

Sarah waved her hand. “Mehdi Hasan said, ‘We must challenge the powerful, question the established norms, and speak out against injustice.’”

“Thank you,” I said, looking across my computer screen to all these women in this space. “I feel we hit this topic today. Share whatever comes to your mind and a wish you want to share with everyone this week for this next week.”

Asiya shared first. “When I think about injustice, I think about not just things happening around the world, but things happening in our schools, and how special education is supposed to be the path to social justice and equal opportunities. Speaking up against injustice is part of our deen.”

Iman said, “There's just a certain emotional and mental bandwidth that I sometimes struggle with. Yes, I want to challenge the systems and norms in my school, especially as there is a norm of ignoring the concerns of Muslim students. Admin gives a, on the surface, ‘Yes, we hear you’ response, but then no follow-up, just forgetting that Muslim students have made these requests.”

Sarah typed in the chatbox and shared her wish for everyone: “I wish everyone a restful week. We have conferences next week, and there will be lots of grading. I feel you, Iman and Kadija.”

Kadija shook her head. “I just want to get all my grading done. I have a student teacher, too. It’s a lot.”

“Teaching English, I feel that too,” Iman added.

“Thirty-five kids in one class,” Kadija added.

Everyone shook their heads in disbelief. Hawa unmuted herself and said, “I wish all of you a week of patience. I hope all your grading gets done promptly, which I’m one hundred percent sure it will. I hope you take a few minutes to yourself every single day.” She paused and smiled. “What Ambereen does with us at the beginning and the end is pretty awesome, even if it’s like five minutes for yourself because those breathing exercises go a long way.”

I smiled in appreciation and unmuted. “I wish you all a week of rest.”

Challenges in Our Workplaces: “We have to be better people.”

“The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion, and sympathy are just like one body: When one of the limbs suffers, the whole body responds with wakefulness and fever,” Asiya said, reading the opening hadith. The conversation today centered on the support received.

On the screen, I saw Iman, Asiya, and Kadija. Umme-Rumaysa had messaged me that she was running late. Sarah told me that she had parent conferences.

Kadija kept her video hidden, but we saw her profile picture of herself performing on stage, holding a mic and her hair wrapped in a gold scarf. She said, “The state of the ummah is concerning. I’m feeling a little overwhelmed. My grades are almost done. Today, my student teacher helped me with that.” Kadija expressed gratitude to her student teacher for their support and guidance.

“On Friday, I interviewed a prominent speaker on my podcast and received praise,” Asiya said. Her voice shifted. “My brother lives in a different state, has a disability, and needs support. My mom is too old and far away. I asked the mosque to help, but they brushed me off.”

“Assalam Alaikum, everybody,” Iman said, and greeted the group. “One moment where I experienced support last week was Friday. I was in a conversation with one of our assistant principals. We talked over email about an initiative at our school. I felt it was done hastily, without enough context to give to the staff about why we were doing it, and without enough planning time to recommend students and participate. The assistant principal was very empathetic, and she agreed with me. I told her I would have liked to recommend some Muslim students for this because Muslim students at our school want to talk about their experiences.”

Umme-Rumaysa joined the call and unmuted. “I’m sorry, I had to write an e-mail to a parent. Iman, how did your Muslim students react?”

“They didn’t want to participate,” Iman explained. “Administrators and teachers haven’t built trust with Muslim students. A lot of Muslim students don’t feel comfortable being visible with their Muslim identity because they don’t want to invite negative comments from people, or they aren’t seen in our building.” Iman paused. “I am optimistic. I hope this conversation with the administrator will yield some movement toward helping students.”

Umme-Rumaya adjusted her hoodie. “We have a lot of Muslim teachers, both who cover and who don’t cover, and it feels very welcoming because our principal keeps it that way. People need to be mindful and be open-minded towards everyone.”

“Last week, some of my favorite students got into a fight,” Kadija said. “This is the third student kicked out. If students are being violent, there’s a reason why. School leaders kick out students instead of addressing why.” Kadija shook her head. “I love my kids. I see them as human beings who struggle to regulate emotions. It’s looking bad for them. I wrote a letter to support them staying in the building.”

“I am reflecting on the question about a time when you felt supported,” Asiya said. “As we go around, I observed we aren’t getting support. We’re the ones advocating for other people and for ourselves. I was trying to find a time when I felt supported this past week, and nope. Our school made us attend a training on how to protect ourselves in a school shooting. The first

example was the nightclub shooting in Florida. They said the shooting was Islamically motivated.”

Hawa shook her head. “That's not even a school shooting!”

“I know!” Asiya exclaimed. “The trainer brought up a few other shootings, all done by Muslims, and none of them in schools. When I asked why, he said there was a crisis and that first responders must react immediately. There are a lot of videos of the Christchurch mosque shooting, and he didn't bring that up at all. Then, in the end”—she paused and drew an X over her face with her hands—“He says, ‘Don’t say the shooter’s name.’ They showed a big picture with an ‘X’ on the mouth. This guy has no empathy.”

“I’ve noticed that every single time the shooter is a white person,” Umme-Rumaysa said. “Someone says, ‘Oh, they had a mental illness.’ When it’s a Muslim or a black shooter, they’re instantly labeled a terrorist.”

“This might be messed up, but I told my students, ‘If there's ever a school shooter, I'm not saving nobody because I'm not here to be a security guard. I love y'all and will help,’” Kadija said, shaking her head. “I would have left the PD. We have metal detectors in all these schools with black and brown kids. But go to the suburbs, 20 minutes up the road, and no metal detectors are in the schools.”

“It’s moments like this that I remember what the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: that, in the very beginning, when Islam was being spread, people were being tortured, but they had to be patient, and as difficult as that is, you have to understand that we have to be better people,” Umme-Rumaysa said. “We have to believe that Allah will take care of us and put that belief in our hearts that it will work out. We believe we're gonna be strong, and we got this.”

“If it's okay, I was hoping to lead us through mindfulness and some journaling,” I said. I suggested grounding to help process emotions and stay in the present. I asked everyone to close their eyes and focus on their breaths to remain present and process the heaviness of the conversation. I also mentioned the lack of support and the importance of being present in the

space, encouraging everyone to take deep breaths for themselves, the space they create, and their identity as educators, connecting to their faith and values.

I paused. “Think about a time when you felt like you were identified or felt you knew you were a Muslim in the workplace, in your school, in your building. What do you wish others understood about your Muslim identity? Take a few deep breaths and think about that. And when you're ready, you can open your eyes.”

“During Ramadan, for sure,” Iman wrote in the chat box. “Colleagues would offer me food, and I had to say, ‘No thank you; It’s Ramadan. I’m fasting.’ I wish my colleagues were aware of this time of year.”

“At school, we have International Week, and the school hangs up flags all along the hallways,” Asiya said. “Just so happened, the first flag was the American flag. The flag opposite it was Iran. I stood in the hallways.” Asiya held her hands out to her side. “It showed both sides of me. I'm half Iranian and half American. And isn't this cool?”

Everyone nodded, and Asiya continued. “Weeks later, they added more flags, as a few were missing. They moved the U. S. flag to be side by side with the Israel flag. So I went to the assistant principal, steaming mad. If the Israeli flag had ended up in that spot randomly, as the Iranian flag had, I would not have said anything. But somebody purposefully moved the flag from there. We have several Palestinian students. Then, the assistant principal moved the flag.” Asiya paused. “I’m exhausted by these microaggressions. If I vent, give me space. Sometimes I feel like I'm burdening people by talking to them.”

“I know everyone thinks of Eid for religious observations, but I value the last ten days of Ramadan,” Umme-Rumaysa said. “I never take off unless it's an absolute emergency. But I want to take off those days this year and read the Quran and pray.”

“That’s a good point,” Kadija said. “I tried my best to go to the mosque every night during the last ten nights of Ramadan. It was rough. I was tired. At our school, a lot of teachers and students fast. It’s a culture shift. The kids get into it. They put on their hijabs. We organized an

Eid celebration, and my principal paid for it. My only issue was when another colleague commented about why we're doing all of this for Eid. I didn't necessarily address her, because some things are just not worth addressing.”

“I treat the staff to food on Eid,” Asiya said. “It’s a good way to start a conversation.”

“I think the time that becomes very evident that I’m Muslim is during Ramadan,” Iman said. “Ramadan is a month long. It's an opportunity for me to try to educate people about Islam. Some days, I welcome that. Other days, I wish people would just find out on their own. I don't want to be the one who's responsible for educating people. There are enough of us now that you know what our holidays are. When I tell people I’m fasting, they're respectful and say, ‘I'm sorry that I'm eating in front of you.’ And I have to assure them, ‘No, that's fine.’” Iman pauses. “You guys know what kahk is? Like ma'amoul? It’s a shortbread cookie with date filling. ”

“I love ma'amoul,” Umme-Rumaysa said.

“I bring that in, and we share that,” Iman said. “It’s challenging. I’m fasting for 30 days in such a demanding job. People recognize that it is hard. But when people say, ‘Oh, I could never do it; you can't even drink water,’ I know they're well intentioned, but as a fasting Muslim, I want to hear, ‘Tell me more about that. What does that feel like? Why is that important to you?’”

“It'd be great if they do their research, right?” Kadija said. “We did a PD about me because some teachers used to say to the kids, ‘Oh, you're fasting. You shouldn't be doing this.’ That’s not your place to say that. Just encourage them and have empathy. Don’t treat them like a science experiment. We had to do a PD because I was annoyed by people saying insensitive things. I’m like, ‘Girl, go Google fasting.’”

I noticed the time inching toward 9 o'clock and typed the closing questions into the chat. I unmuted and said, “Ingrid Mattson is the former ISNA president. And she said, ‘If they can't handle me challenging them, they can't handle the rest of the world.’ And I look at all of you, your resilience, strength, and how you are coming together in this space. So my hope for all of

you is that you take this support here, and you carry it with you, this hope, this power right here, and just carry it with you.”

“I hope that everyone has a calm week,” Iman said. “Kadija, I hope your kids remain in school. I know it's not easy, but just take that support wherever you can find it.”

“I hope everybody remembers to take the time to pray about what they want,” Asiya said.

“Thank you, Iman,” Kadija said. “I hope my kids stay. I hope that, inshallah, everyone has a good week—no drama, no issues, just good vibes.”

“I hope everyone has blessings in their day,” Umme-Rumaysa said. “Try to find the good and magnify it so that it can overshadow the light and reduce the darkness into smaller pieces. Find the good thing and make it bigger. Maybe that one big thing could be your light, like your shining light at the end of the tunnel.”

Navigating White Spaces as Muslim Educators: “Stories of Perseverance.”

“You know, it has been crazy, especially when we are being demonized again in other parts of the world,” Hawa said.

I had just led everyone through a mindfulness practice and asked what it felt like to be a Muslim educator.

“Two words come to my mind: lonely and isolating,” Iman answered. “At my school, I'm only one of two Muslim educators. I'm connected professionally but not personally. African-American and Hispanic educators are also marginalized, but it looks differently for them. They have a pretty kind, tight-knit community. Their collective voices can be raised to express their concerns. When you're one person, you don't have a collective voice. It's one voice. So you don't have the same sort of visibility. You don't have the same sort of power. I have support among educators of color because they understand what it's like to be marginalized, but not completely.”

“I agree. I am struggling with what's been happening in the world, right?” Hawa asked. “I feel that every time I say something about it, everyone knows that I am Muslim. They look at me like, 'Are you saying something bad about the Jewish people?' And I'm like, 'No, what I'm saying is that there's a lot of people dying, and it needs to stop.' I hate that. As a Muslim woman, I can't just say something like that.”

“Iman, I can relate,” Asiya said. “I supported administrators in becoming superintendents, but they would forget about me once they got into those positions. I saw pictures of my colleagues on social media. Some of them went to church together, too. No one invites me to anything social, unless it's the whole school, and they must include me. They don't see me as somebody they could be a regular friend with and just hang out with.”

“My experiences are a little different,” Sarah said. “It stings when people don't invite you. I'm the only Muslim teacher and the only person of color. My fifth-grade team was supposed to mentor me in my first year, but they were toxic and never invited me to their gatherings. But, in my second year, I moved grade levels, and things changed. I took the initiative, planned outings, and was invited to events in return. My former team members saw that and invited me to their events. I refused, because when I needed that support, that circle wasn't there. I don't want to be part of that group.” Sarah paused. “Most people are interested in learning about me. I always ensure that my actions and character speak first, and my work does before my words.”

“I'm so sorry that you must go through that,” Umme-Rumaysa said.

Sarah nodded. “I've noticed that, in my South Asian culture here and Muslim culture here, especially with women, they don't like talking about work for some reason. I go to the mosque, a community dinner, or something. Once they realize that I'm not a housewife, I have a profession, I'm very career-oriented, and I have my degrees, they don't want to talk anymore. I've finally learned how to be okay.”

“You are not accepted by either,” Asiya said. “Your cultural group does not accept you.”

“People should have a broader mindset that incorporates other people's thinking,” Umme-Rumaysa said. “Sorry, everyone, I’m feeling awful. I’ve been sick all week. I like this community because it's women talking from different parts of the states. It's just real nice to have a calming place.”

“I hope you feel better soon,” Sarah said.

“I use the book *Under My Hijab* to explain to students why I wear hijab,” Asiya said. “This book has pictures in it that show the little girl. It shows several women who are related to this girl, and each woman has a job. Whenever any kids ask me, I pull out the book and show them, and it's a good conversation. One of my students with severe autism used a mesh fabric from P.E. to put around his head and pretended to be me. I’m like, I’m his celebrity!” Asiya smiled brightly. “I never thought my students looked to me like they wanted to be like me. Kids are just kids. They’re not like adults. They are more genuine.”

“I started smiling when I heard this,” Kadija said, showing her video. “I was making food when I realized I had not opened my phone. So, I apologize. I feel affirmed in my Muslim identity.” Kadija paused and moved around in her background. “It’s hard being a Muslim supporting Palestinians and speaking out about it. A teacher was pulled out of the classroom for being vocally pro-Palestinian. Another teacher in her school was a staunch Zionist and doxxed a student who made a project about comparing the black struggle to the Palestinian struggle. That teacher took a sabbatical and wasn't investigated. But the Muslim teacher was pulled out of the classroom, and now she's in this limbo where they're going to investigate, you know, 'BS, BS.' Still a lot of Islamophobia. Some teachers are protected, and some aren't.”

Everyone grew silent and nodded in agreement. Kadija continued: “The teacher across the hall is a Zionist and fought in the Israeli army. When I first met him, my assistant principal asked me to help him decorate his classroom, knowing I'd help any teacher. He and I talked. I told him how I felt, and we were cool. One day, he and the other teacher next to me argued. She’s white and anti-Zionist. They argued. I didn't get involved as I already know how things get

pinned on Muslim teachers, especially if you're vocal, right? Admin, who's all black and non-Muslim, heard about the argument and sided with the white Zionist teacher. They said, 'How can you say that about the only Jewish state?' On the surface, the admin seems supportive, like funding activities and decorations for Ramadan and Eid. But they don't do the work."

"It gets exhausting," Asiya said. "You don't want to be the organizer of everything."

"Yes, I have to do the work to get it done," Kadija agreed. "We have a large Muslim population. Admin should take the initiative. They don't even understand how long it takes for students to pray. So, kids are kids, and they'd be gone for the whole period. I told admin, 'It doesn't take long to make wudu and pray, unless there's a long line to make wudu.' You know, kids don't do long prayers." Everyone laughed. "Admin had no idea. It's too much for me to lead this."

While Kadija was talking, I added the closing ceremony quote by Dr. Omar Suleiman in the chatbox.

Sarah volunteered to read. "Sometimes," Sarah said, "You wish you had never met certain people, but then you grow and realize that they were a gift in disguise and contributed to making you who you are."

"I'm sitting right now with what Khadija just said," I said. "So, how are you feeling about your space today? What was challenging for you? What was a gift for you? And please share a hope."

"When you hear about other people's experiences," Sarah said, "Sometimes your challenge or struggle doesn't seem as big. And you get more ideas as to how to solve it."

"This space is helping me," Kadija started. "When you're in certain environments, you can feel complacent. Hearing your experiences makes me reflect on how my school shows up for me as my identity as a Muslim. I'm reflecting on how admins can do better to ensure a safer environment."

“I'm so grateful for all of you,” Hawa said. “I love listening, and it truly gives me a new perspective. Thank you.”

“The challenging part for me today was talking, because it hurts,” Umme-Rumaysa said. “This is a place where we can give each other solace even if you go through something awful. We're all in this together. I want to be that person to help ease people's sorrows. The more we help people, the more likely Allah will open our paths.”

Umme-Rumaysa continued and gestured toward me on her screen. “Thank you for being here and Ambereen for even having this group. I'm learning a lot from all of you, and I wish you nothing but the best. Until next time. Inshallah.”

“Asiya, everybody deserves a fair shot,” Kadija said. “We shouldn't be looked down upon because of who we are and what we represent, right? So, Inshallah, I hope and wish you success in that.” She paused. “I hope to continue my grading. And have a peaceful weekend, inshAllah.”

Iman said, “I hope that you will continue to care for yourself so that you can care for others.”

Hawa shared next. “May you all be blessed.”

“I hope everyone has a wonderful week,” Sarah said. “Things will be easier, inshaAllah.”

I ended the call with my hope for all of them. “I hope you take a moment. Just to breathe. That's my hope.”

Dreaming of Empowerment: Truths and Community as Healing

“Empowerment is when you have a seat at the table, and even if people don't agree with what you shared,” Asiya said. “That's when you have a voice.”

It was the following Monday night when Asiya, Sarah, and Kadija were on Zoom. Umme-Rumaysa messaged me that she was sick but hoped to join soon. I had led everyone through a mindfulness practice and asked, “What does it mean to empower your community?”

What can empowerment look like, feel like, and sound like?" These were dreaming exercises. I also asked them about wellness for their community.

While Asiya talked, I remembered praying for her family and wrote about it in the chat. Sarah typed the same, and Asiya nodded in appreciation.

Sarah said, "Empowerment should be inclusive. Even if it's not accepted, everybody's idea should be respected without being shunned. Cultures and holidays should be celebrated with equality as well."

"Empowerment is when I am acknowledged when I speak up about something. Instead, I'm brushed off," Asiya said. "I want to grow and learn. We attend professional development on this, but my school district doesn't see me as a potential leader. Do you see a lot of Muslims as principals?" Asiya paused. "I know one Muslim administrator in our district. During Ramadan, she told staff and students how she sneaks into her garage to drink whiskey. It's okay to be Muslim, but not *that* Muslim."

"That would make me angry," Sarah said.

"I was angry," Asiya said. "That's the level that she stooped to in order to prove that she wasn't that big of a Muslim. That somehow made her better."

"I'm in a district with a lot of Muslims, right," Kadija said. "But there are no Muslims in senior leadership at district or school levels. My admin does the bare minimum to accommodate Muslim students. The progress in equity and Islamic representation is largely due to grassroots efforts by educators. More needs to be done. That's why I believe people must be represented in their leadership."

I felt compelled to repeat the question to Kadija, given the circumstances surrounding her context of living in a Muslim-majority area. She's the only one of us living in a predominantly Muslim area. "Kadija, in your context, what would empowerment, or maybe even a shared humanity, look like for you?" I paused, remembering my inclusive facilitation. "And feel free to pass on this question."

Kadija looked at us. “A Muslim teacher was pulled out of the classroom for her stance on Palestine. She was being attacked. I saw a Jewish teacher had doxxed a student for making a project on black and Palestinian solidarity. The teacher sent the student’s information to a Zionist organization.” She paused. “As an educator, why would you do that? And that teacher didn’t have any consequences. But the Muslim teacher does. Admin planned professional development that focused on anti-Semitism, ignoring Islamophobia. They overprioritize anti-Semitism over Islamophobia, particularly in the wake of the genocide in Gaza. Empowerment looks like allowing Muslims to have the opinions and beliefs that they do. Empowerment would look like schools partnering with Muslim organizations and masjids to create equitable spaces and environments for Muslim students and addressing Islamophobia.”

“I envision a committee for open dialogue about the social studies curriculum that could include parents, teachers, and PTA members, promoting respectful communication and understanding rather than aggressive or violent confrontations,” Asiya said. “In our school system, dialogue about perspectives and contexts is limited due to anti-critical race theory laws. However, understanding different perspectives can be gained through active learning. Universal design can incorporate stories from diverse backgrounds, allowing students to explore their interests and contribute to the curriculum. Students can bring themselves into their lessons. Muslim teachers and district employees may be involved in committees to help children explore their interests, providing opportunities for people to have a voice.”

“I wish I had come on earlier,” Umme-Rumaysa said. She had joined our call a few minutes before and was listening in. I had pasted the questions in the chat for her to see. “Empowering means we help each other grow. Empowerment is helping achieve what we are all trying to teach and learn in a community, regardless of our background.”

“Yes, and if admin can handle the workload and compensates Muslim teachers for time spent on curriculum or training writing, it can open doors for them to other positions and opportunities,” Kadija said. “When admin uses external sources to teach about the genocide in

Palestine, they use sources that make them feel comfortable. They are using a curriculum that pushes their own agenda. I'm like, bro, you could have hired teachers in your district who already do this work for free. They could create a curriculum that would represent Muslim students and identities.” She shook her head. “But they don't, because that would be too much of doing the right thing.”

The group became silent. I added a question to the chat and unmuted my mic. I asked, “What could healing look like to our community?”

“Can I share an experience? As I was looking at dreaming of what might wellness, healing, and mindfulness look like in a Muslim community?” Umme-Rumaysa asked. “The Muslim community is always like looked down on, like other minorities. Muslim women in the same community can bind together. Any group, like PTA, community members, anyone, could say, ‘If one person does something, we're going to be by their side, help them, empower them, encourage them, as opposed to break them down.’”

She continued: “At my school, staff has pictures of Muslims wearing hijab everywhere, on their websites, in the hallways. But, like, the way I dress, I've gotten more snarky remarks—not words—looks from parents who are Muslim rather than people who are not Muslim. What I felt was that, just because I cover, I can't be successful. I've said ‘Salam’ to a Muslim parent who was dropping off her kid and looked me up and down as if I'm being assessed. I feel like a moment of healing would be to have a stronger community within the Muslim community to back each other. If Muslims help each other, then non-Muslims won't have a reason to say that even their own communities put Muslims down and ask, 'Why should we help?' That's what I've noticed. If I walk outside, and a Muslim person I don't know calls me out on whatever, then a non-Muslim person can see that and say, 'If their own people are calling her out, then why should we be an exception to that?’”

“We have to teach kids that positive changes happen when people are uncomfortable,” Asiya said.

“Umme-Rumaysa, I have also experienced the same with my Muslim and South Asian community versus my educator community,” Sarah said.

“Umme-Rumaysa, your point made me think about identity politics and having Muslim representation,” Kadija said. “A lot of Muslims have to do internal work to make sure that they're not internalizing these systems that were brought up, because sometimes you will have representation that is not good. A lot of times, when people of color or people of marginalized or minoritized groups get into certain positions, they start to take on the qualities, characteristics, ideologies, and ways of being of the dominant group. That's not helpful in terms of our movement and what we want to see education be for Muslims and all students.”

“Absolutely! We need to be as 'clean' as possible so that our skeletons from the closet won't return to haunt us!” Umme-Rumaysa enthusiastically said. “Allah grants power to those He wills, and truth remains constant regardless of power. Believe in yourself and identify as a Muslim, knowing that Allah's wills are always true. If we truly, as people—as Muslims—are truthful in positions of power, it will never demoralize us. It will never deface you. You will be victorious because Allah is on the side of truth, and truth never dies. Truth can be healing.”

“I feel a lot,” Sarah said. “With our Muslim community and our culture, we have the biggest identity crisis as we grow up in America.”

“It makes me think of Ta-Nehisi Coates, who just wrote about his experience in Palestine and how he felt like he had a duty and responsibility to tell the truth of what he saw and what the Palestinians showed him when they welcomed him into their home,” Kadija said. “And he said, 'If the only fear I have is whatever they're going to say about me, then I'm in good company because I'm in the company of my ancestors who told the truth regardless of what anybody said, right?' And when we get into these positions of leadership, we want Muslims who are going to tell the truth and be honest and be true to themselves and their identities. That's healing.”

I typed in the chat so everyone could unmute and share a wish.

“Peace,” Sarah said.”

“It's still hot. We're just waiting for fall,” Asiya said. “So if y'all could please wish for me to have cooler weather, that'd be great.

“Find the one good thing and make it bigger,” Umme-Rumaysa said.

“Peace and happiness. Freedom for oppressed groups,” Kadija said. She paused. “But that is a big wish.”

The Divinity of Our Past, Present, and Future: The Stories “That Transcend Human Experience.”

“I want my students to remember when I stopped in the hallway and talked to them. I hope everyone remembers me as a fierce advocate for children with disabilities,” Asiya said, wearing a bright pink shirt and a mosaic black, orange, and purple hijab. “I hope they see me as somebody that makes them think positively about any situation.”

Sarah nodded, pushing back her white-framed glasses. Kadija's video was hidden. I asked them about the stories they want their students to remember them by. Iman just joined in, securing her black headphones in front of a garden wallpaper. Umme-Rumaysa was still sick, and Hawa was still dealing with the aftermath of a natural disaster.

“Special education teachers are superheroes,” Sarah said. “Asiya, thank you for being their advocate.”

“I went to an Islamic conference with a friend. I learned sign language but don't consider myself a professional,” Asiya said. “Thousands attended a keynote session, and I just thought it was terrible that they didn't have an interpreter. So I went up to the stage and interpreted. Years later, I ran into my old friend, and she was like, 'I remember when you got up in front of the stage. People told you to sit down. And you wouldn't, because you wanted to interpret sign language.' That kind of story would be what I hope people remember me by.”

“I want students to remember me by how much I valued the education that I gave them,” Kadija said. “I want my students to remember me as somebody who stood up for injustice and oppression, and allowed them to think critically about the world around them.”

“I want my students and staff to remember me as being an inclusive teacher,” Sarah said. “That I bring in my students' cultures, their beliefs, and their faith.”

“I want my students and colleagues to remember me as someone who dedicated myself to creating an educational environment where all students felt seen, heard, and valued,” Iman said, slipping off her headphones. We nodded to her that we could still hear her without them. “A place where students could take risks, safely, where they could show up as their authentic selves. I want to be remembered as someone who empowered students to be able to know how to think, how to learn, and how to communicate effectively.”

I typed in the chat box, “What should I have asked, but didn't? What's something you want to share with this group?”

“There's a need to understand the experiences of Muslim students in our public schools. It could help them, socially and emotionally, to feel seen and heard and valued for who they are,” Iman said. “Empowering a generation of students to center their experiences as Muslims in the public school system and not feel as though they have to suppress it, hide it, or otherwise just ignore it.”

“Everyone needs to be more aware of Muslim student needs. During Ramadan, one of my Muslim students sat in the lunchroom and didn't have a place to go. I told him he could come to my office anytime. And he did,” Asiya said, motioning her hands to the space next to her, as if her student was sitting there. “We chatted about what surahs he was memorizing and how his family practiced Ramadan, just like millions of families and people around the world.” She paused. “I wish I had this when I was little. I realized from this group that my Muslim students *see* me. They know that they're not the only ones in the school. They see an adult that shares the same practices.”

“I think Muslim students don’t know what they need and how they advocate for their needs,” Iman said. “We need to empower them to advocate for themselves, especially in spaces where there aren’t any Muslim educators. They have to find those allies in their community who will help them advocate for themselves.”

“This group made me more confident and acknowledged the microstresses that we face,” Asiya said. “I spoke up at my last couple of meetings with my diagnosticians. I am continuing my education to better myself. All of it together makes you more confident. Even in my Ph.D. classes, there’s a lot of confidence that you have to face, like ‘Am I the only one that doesn’t know how to do this?’ You don’t want it to be you, because you’re already a Muslim. You don’t want to be the dumb Muslim, too.”

“The perception is that you’re representing all Muslims,” Iman agreed. “The pressure to be beyond what would be expected of any other employee or student is much greater because any mistake that you make is going to reflect badly on other Muslims.”

“They don’t want to see you in that light,” Asiya said. “If you give them a reason, if you make a mistake, then they want to jump on it to say, ‘She always questions people. She always makes these mistakes.’”

“Other minorities say that they, too, have to do more and be beyond reproach,” Iman said. “We all have to work twice as hard to get the recognition that white people have, just by virtue of their privilege.”

“I stopped trying to feel that I’m representing anyone, because part of white supremacy is to dehumanize us,” Kadija said. “If they want to dehumanize me, they are going to regardless if I’m the best or worst in my group.”

“When I came to my new district, I asked lots of questions because I was learning,” Asiya said. “People were upset. They don’t want to see me as somebody who is really trying to learn. You do one thing wrong, and it ruins your whole reputation.”

“I represent myself. I don't represent an entire religion or entire belief system,” Kadija said. “We need to free ourselves from that. We shouldn't have to carry that burden.”

Everyone listened and nodded. Kadija continued: “With all the atrocities going on in the world, and civilians are still targeted, I just can't carry that burden anymore. That's one thing I teach my students.”

“Kadija, I appreciate that,” Iman agreed. “The perception is that other people believe we represent an entire group, and we need to be explicit in saying that we represent ourselves and what we believe.”

“If I was in a predominantly white or a Christian school district, then my feelings would be different,” Kadija said. “I am in a space where there are many different stories that the kids can use to inform themselves about what their ideas of Muslims are, right?”

“I find myself in situations where I'm being asked to represent all Muslims or Islam. I have to remind myself that when I speak, I'm speaking about me and my experiences,” Iman said. “I can't speak for two billion people. It's the responsibility of whoever is asking these questions about Islam to educate themselves and not rely on me or any Muslim person.”

“Seeing the images coming out of Gaza right now, I'm frustrated. I'm black. My parents are from West Africa,” Kadija said. “I grew up in America, and just seeing people basically saying that they don't want to participate in this upcoming election, right?” She asked. “They're black, I'm black, right? The things that they want for the black community are not the things that I want. The fact that we have to walk into spaces and have to represent people doesn't make any sense to me.”

Looking at the clock and taking a deep breath, I said, “I want to acknowledge the pain, the suffering, and also the beautiful growth, and just the nurturing of yourself and having self-awareness in this space. I want to hold that in the space.”

For the closing ceremony, I read out loud the quote from G. Willow Wilson, author of Ms. Marvel. I said, “It's a strange feeling, praying into your hands, filling the air between them

with words. We think of divinity as something infinitely big, but it is also infinitely small—the condensation of your breath on your palms, the ridges in your fingertips, the warm space between your shoulder and the shoulder next to you.”

I continued. “How are you feeling as we close our last circle together? What’s something small or divine that you want to carry with you?” I paused. “I also want to uplift Hawa. She’s dealing with the aftermath of the natural disasters this past week and is unable to attend tonight. Please make dua for her and her family.”

In the chat box, everyone started typing duas for Hawa. A minute of silence went by. Sarah unmuted and said, “I’m grateful that I could learn from everybody. The issues that we discussed gave me a fresh perspective that I’m not the only one going through these challenges.”

“What comes to mind after this circle is continuing my own circles,” Asiya said. “I used to never see Muslim diagnosticians in my state, and since I started my podcast, there are a few educators with less experience than me, and they see me as a mentor. I could develop a group of Muslim special educators. When I was becoming a special educator, I didn’t have a group of people to mentor me that was Muslim. So this circle made me realize the importance of trying to reach out to other developing Muslim educators to support them.”

“Ambereen, thank you for sharing about Hawa. I’ll keep her in my prayers,” Iman said. “I really like the quote that you shared from Willow Wilson. I’d never heard that before, and Miss Marvel? Is that like a comic book series? I didn’t know it was written by a Muslim woman.”

“The character is Muslim and so is the author,” Asiya said.

“I like it because it invites me to reflect on what is the divine,” Iman said. “And I think there’s divine with a capital D, which represents something that transcends human experience, something that is mysterious, something that is kind of unnameable and unknowable, but it’s something that you just feel.”

Iman continued. “I felt a connection with everyone who’s here, even though we all live in different places and we teach in different environments,” Iman said. “I want to carry with me

this feeling of connection to other Muslim educators, and this gratitude that I have for being able to share and listen to your experiences.”

“In the future,” Sarah said, “as I’m going through challenges, I will remember our experiences, ladies.”

“I’m feeling good about being here, and reflecting on my experiences as a Muslim educator,” Kadija said. “What I’m taking with me is peace, calm, and stillness, particularly in a hostile and sad time.”

“There’s something sacred about coming together, being vulnerable, sharing and also supporting each other,” Iman said, “when we can come together and do that in the name of wanting to better ourselves and improve the experiences for our students.”

I loved this conversation, but knew our time was coming to an end. I unmuted and said, “Share a wish or a hope for this next week.” I paused and smiled. “My hope is that you carry this connection, you carry this community, and carry this love that’s here in this space with you.”

“I just wish peace for me, for all of you, for all of our students,” Kadija said. “That’s what the quote made me think of.”

“I just hope for strength for everyone. There’s a lot going on in the world that is very disturbing. ‘Disturbing’ is not even the right word for it. It’s tragic, horrifying, and unbelievable,” Iman said. “I pray for us to remain strong and steadfast in trying to serve those who have no support or voice, trying to serve those who really need us the most in whatever capacity we can. That’s what I pray for, for strength for myself and for all of us.”

“I hope that Ambereen will have no trouble writing her dissertation and send us the final product soon,” Asiya said with a smile. “I wish for everyone to stay connected and find connections with people who can support them.”

“I also have the same hope,” Sarah said: “Stay connected with everyone, and then hope that we all have a peaceful week.”

As I expressed my gratitude to everyone, I jotted down my emotions and feelings on my notepad while listening to these educators. Hearing other Muslim educators' shared experiences, challenges, and perspectives provided me with a profound sense of validation and connection. I felt the impact of their words, conversations, and phrases, and the emotions underlying their language just floating in the air, surrounding me, wrapping me as if it were a hug. I felt honored to witness the strength and agency of these educators, who will forever empower their students, their colleagues, their communities, and myself. For the last time, I ended the Zoom call.

CHAPTER 8: PROFILE ANALYSIS OF MUSLIM EDUCATORS

Connecting Theory of Change to Analysis

In this intervention, I used practices from restorative circles, affinity-based spaces, and traditional halaqas to create a halaqa for Muslim public school educators. I used analytic memos, halaqas, observational field notes, and qualitative interviews as forms of data collection. In alignment with the use of liberatory design, developing an intervention is part of the “act” stage, in which we gather feedback on the intervention to check assumptions (National Equity Project, 2023a). Analyzing the data from this intervention demonstrates one of the Liberatory Design cycle modes: prototype, in which we build and test critical ideas (National Equity Project, 2023a). Addressing historical, political, and social inequities, Ali's (n.d.) MusCrit explores Muslim-American experiences through six tenets: systemic racialized oppression, identity, gender stereotypes, counternarratives, whiteness, and allies. My theory of change guided this intervention:

IF WE	empower Muslim public school educators to share their authentic identities and experiences in an affinity-based space,
THEN	Muslim public school educators will use storytelling practices, practice mindfulness of body and emotions, and create community,
AND WE WILL SEE	those Muslim public school educators create their own ummah, build a network of support, reflect after mindfulness practices, and share stories of their experiences as Muslim public school educators.

The National Equity Project's Lens of Systemic Oppression explores how oppression, including race, gender, class, language, and sexual orientation, hinders progress and prevents action (National Equity Project, 2024). The framework enables me, as a researcher, to examine the experiences of Muslim public school educators, highlighting the systemic aspect of anti-Muslim racism. As mentioned in my chapter on the theory of change, I applied the Lens of Systemic Oppression to my landscape scan illustrating Muslim public school educators'

experiences. On that basis, I developed aims for how Muslim public school educators could address each type of systemic oppression:

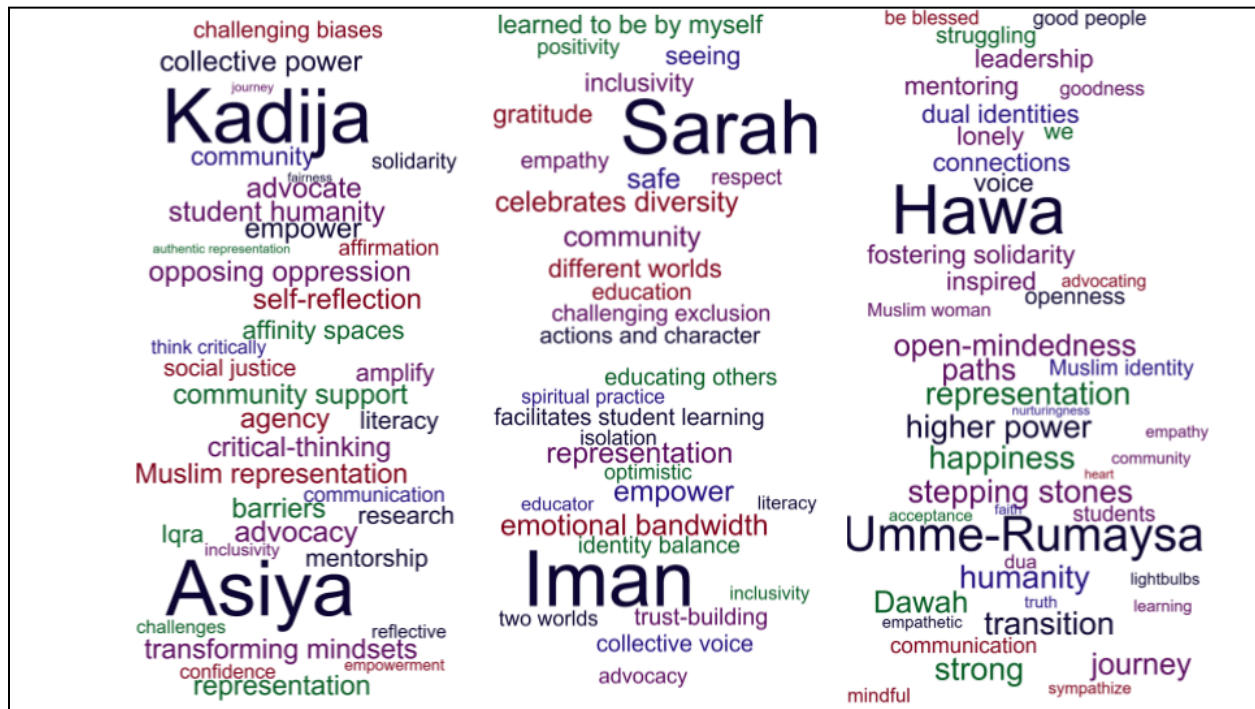
- **Individual:** Muslim public school educators will share examples of colleagues', students', and families' conscious and unconscious beliefs and actions that perpetuate oppression against them.
- **Interpersonal:** Muslim public school educators will share stories about the intersectionality of oppression between individuals and their school systems.
- **Institutional:** Muslim public school educators will share the extent to which Anti-Muslim policies, norms, and practices have affected them.
- **Structural:** Muslim public school educators will use storytelling to create a network, call forth awareness, and identify how they can collectively heal as an ummah.

To analyze the data collected in this study, I used my MusCrit observational field note tool and transcribed the Zoom calls with the use of Otter.AI. I edited the transcripts, paying attention to Arabic words that were not properly transcribed. I read over transcripts multiple times in order to gain a better understanding of statements, themes, and emotions conveyed by these educators. Observational field notes enable researchers to observe and record participants' activities in specific contexts, serving as a valuable method for data triangulation (Ravitch et al., 2021). The analysis of group interaction requires a thorough examination of individual voices within each circle's discussion (Barbour, 2007). As discussed earlier in analyzing my empathy interviews, I used MusCrit observational field notes to identify examples of MusCrit tenets, themes, and evidence. Since then, I have reflected on how I used this tool and made changes to how I would analyze data from the MusCrit tool for this portion of my DoP. For each educator, I completed a MusCrit observational field note for each halaqa the educator attended. For example, for the MusCrit tenet on anti-Muslim racism, I read over the educator's conversations and dialogue so that I could identify any evidence pertaining to the tenet. While I identified whether the educator was emerging, developing, or transforming, this tool became a guide to

help me “see,” as part of Liberatory Design—to understand how these educators address types of systemic oppression in their lives.

Figure 38

Themes from Muslim Educators (Source: WordCloud.app)



In this chapter, I present the findings and analyses of Muslim educators, guided by my theory of change and four MusCrit tenets: anti-Muslim racism, the impact of Muslim identity, whiteness as property and norm, and essentiality of co-conspirators. Under each MusCrit tenet, I identified themes and evidence supporting how Muslim public school educators address each level of systemic oppression. At the beginning of each educator’s profile, I created a word cloud identifying themes, key concepts, and ideas repeated by the educator, to emphasize their individuality and experiences. (See Figure 38.) For each educator, I created a visual showing how I applied the Lens of Systemic Oppression to the themes identified from my MusCrit observational field note tool. Using the National Equity Project’s Lens of Systemic Oppression can help me, as a researcher, identify places and circumstances in which Muslim public school educators face oppression. I wanted to focus on each educator as an individual, to share their

stories and experiences while in a collective space. To truly humanize each Muslim educator, we must examine their challenges, joys, and beliefs. In the next chapter, I will present the findings from, and analyses of, examining halaqas as a space.

Asiya: “Part of Iqra is to get rid of ignorance and stand up for justice.”

Asiya is an educational diagnostician who manages special education services in public schools. She does not teach in a classroom but rather assesses students and oversees special education programs. Asiya is passionate about literacy and critical-thinking skills, which she sees as profoundly connected to Islamic teachings on seeking knowledge. She also has personal experiences and challenges, such as having a family member with health issues, that have affected her. She has decided to pursue a Ph.D., as she feels it is the only way for her to move up in the education system. Asiya emerges as a dedicated and reflective Muslim educator who is committed to supporting and advocating for her fellow Muslim educators, while also focusing on developing critical skills and knowledge that can empower students and challenge systemic inequities. (See Figure 39.)

Figure 39

Asiya’s Word Cloud: Literacy (Source: WordCloud.app)

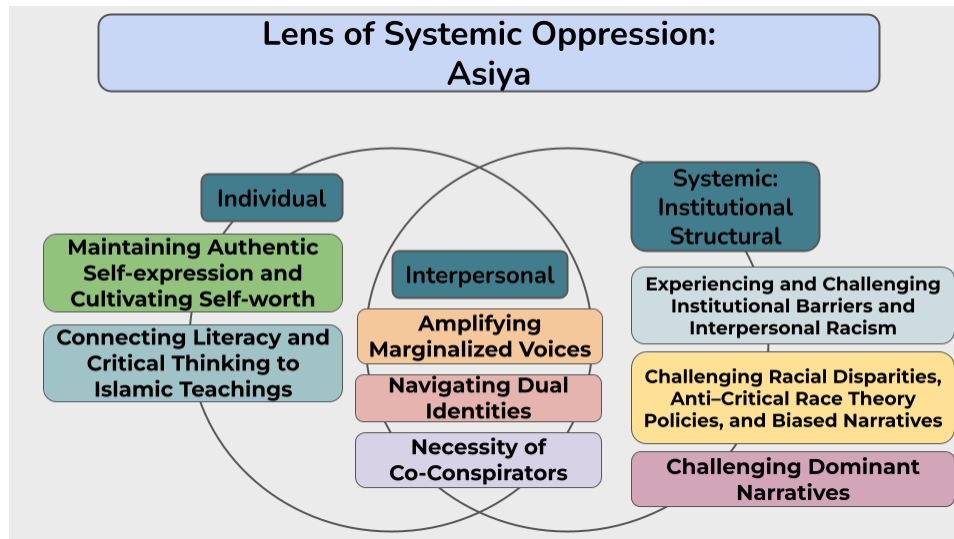


Anti-Muslim Racism

Asiya consistently works to challenge and change systems of racialized oppression and anti-Muslim racism in her professional and personal life. She frequently mentions being the one to speak up against injustices or problematic practices in her school and community. Viewing special education as "the path to social justice and equal opportunities," she advocates for students with disabilities and challenges biased training. Asiya explains her hijab to students, pushes for representation in leadership positions, and addresses cultural insensitivity. She leads a podcast to advocate for vulnerable students, encourages critical thinking, and mentors other Muslim educators. Asiya also addresses systemic issues, recognizing the exhaustion of constantly advocating for herself and others in a system lacking support for Muslim educators. (See Figure 40.)

Figure 40

Applying Lens of Systemic Oppression: Asiya



In one school in which she taught, Asiya expressed concerns about the lack of diversity in leadership positions and faced microaggressions, ending up being placed in a different school. She shares her experiences of being overlooked and not receiving the same leadership opportunities as her non-Muslim counterparts despite her qualifications and efforts. Having

observed that lead directors of a department are predominantly white women with blue eyes and blonde hair, Asiya said, “I feel like there's a ceiling for anyone different.” She supported educators in applying for senior positions, and they never acknowledged and supported her in return. Asiya said, “We need to find out the barriers for people like me to move up....We shouldn't have to get five times more certificates than somebody else to get the same position.” Asiya highlights systemic barriers that prevent Muslim educators, particularly Muslim women, from ascending positions of power and influence. The system does not provide equitable pathways for Muslim educators.

Asiya shares her experience of feeling disconnected from colleagues beyond work, citing her 13-year tenure in a district where she was dedicated to certain principals who later became superintendents. She also mentions seeing photos of colleagues having birthday parties on Facebook. She said, “They don't see me as somebody that they could be just a regular friend with and just hang out with.” Despite her qualifications and dedication, Asiya faces institutional barriers and biases that hinder her professional advancement. Asiya shared that she feels excluded from the social circles and events organized by her colleagues, even though she is a dedicated and experienced educator.

Through her podcast, Asiya has connected with and interviewed “every single great professor” in special education, many of whom are “emeriti.” Asiya has interviewed well-known educators in special education, including her former professor, who became a commissioner for special education research. She finds it privileged to be taught by great professors who share their hard work and inspire her beliefs. Asiya speaks about the opportunity and honor she feels in interviewing these individuals: “They feel people don't hear all the hard work they did their whole lifetime to achieve, and people don't read it or know it.” By providing these influential educators a platform to share their knowledge and experiences, Asiya amplifies the voices of those who have dedicated their careers to supporting students and disseminates the knowledge and insights of these marginalized experts, challenging the tendency for such wisdom to be

overlooked or forgotten.

Asiya attended a school training on protecting oneself in a school shooting, with the trainer citing examples of Islamically motivated mass shootings and incidents. Asiya expressed frustration with the school shooter training, which included examples only of Muslim shooters. She asked the trainer, “If you're going to bring up that example, then why not bring up the Christchurch mosque shooting?” Asiya recognized this shortcoming as a problematic and biased framing that perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Muslims. When the trainer suggested not saying the shooter's name, Asiya pushed back, recognizing that the shooter was also someone's child and that mental illness should be considered. She refused to accept the dehumanizing narrative.

Asiya rejected the anti–Critical Race Theory policies implemented in her state and others. She said, “They just would rather you not say anything. But I don't think that's the answer.” By acknowledging the existence of these laws and the way they discourage open discussion, Asiya challenges the underlying intent and impact of such policies. Her rejection of the “just don't say anything” approach demonstrates a commitment to pushing back against the censorship and suppression of critical perspectives.

Asiya shared that she constantly has to “squash” comments from educators that demonstrate “deficit thinking,” such as blaming parents or students for their challenges. She “remind[s] people, ‘Did you ever think that this parent's working three jobs, or that this kid might not have gotten [a] good sleep last night?’” Asiya reframes these perspectives and encourages her colleagues to consider the systemic barriers and inequities contributing to the issues, demonstrating her role as a compassionate leader committed to transforming mindsets rather than simply accepting the status quo.

Impact of Muslim Identity

Asiya demonstrates a deep understanding of her dual identity as both a Muslim woman and an educator. As a diagnostician, Asiya takes the initiative to educate others about her Muslim identity and advocates for Muslim students and educators. She mentors other Muslim educators, helping them navigate their professional identities in predominantly non-Muslim environments. Asiya reflects on the challenges of maintaining her Muslim identity while pursuing educational leadership positions, recognizing the need for genuine representation rather than tokenism. She actively works to shape how others perceive her while she stays true to her values and beliefs, effectively navigating the complexities of double consciousness in her professional life.

Asiya shares that she has had to navigate the "two worlds" of being Muslim and fitting into the culture of the public school system—worlds that can sometimes be at odds with each other. She said, "One of the conflicts I've felt, how do you bring together being Muslim and being in public school, and feeling like it's two different worlds that you're living in?" Asiya actively reflects on the challenges of maintaining her authentic Muslim identity while operating in predominantly non-Muslim spaces. Asiya is aware of the lack of Muslim representation in leadership positions and desires to be seen and valued as a Muslim educator. She says of her leadership, "I think they would show some interest in me and develop me. Do you see a lot of Muslims as principals?" Asiya acknowledges the microaggressions she experiences, in which her concerns and ideas are brushed off or ignored by administrators, and is conscious of how her Muslim identity is perceived and excluded.

Asiya shared that, in her school, the flags of different countries were displayed, and she could stand in a way that showed both the American and Iranian flags, representing her dual identity as half-Iranian and half-American. The school later added more flags, eventually placing the Israeli flag next to the American flag. Asiya complained to the assistant principal, who

eventually moved the flag back to its original spot. Asiya reflected on this incident: “I feel like I’m burdening people by talking to them or venting a little bit....These little things build up, like microaggressions, like microstresses.” Despite the challenges and lack of support she faces, Asiya refuses to internalize the negative societal perceptions of Muslim individuals. Her willingness to speak up and advocate for herself and her students suggests a strong sense of self-worth and agency, even though she is emotionally drained from speaking up.

Asiya shared the example of using the book *Under My Hijab* to explain her hijab to students in a way that educates and challenges misconceptions about Muslim identities. Her experience with an autistic student who imitated her by wearing mesh fabric as a hijab demonstrates that she may be empowering her students to embrace and celebrate diversity, even in small ways. She shares: “There are a lot of teachers that have students who want to be like them. But you doubt yourself, like these kids don’t want to be like me. They don’t look up to me that way. To know that some of them might see you as a role model or to look up to somebody.” Asiya’s observation that some of her students “look up to” her as a role model indicates that she has engaged in self-reflection to cultivate a sense of self-worth and value, separate from how others perceive her. She is proud of herself.

In the last halaqa, Asiya shared her experience of being perceived as “the dumb Muslim” and feeling the pressure to be “beyond reproach” because any mistake or shortcoming could be seen as reflecting poorly on the entire Muslim community. She said, “‘Am I the only one that doesn’t know how to do this?’ You’re probably facing that all the time, too. You don’t want it to be you, so you’re already the Muslim. You don’t want to be the dumb Muslim, too.” In discussing her educational journey and experiences as a Muslim diagnostician, Asiya understood the intersections among her racial, religious, and professional identities. This intersectional awareness allows her to navigate the complexities of how she is perceived and valued within different contexts. Asiya stated that the last couple of meetings with her diagnostician colleagues have made her “speak up a little bit more.” She attributes this increased confidence to this group

and her continued education and efforts to improve herself. Her example suggests that the halaqas have played a role in bolstering her self-assurance.

Whiteness as Property and Norm

Asiya explores the effects of whiteness on Muslims through self-reflection and self-education. She has advocated for Muslim students and educators, often speaking up against cultural insensitivity. Asiya has analyzed the representation of Muslims in media and educational materials, questioning the authenticity of non-Muslim creators. She has also observed the lack of Muslim representation in leadership positions within schools and districts, a shortcoming that perpetuates whiteness in decision-making processes. She has also challenged biased narratives, explored cultural differences, and critically examined educational practices, gaining a nuanced understanding of how whiteness affects Muslims in academic settings and the broader society.

Asiya passionately connects her focus on literacy and critical-thinking skills to Islamic teachings on seeking knowledge, describing the latter as a "spiritual practice." She reflected on having two identities and prayed, explaining the importance of the word "Iqra," or "read." She said, "The first thing that came to me was Iqra. That is the first word ever revealed, Iqra. And I said this is my religion. This is my jihad. This is my duty. Literacy." Asiya emphasizes that the Quran teaches literacy through phonemic awareness, recitation, and critical thinking, bridging both worlds and promoting understanding and appreciation for all aspects of learning. She gives her hope, "The most beautiful gift for anyone Muslim, not Muslim, old, young. The Prophet always said that you freed a slave. You could do that by teaching them to read." Asiya passionately believes that literacy and critical-thinking skills are essential for transforming society. By making these connections, she advocates for an educational approach that values and empowers Muslim students, challenging the dominant Eurocentric models that devalue Islamic knowledge and practices.

Asiya stresses the integration and harmonization of her Islamic identity and values with her professional role in a non-Muslim educational environment. She elaborates, "Part of Iqra is to get rid of ignorance and stand up for justice." Asiya further critiques Columbus Day as not "standing up for justice or getting away from ignorance," suggesting a devaluing of Muslim-American heritage and efforts to promote awareness around issues like dyslexia. Asiya sees a direct connection between the Islamic principle of "Iqra" (to read/learn) and the efforts to promote dyslexia awareness. She recognizes that these seemingly disparate causes are united by the common goal of combating ignorance and standing up for justice. She speaks to the pressure that Muslim educators may feel to keep their religious and professional selves separate in order to navigate white-dominant spaces. Yet, her own integrative approach offers a model for how Muslim educators can assertively bring their whole, authentic selves into educational spaces dominated by white norms and values.

Asiya reflects on injustices and issues in schools, and the potential that special education has: "When I think about injustice, I think about not just things that are happening around the world, but things that are happening in our own schools, and how education was really supposed to be in special education." Asiya critiques how the education system has failed to live up to its stated purpose of providing equitable opportunities, particularly for marginalized students. She challenges the prevailing narratives and assumptions in whiteness-centric educational policies, which may overlook or downplay the needs of students with disabilities. By framing her concerns about injustice in the context of "our own schools," Asiya focuses on addressing systemic issues within her immediate environment. Her framing critiques the individualistic, detached perspectives often associated with whiteness-centric approaches to educational policy and advocacy.

Asiya explores how whiteness affects Muslim educators. Her strong reaction to the Muslim vice-principal's public admission of drinking alcohol demonstrates her rejection of the notion that one must compromise one's Muslim identity to be accepted in a leadership role. She

said, "Why would you tell kids that you go into the garage and take whiskey? That's the level that she had to stoop to prove that she wasn't that big of a Muslim. That somehow made her better." Asiya sees this situation as problematic and a reflection of the pressure that Muslims face to conform. She advocates for Muslim educators to remain true to their beliefs, resisting the pressure to assimilate. The principal's action undermines the empowerment of the Muslim community, as it implies that embracing one's Muslim identity is a liability rather than a source of strength and pride.

Essentiality of Co-Conspirators

Asiya recognizes the crucial role of allies in supporting Muslim educators and students. She emphasized the need for genuine allies who can effect change from within the system. However, Asiya does not have allies to combat anti-Muslim racism in her area. She strives to create those co-conspirators by modeling advocacy and building networks through her podcasts, which demonstrates a recognition that she cannot rely solely on herself. Asiya expressed the "exhaustion" she feels from constantly having to create her own support systems rather than receiving them from the places she feels she should, such as her family and her Muslim community. The absence of these supports is a significant source of distress for her.

Asiya shares her experience of asking other Muslim parents to stand up and speak out when their children are being bullied for their religion. Still, she found that these parents "really didn't want to bring any attention to themselves." The Muslim community was reluctant to actively engage in confronting and challenging anti-Muslim racism, even when their children were directly affected. Asiya said to them, "'This is our kids. We have to stand up for what's right. We have to say something.' And they just didn't want to bring any attention to themselves or their kids, even though their kids were being bullied." The Muslim families' aversion to drawing attention, even in the face of injustice, suggests a need to address the underlying fears and concerns that may prevent individuals from becoming co-conspirators. Asiya's experience

underscores the vital need for her to identify and transform individuals outside of the Muslim community into committed allies, as well as the need to educate and empower the Muslim community.

Asiya shared that she is seen as a leader and expert in special education on her campus, with teachers and administrators regularly seeking her advice and guidance. This vantage point positions her to influence the practices and mindsets of her colleagues, potentially helping to dismantle harmful biases and promote more inclusive approaches that combat anti-Muslim racism. Asiya describes how she wants to take what she learned from these halaqas to create her own network:

What comes to mind after this circle is maybe continuing my own circles and maybe supporting other Muslim educators. I used never to see Muslim diagnosticians in my state. Since I started my radio, there have been at least two or three diagnosticians with less experience than me. They have seen me as a mentor. So, the idea that maybe I could help develop a group of special Muslim educators is very motivating. When I was becoming a special educator, I didn't have a group of people to mentor me that was Muslim. So, this group made me realize the importance of reaching out to other developing Muslim educators to support them.

Asiya's desire to continue developing support networks and mentorship opportunities for other Muslim special education professionals suggests a commitment to empowering and uplifting educators who are commonly excluded, an undertaking that can create a ripple effect in the broader educational community and foster the development of allies. Asiya noted that the halaqa has made her "more confident and [able to] acknowledge the microstresses we face," helping her recognize and validate the more minor, day-to-day challenges Muslim educators navigate. The affinity space bolstered Asiya's confidence, deepened her awareness of Muslim educators' challenges, inspired her to build supportive networks, reaffirmed her commitment to positive representation, and validated her role as a leader and advocate within her school

community.

Post-Halaqa Impact

Asiya explains that she felt at home in the halaqa because of the diversity it represented: "I felt at home. You had diversity here...a diaspora representation of Muslim Americans." Asiya appreciated that the group did not have a single, narrow representation of what a "Muslim American" is, but rather reflected on the educators' diverse backgrounds and experiences. Because the halaqa represented a range of perspectives and experiences, Asiya likely felt that her background and identity were recognized and validated within the group.

Asiya expresses her interest in pursuing a Ph.D. and exploring critical disability theory and its application to learning disabilities. After participating in the halaqas, she realized that students "don't need me to stand up for them or advocate for them or anything, but they do need me to be a presence and for them to see diversity." Asiya gained a deeper understanding of the importance of Muslim representation in classrooms, even at elementary schools, as a way to provide a positive presence and role model for Muslim students. Participating in the halaqas made her aware of the missed opportunities for Muslim educators in the public school system. Asiya described meeting a Muslim woman at a conference. The woman was young, had succeeded in academia, and became a professor at a relatively early age. The meeting had a profound impact on Asiya: "I told her about your group and the fact that a lot of us need the support." The fact that this woman could navigate the transition and challenges of moving to a new area and community as a Muslim professional was admirable to Asiya. The woman is a tangible example of what is possible for Asiya herself.

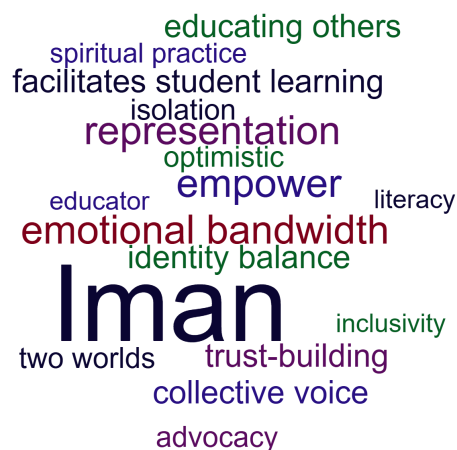
Iman: "Being an educator for me is a spiritual practice."

Iman is a high school English teacher with nearly 30 years of experience in the same school district and school. She transitioned from calling herself a teacher to considering herself

an educator, emphasizing the importance of teaching students how to think and learn critically. She has been involved with the Muslim Student Association at her school, helping her students create a slideshow about Islam and Islamophobia. Iman shares that she has had to navigate "these two worlds" of being Muslim and fitting into the culture of the public school system, which can sometimes be at odds. (See Figure 41.) Iman has shared experiences of educating others about Ramadan, appreciating respectful responses but also feeling exhausted from being the one doing the educating. She attended five of the six halaqas. Iman is involved in a Muslim educator group in her county and sees value in regular meetings to raise awareness and provide support.

Figure 41

Iman's Word Cloud: Educating Others (Source: WordCloud.app)



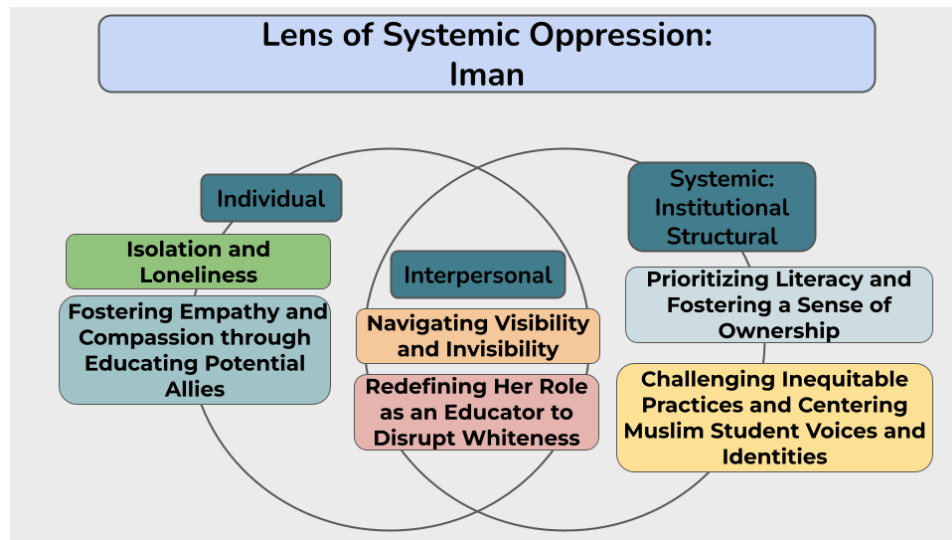
Anti-Muslim Racism

In her many roles at school, Iman advocates and facilitates change against racialized oppression systems. She recognizes the lack of trust between Muslim students and administrators, and brings up concerns and requests from Muslim students to the administration, pushing for more education about Islam in classrooms in order to address stereotypes and misconceptions. She educates her colleagues about Muslim practices, such as Ramadan. As an educator, Iman teaches her students how to think critically and learn for themselves. Although she faces challenges and sometimes feels exhausted by constantly

educating others, Iman remains committed to supporting and nurturing students of color, particularly Muslim students, and to challenging systemic issues in her school. (See Figure 42).

Figure 42

Applying Lens of Systemic Oppression: Iman



During the first halaqa, Iman told the group, “I see my role as somebody who facilitates student learning, not telling them what to believe, but how to learn for themselves.” Iman believes that effective communication and literacy skills are the foundation of society, and she wants to equip her students with these essential abilities. Iman prioritizes skills that empower students to challenge oppressive systems and to foster critical thinking and self-expression. She encourages active student engagement in education, recognizing its transformative potential for social change and justice and for disrupting racist practices in the classroom.

Iman discusses the need to challenge the norms and stereotypes that exist around how Islam is taught in the curriculum. Iman said, "Muslim students have specifically requested more education about Islam in their classrooms, but their concerns have not been adequately addressed by the administration." Despite the students' requests, Iman acknowledges that there has been an "on the surface, 'yes, we hear you' response, but no follow-up, just forgetting that

Muslim students have made these requests.” Iman is not deterred by the initial resistance or lack of action by the powers that be and is committed to advocating for the necessary changes.

Iman spoke up against the "study circles" initiative at her school, an initiative that was hastily implemented without adequate planning or consideration for the needs of Muslim students. Iman amplified the perspectives of her Muslim students, who expressed reluctance to participate in the study circles because of past experiences of microaggressions and lack of understanding from school administrators. Iman engaged in a thoughtful dialogue with the assistant principal, seeking to understand the rationale behind the study circles initiative. She educated the principal about Muslim students' unique challenges and the importance of building trust. Iman elaborated further: “If somebody says something that's a microaggression, or there's a stereotype that's floating around that reaches them about Muslims or Islam, they don't feel comfortable going to an adult in the building, necessarily, who can intervene.” By elevating their voices and experiences, Iman strives to be an individual whom Muslim students can trust. She challenges power structures that often silence or dismiss the concerns of Muslim students.

Iman sponsors the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at her school, and her students in the student organization created a slideshow to educate the school community about Islam and Islamophobia. This slideshow aimed to "dispel a lot of the stereotypes about Muslims by providing more accurate information." Iman actively works to challenge misconceptions that contribute to the disempowerment of Muslim identities. As a long-serving educator in her school, Iman built up a level of institutional influence that she can leverage to advocate for policy changes, curriculum revisions, or professional development initiatives that address systemic issues of racism and marginalization.

In the last halaqa, Iman emphasized the need to educate people about the nuanced and complex experiences of Muslim students rather than relying on them to learn about Islam and Muslim identity on their own. She said, “It's the responsibility of whoever it is who's asking these questions about Islam to educate themselves and not rely on me or any Muslim person to

give them the entire story, because we can't do that." She proactively shares information and perspectives with her colleagues in order to build understanding and challenge stereotypes. Iman highlighted the need to understand and address the experiences of Muslim students in public schools, noting that school systems often overlook Muslims in discussions around race and equity.

Impact of Muslim Identity

Iman actively leads and deeply engages in self-reflection about identifiability and double consciousness. She acknowledges the challenge of balancing her Muslim identity with the public school culture and mentions "trying to live in these two worlds"—her Muslim community and the public school environment, which is "often at odds with Muslim culture." Iman acknowledges the impact of her Muslim identity on her experiences, stating that it's easy for people to ignore her if she doesn't present herself as Muslim. She expresses a desire to explore her challenges in a non-Muslim school further, demonstrating openness to self-reflection and trying to identify as a Muslim authentically.

Iman shares the challenges she faces with maintaining her authentic Muslim identity while operating in predominantly non-Muslim spaces. Iman said that being Muslim "while still fitting into the culture of a non-Muslim school is something that's been a challenge for me." Her resilience and willingness to engage in self-reflection can enable Muslim educators to persist and potentially transform the systems within which they operate. Iman expresses that, before this research study, she had never been asked about her experiences "as a Muslim public school teacher in all my years of teaching." Iman recognized that her Muslim identity is more visible during Ramadan, as she has to explain to colleagues why she is not eating or drinking during the day. Nonetheless, she views it as "an opportunity for me to try to educate people about Islam and what Ramadan is." Iman wanted her colleagues to be more curious and understanding about the fasting experience rather than just commenting, "I could never do that."

Iman's experience highlights how her identifiability as a Muslim shifts with the context. Although some of her colleagues have been respectful, she expressed the exhaustion that comes with constantly being responsible for educating others about her religious practices and identity. Iman's desire for her colleagues to show genuine curiosity and empathy, rather than just respect, points to the need for deeper engagement and understanding of the lived realities of Muslim educators. Her frustration with constantly having to educate others about her religious practices and identity speaks to the emotional toll and double consciousness that marginalized individuals often face.

Iman navigates her double consciousness by being self-aware of her challenges, maintaining professional boundaries, and finding pockets of understanding and support where she can, rather than expecting full acceptance of her Muslim identity from all her colleagues. Iman acknowledges the loneliness and isolation she feels as one of the only Muslim educators in her school, stating, "When you're one person, you don't have a collective voice. It's one voice. So you don't have the same sort of visibility." Iman recognizes that she doesn't have the same collective voice and support that other minority groups have. She expresses gratitude for the support she receives from some African-American and Hispanic colleagues, who can relate to the experience of being marginalized, even if not in the same way. Iman said, "I felt connected professionally, but personally, it's very lonely."

Whiteness as Property and Norm

Iman actively decenters from policies and practices of whiteness, especially in advocating for her students. She advocates for Muslim students and for building trust between them and the administration, highlighting the need for intentional efforts to make Muslim students feel seen and heard in the school environment. Iman's approach to creating an inclusive educational environment in which students feel seen, heard, and valued is a way to decenter dominant

cultural norms. Iman shares her experiences of educating others about Ramadan and Muslim practices, an approach that brings diverse perspectives into the school environment.

Iman's shift in perspective from being a "teacher" to becoming an "educator" indicates a deeper understanding of her role and identity. As a student, she emphasized that learning and self-thinking were not innate to her but rather emerged later in her academic journey. As a teacher, she realized that "Students have so much information at their fingertips that I don't think I need to teach them what something means. I need to teach them to figure out how to decide for themselves what it means and how to be able to articulate that." Iman redefines an educator's role, prioritizes essential skills, rejects authoritarian models, fosters student agency, and connects education to real-world relevance. She continues, "Being an educator for me is a spiritual practice. Not necessarily telling students what to think, but how to think, learn, and develop their critical-thinking skills is important for me." Her description of her role as an educator as a "spiritual practice" emphasizes the importance of teaching students how to think and learn, rather than just imparting information to them. Iman understands that her Muslim values and beliefs inform her educational philosophy, separating herself from societal expectations of what an educator should be. She construes that separation as a way to challenge or resist white-centric norms. Iman's emphasis on spiritual practice, critical thinking, and student empowerment can create inclusive and equitable learning environments that center the needs and perspectives of Muslim communities.

Iman was vulnerable and open in sharing the influential role of her high school English teacher, Mrs. G, in her life and development as an educator. She credited Mrs. G with teaching her the value of discernment, precision, and holding herself to high standards—lessons that she continues to apply in her own teaching practice. Iman said, "I appreciated that because she saw that something could be improved. Whenever I think of an effective teacher, I think of her. Sometimes, I try to channel her in my own teaching." By openly sharing this personal story about an educator in her past, Iman demonstrated a willingness to be vulnerable and

transparent about the individuals who have shaped her identity and approach as a teacher. Iman's willingness to share her own struggles with maintaining the "emotional bandwidth and mental bandwidth" required to challenge systemic issues can inspire others to engage in similar self-examination and vulnerability. Her modeling of openness can help break down the perceived barriers between educators and administrators and can foster a more collaborative environment for addressing the policies and practices of whiteness.

Iman supports the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and its efforts to educate the school community about Islam and Islamophobia—support which suggests that she is actively centering Muslim identities, narratives, and experiences, rather than deferring to dominant (white) cultural norms and perspectives. Iman supports an MSA's slideshow project as part of a wellness program that focuses on educating the community about diverse cultural and social-emotional topics. The slideshow aims to "dispel a lot of the stereotypes about Muslims" and helped her disrupt the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and misrepresentations. Iman's participation suggests that she creates spaces that actively challenge the exclusion of nonwhite identities and experiences. Iman celebrates her Muslim students: "I am happy about that. It's a little victory."

Iman spoke about the importance of empowering Muslim students to center their faith and identity rather than feeling the need to suppress or ignore it. She said, "There's a real need to understand the experiences of Muslim students in our public schools. That need is not consistently addressed in ways that could help Muslim students, maybe, if not academically, although it could have. It could help them, socially and emotionally, to feel seen, heard, and valued for who they are." Iman aims to dismantle white-dominant educational practices by promoting student agency and voice, challenging assimilationist policies that often require marginalized groups to conform to white, Christian-centric norms.

Essentiality of Co-Conspirators

Iman takes a proactive approach to identifying and transforming allies to combat anti-Muslim racism, focusing on education, building trust, and fostering empathy. She engages in conversations with school administrators to raise awareness about Muslim students' experiences. Iman encourages administrators to build trust with Muslim students through discussions, educates colleagues about Islamic practices, and advocates for curriculum changes to address misconceptions about Islam. She observes Muslim students' requests for more education, but there is little follow-up from administration. Through these efforts, Iman aims to create a more inclusive environment and transform colleagues and administrators into allies who actively work to combat anti-Muslim racism.

Iman engaged in a dialogue with the assistant principal, whom she educated about the unique challenges Muslim students face at the school. Emphasizing the importance of empathy and understanding, rather than making assumptions or judgments, Iman said, "I am optimistic. I'm hopeful the conversation with the administrator will yield some movement toward helping students feel like they can talk openly about what they're experiencing at school to make some sort of change." By bringing this issue to the forefront, she challenged the administration to actively work on building trust and on creating a more welcoming environment. Iman did not simply criticize the school's approach; she offered concrete suggestions for how the administration could support Muslim students.

Iman highlighted the need to advocate for Muslim students and find allies who can support them. Of her Muslim students, Iman said, "We advocate for them, but also empower them to advocate for themselves in spaces where there aren't necessarily Muslim teachers who are going to advocate for them, but being able to find those allies in their community who will help them advocate for themselves." Iman actively seeks out and engages with individuals who may not share her Muslim identity but are willing to use their privilege and position to combat

anti-Muslim racism. She empowers Muslim students to identify co-conspirators and support networks, a practice that speaks to her commitment to building collective power and resilience. She strengthens these internal connections and creates a foundation for external allyship and advocacy.

Post-Halaqa Impact

The halaqas provided a sense of community and belonging for Iman as a Muslim educator. She said, “It created a sense that we were not alone or isolated in what we were experiencing and that we were able to articulate that these things were happening to us in a place where it was safe to do so.” Iman felt that the space both allowed educators to share their experiences without feeling isolated and was safe because the educators shared a religious background and understanding. The structure of the space, including the mindfulness activities and my approach as a facilitator, contributed to Iman’s feeling safe to share. Iman shared that her fellow Muslim educators were “People who understood without me having to explain what kind of stereotypes I’ve been personally subjected to or how I’ve observed my Muslim students be affected by those stereotypes.” The sense of community and belonging was crucial for Iman because it provided validation, reduced her feelings of isolation, and created a space for Muslim educators to come together and collectively address their shared concerns and needs within the education system.

Iman believes it is “really important for Muslim teachers to continue meeting and talking and sharing and supporting one another on a regular basis.” Iman emphasized the importance of Muslim educators coming together regularly to “promote the unique needs of our children and our families within school systems.” Iman wants the group to continue in some form, such as monthly meetings or a group chat, that can help sustain this community and facilitate collective action. Iman believes that the sense of community and belonging can also contribute to Muslim educators’ professional and personal growth, such as sharing experiences, learning

from each other, and feeling supported, all of which can help strengthen their resilience, confidence, and effectiveness in the classroom. This increased strength, in turn, can enhance the experiences and outcomes of the students these educators serve.

Hawa: “A Very Lonely Space”

Hawa mentions that she lives in a state pummeled by a natural disaster, which caused her to miss three halaqas. She was a middle school teacher, though she is currently in a leadership position and not in the classroom. She is also on the governance board for the state education association, the only Muslim person in this role. Hawa shares that she was initially supposed to become a lawyer after completing her master's degree in political science. She is committed to "helping and spreading the word that Islamic educators are good people" and to the idea that their "voice should be heard in this space." Hawa emerges as a dedicated and resilient Muslim educator who has navigated the challenges of being a minority in leadership positions while advocating for greater representation and support for Muslim educators. (See Figure 43).

Figure 43

Hawa's Word Cloud: Good People (Source: WordCloud.app)

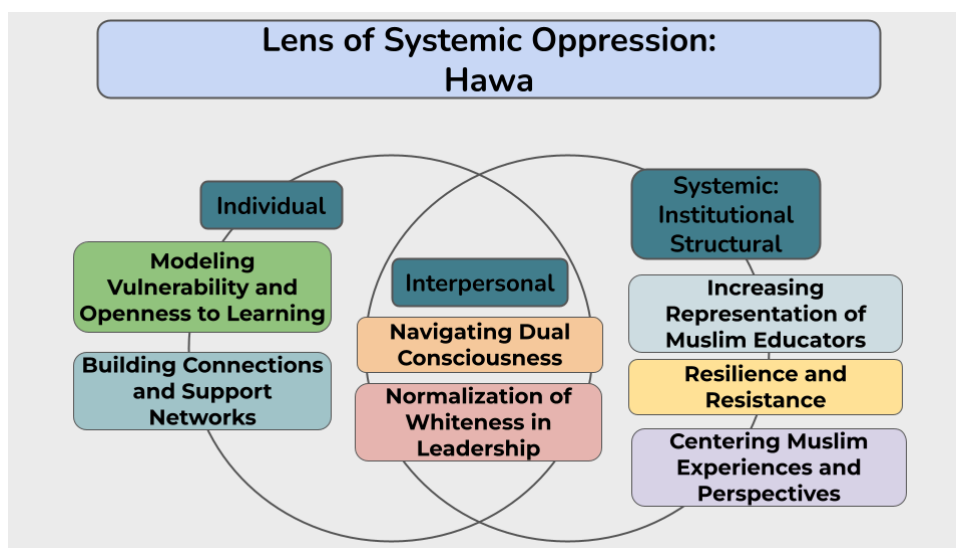


Anti-Muslim Racism

In her role, Hawa advocated for and facilitated change against systems of racialized oppression. Dedicated to helping children and ensuring their success, she believes that Islamic educators should have a voice and be heard in leadership positions. Hawa has been struggling with the world's issues, particularly the increasing number of deaths in Gaza and the question of whether she is speaking negatively about Jews. She acknowledges that, being a Muslim woman, she struggles to express her views without being perceived as negative. (See Figure 44.)

Figure 44

Applying Lens of Systemic Oppression: Hawa



Hawa shared that, when she met another Muslim woman in a leadership role, she was inspired and motivated to get more involved in union leadership, as that educator "inspired me to do more." Hawa said that she wanted to participate in this halaqa to "spread the word that educators who are Islamic are good people" and that their "voice should be heard in this space." Hawa actively mentors and supports other Muslim educators, helping them navigate leadership challenges and advocating for their advancement. By advocating for the recognition and amplification of Muslim educators' voices, Hawa challenges systems that have historically marginalized or overlooked their contributions.

Hawa is frustrated with the lack of Muslim representation in the union despite the significant presence of Muslims in the schools. Hawa said, “I want more people who are Muslim to be in my position, and I have the power to do that.” Hawa aims to increase Muslim educators' representation in power and influence, challenging systemic barriers and anti-Muslim racism within the education system. Despite their withdrawal from her, trying to identify Muslim educators shows how Hawa is committed to creating this change. She is still persistent and does not give up on building relationships. She is open to receiving advice and challenging her practices.

Hawa's willingness to continue voicing her concerns, despite the challenges she faces, suggests resilience and resistance in the face of racialized oppression. Hawa expressed her struggle with feeling unable to speak up about global issues, such as the situation in Palestine, without being perceived as saying something "bad" about Jewish people. She said,

I have been struggling with what's going on in the world, right? And I feel that every time I say something about it, everyone knows that I am Muslim, right? And they all look at me like, “Are you saying something bad about the Jewish people?” And I'm like, “No. What I'm saying is that there's a lot of people dying, and it needs to stop.” I just, I don't know. I hate that. As a Muslim woman, I can't just say something like that.

Hawa advocates raising awareness about the nuances of these complex geopolitical issues and about challenging the assumptions that limit her ability to voice her concerns. She understands the long-standing historical patterns of marginalization and vilification faced by Muslim communities. She reflects on how the current experiences of oppression are rooted in deep-seated historical inequities.

Impact of Muslim Identity

Hawa leads and engages in self-reflection about identifiability and double consciousness, and shares her experiences as the only Muslim woman in a leadership role, which she describes

as a lonely space. Hawa's cultural and religious identity often clashes with the dominant culture, and she actively challenges societal perceptions and stereotypes imposed on Muslim educators. Hawa's adaptability, including the "three cups of tea" practice, demonstrates her efforts to bridge the gap and support her fellow Muslim educators effectively.

Hawa shared that she navigates being a Muslim woman in leadership positions, in which her cultural and religious identity is often at odds with the dominant culture, highlighting the isolation she experiences. Hawa said, "It's really interesting. It's very lonely in leadership. I'm not going to lie to you guys. It's a very, very lonely space." She navigates double consciousness by seeking ways to connect with others who share her experiences, especially by meeting another Muslim woman in a leadership role. Hawa engages in self-reflection and advocacy, actively working to challenge societal perceptions and stereotypes that may be imposed on Muslim educators. She desires to "spread the word that educators who are Islamic are good people" and that their "voice should be heard in this space."

As a Muslim woman in a leadership role, Hawa seems to be grappling with the disconnect between her own intentions to support and empower her community and the skepticism or disengagement she encounters from some Muslim educators. She is perplexed by the disengagement and avoidance she experiences from Muslim educators when she visits schools in her union role. Hawa's self-reflection suggests an awareness of how her identifiability as a union representative can create barriers to building trust and rapport with specific groups.. Hawa's willingness to adjust her approach, such as by incorporating the "three cups of tea" practice, demonstrates her efforts to bridge this gap and find more effective ways to connect with and support her fellow Muslim educators.

Hawa's comments about feeling unable to speak up about global issues without being perceived as saying something "bad" about Jewish people suggests that she is very aware of how her Muslim identity is viewed and interpreted by others. Her struggle with feeling silenced or misunderstood when expressing her concerns could indicate that she grapples with this internal

duality, constantly negotiating how she is perceived versus how she sees herself. Hawa reflects on the interconnectedness of her racial, religious, and gender identities, which collectively shape her experiences of systemic oppression.

Whiteness as Property and Norm

Through self-reflection and self-education, Hawa explores how whiteness affects Muslims, especially in educational settings. She acknowledges the issue of loneliness and the lack of diversity in leadership roles, an issue that contributes to harmful stereotypes about Muslims. Hawa advocates for Muslim educators to promote their "goodness" and challenge systemic biases in education, emphasizing the need for supportive spaces to counter the isolation and lack of representation caused by white-dominated systems.

Born in Guyana, Hawa first met a Muslim leadership figure from her county during a meeting with her current union. The woman was a school district negotiator. Hawa said, "I was so excited to finally meet someone of my own culture; she just happened to be a Muslim woman, too. And so when I met her, I was involved in leadership in this union role, and she inspired me to do more." Hawa's excitement implies that Hawa knows the rarity of encountering individuals who share her cultural and religious identity in such positions. She challenges the normalization of whiteness in power and influence, advocating for better representation of Muslim voices in both decision making and navigating predominantly non-Muslim spaces, thereby promoting inclusivity and support. Hawa states that she wants to "spread the word that educators who are Islamic are good people" and that their "voice should be heard in this space." Hawa acknowledges the systemic marginalization of nonwhite, non-Christian identities within the education system and leadership structures.

Hawa's willingness to openly share her experiences and challenges with the group and seek input from others both demonstrates a level of vulnerability and openness to learning that can be valuable in decentering from whiteness-centric practices and reflects a commitment to

continuous learning and growth. Hawa said, "I was at a school today, and I don't know why, but all of the Indian people and Muslim people who are ever in a school avoid me like the plague. I don't understand." Her vulnerability is essential in building trust and relationships, especially in affinity. Hawa asked a question that she felt safe asking in this group. She acknowledged a problem, fully realizing that she could be open to being scrutinized by exposing herself. Her behavior goes against adhering to white, Western cultural practices and behaviors aimed at acceptance and success.

Hawa said of Muslims and her own experiences, "You know, it has been crazy, especially when, in other parts of the world, we are being demonized again." Hawa's acknowledgment that "we are being demonized again" suggests an awareness of the dominant narratives and discourses that marginalize and vilify Muslim communities, both locally and globally. By naming this dynamic, Hawa actively resists normalizing these harmful narratives. Her use of the collective "we" indicates that she is centering the experiences and perspectives of the Muslim community, rather than deferring to or aligning with the dominant (white) cultural norms and expectations. Hawa positions herself as someone who will not passively accept the perpetuation of anti-Muslim racism. Instead, she disrupts the normalization of these oppressive dynamics—a crucial step in decentering from whiteness and its associated systems of power.

Essentiality of Co-Conspirators

Hawa acknowledges the importance of co-conspirators and is working toward identifying individuals to combat anti-Muslim racism. She conveys the twin challenges of being the only Muslim woman who has held leadership positions and finding allies who support her. Hawa shares her experience hugging another Muslim woman and her desire to promote Muslim educators as good people who help children succeed. She acknowledges the loneliness in leadership positions and the role allies can play in amplifying their voices.

Hawa recognizes the value of building connections and support networks among those

who share her experiences and identity as a Muslim educator. She expressed her excitement and sense of connection when she met another Muslim woman in a leadership role, declaring “She inspired me to do more.” Hawa values the opportunity to connect with and find support from someone who shares her cultural and religious identity, a bond that could be seen as a form of allyship. She recognizes the importance of building such connections and support networks, which can empower and inspire her leadership efforts. As a result, Hawa sees value in supporting and empowering other Muslim educators, which could be a step toward building a network of allies.

Hawa expressed frustration with the disengagement and avoidance she experiences from Muslim educators when visiting schools in her union role: “All of the Indian people and Muslim people who are ever in a school avoid me like the plague.” By contrast, she noted that educators from other cultural backgrounds have been more welcoming and receptive to her work:

“Everyone from other cultures welcomes me. Everyone else welcomes me.” Hawa can identify potential allies outside of her own community. Her willingness to build bridges and foster solidarity across different communities demonstrates her efforts to create a more inclusive and supportive environment. By actively engaging with and building relationships with educators from diverse backgrounds, Hawa creates opportunities for cross-cultural allyship and collective action against anti-Muslim racism. However, her experiences reflect internal and external barriers to creating such allyship.

Hawa's participation in the supportive group of Muslim educators indicates that she may create spaces for non-Muslim individuals to engage with Muslim community members' narratives and experiences. She fosters empathy and understanding, especially when she gives a wish for everyone: “May you all be blessed.” Her appreciation of and involvement in this group can help foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, and inspire a deeper understanding of the lived realities of anti-Muslim racism.

Post-Halaqa Impact

Hawa was unable to participate in a post-intervention interview.

Kadija: “Remember Me as Somebody who Stood Up for Injustice and Oppression.”

Kadija is a high school English teacher and identifies as West African. She is interested in getting her Ph.D. in the future, and she sees this research study as an opportunity to learn from the experiences of other Muslim educators and develop friendships and connections. Kadija attended and participated in all six halaqas. She expresses her sadness and frustration at the "disregard for Muslim lives" by the school district and the country, particularly in the context of the genocide in Palestine. Kadija has discussed the challenges of balancing personal religious obligations with professional responsibilities. She has expressed appreciation for the support and perspectives gained from the halaqas. Overall, Kadija emerges as an engaged and passionate high school English teacher who is committed to advocating for Muslim educators while seeking opportunities for personal and professional growth. (See Figure 45.)

Figure 45

Kadija’s Word Cloud: Advocate (Source: WordCloud.app)

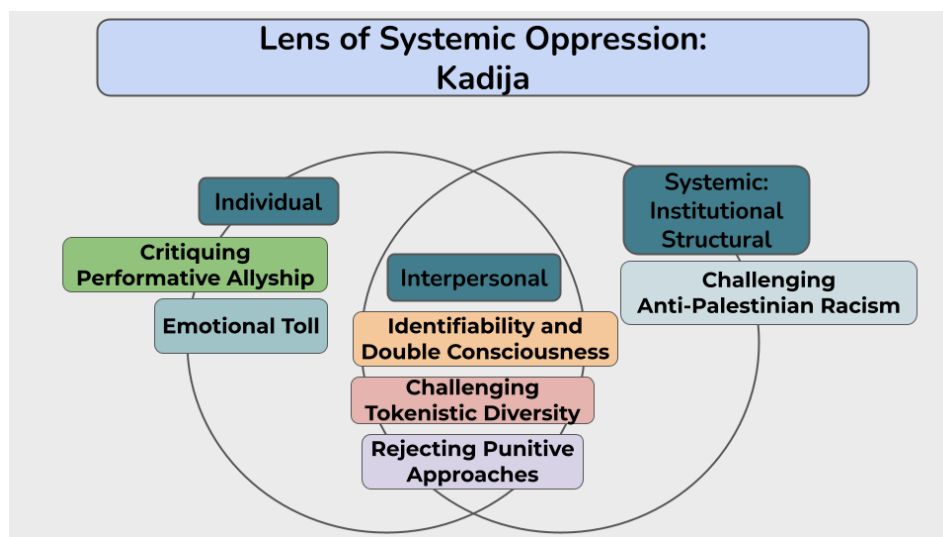


Anti-Muslim Racism

Kadija is a dedicated advocate against anti-Muslim racism and racialized oppression. She works in a school with a large Muslim student body, ensuring that they feel welcome and treated fairly. Kadija creates inclusive spaces, such as a welcoming environment during Ramadan and Eid celebrations, to normalize Muslim practices. She speaks up against discriminatory practices and encourages non-Muslim students and staff to learn about Muslim practices. She also advocates for affinity spaces and support networks for Muslim educators. Kadija voices her opinions against injustice, such as the treatment of Palestinians and double standards in labeling groups as "terrorists." She refuses to internalize oppression. (See Figure 46.)

Figure 46

Applying Lens of Systemic Oppression: Kadija



Kadija discusses the challenges faced by Muslim educators in public schools, particularly after October 7. Kadija said, "A lot of Muslim educators have been getting attacked and doxxed due to their support for Palestine and what's happening right now in Gaza." By bringing attention to these issues, Kadija advocates for more significant support and protection for Muslim educators who are facing discrimination and backlash for their political and social stances, particularly in challenging anti-Palestinian racism. Kadija expresses her sadness and

frustration at the "disregard for Muslim lives" exhibited by the school district and the country, especially after October 7.

Kadija shared how other teachers who identified as Zionists bullied her for helping a Palestinian student: "They were trying to bully us because I've been supporting a Palestinian student who was talking about her experience going through checkpoints. And they were not supportive." By defending the Palestinian student's right to share her experiences, Kadija directly challenges the dominant, often Eurocentric, pro-Israel perspectives that can perpetuate systemic forms of oppression. Kadija keenly understood the systemic dynamics underlying the different forms of oppression and believed in supporting her students and standing up against such brutality.

Kadija shared the story of a teacher who was pulled out of the classroom for being vocally pro-Palestinian, while another teacher who was a "staunch Zionist" and doxxed a student was able to take a sabbatical without investigation. She said, "As an educator, why would you do that? That teacher didn't get punished. But this Muslim teacher does for her stance on Palestine. The lack of empowerment of Muslim educators in this city results in situations like this." By highlighting the disparate treatment of the two teachers, Kadija is exposing the institutional biases and power structures that privilege specific ideological perspectives over others. She is actively decentering the unchecked power and privilege often associated with whiteness and is shining a light on the double standards and inconsistencies that perpetuate racialized oppression.

At a professional development training, Kadija challenged why the topic was focused on anti-Semitism and said, "They're throwing in Islamophobia as a caveat to shut everybody up and say that Islamophobia is wrong. Empowerment looks like allowing Muslims to have the opinions and beliefs that they do." Kadija criticizes the district's approach to professional development, an approach that focuses primarily on addressing anti-Semitism while only briefly mentioning Islamophobia. She identifies this overprioritization of one form of oppression over another as a

problematic dynamic that needs to be addressed.

Impact of Muslim Identity

Kadija discusses the challenges of identifying and separating oneself from societal expectations. She explains that she works in a Muslim-majority school environment in which educators of color often face survival challenges. She also challenges tokenistic diversity and discusses the scarcity of Muslim representation in the media and the potential for terrorist tropes. Kadija believes that having a platform to spread messages about Islam and Muslims is a double-edged sword, as it can lead to negative perceptions of Muslims. She rejects the burden of representation and emphasizes that she represents herself.

Kadija said that, because she teaches in a predominantly Muslim-populated city, "It's a supportive environment for me. I feel very affirmed in my identity and the space I'm in." Kadija has access to a community that can validate her experiences and provide a sense of belonging. However, she also recognizes that there are "always shortcomings, and there [are] always ways to do better" in that environment. Her nuanced perspective demonstrates Kadija's self-awareness and willingness to critically examine even the supportive spaces she occupies, indicating a level of ongoing self-reflection. Kadija states that this is "why [she is] here" in the halaqa space, suggesting that her participation is driven by a desire to learn, grow, and potentially address the "shortcomings" she has identified.

Kadija reflects on the nuances of her work environment, the diversity of the Muslim community, how her identifiability as a Muslim is perceived and accepted, and her colleagues' collective power. She said, "I've never felt ostracized because of my identity as a Muslim, particularly in my work environment....Now, there are other differences, because I'm West African, and a lot of the staff are black Americans. So there are differences between how we practice Islam." Kadija separates her own identity and experiences from the monolithic societal perceptions of Muslims. Her observation that her colleagues are quick to "check" anyone who

openly expresses anti-Muslim bias suggests that she sees herself as part of a collective, empowered group. Kadija's willingness to address the "side comments" made about Muslims, even in an environment in which overt hostility is not tolerated, demonstrates her ability to identify and confront more subtle forms of discrimination.

Kadija's recognition that educators of color have to "go above and beyond to get the positions that they are in" in school environments demonstrates her awareness of the racialized dynamics at play. She recounted, "I feel like they're in survival mode, like, 'I want to save my position.'" Kadija's ability to identify the "survival mode" mentality that can develop among educators of color in these environments indicates an intimate understanding of their lived experiences. Her observation that her assistant principal is "so hard on black women" while not holding white teachers to the same standards reveals her keen sensitivity to the biases and differential treatment faced by educators of color. Kadija said, "When I see older black women in positions of power, I'm a little guarded because some of them have kind of burned me in the past." Kadija's admission suggests a level of internalized mistrust that reflects the complex dynamics of identifiability, whereby marginalized individuals may struggle to fully trust even those who share their marginalized identities, because of the realities of systemic oppression.

Kadija explicitly critiques the notion of "voting for Kamala Harris people" because she is a black woman, indicating that Kadija does not equate mere representation with meaningful change. She said, "Diversity is not just having somebody with that identity there....I'm not just voting for people just because they're black anymore." Kadija has engaged in self-reflection about the limitations of superficial diversity and the need for substantive allyship and advocacy. Her acknowledgment that "there's so many people who share my identity, who are not there to help people in or move them forward" reveals her self-awareness about the diversity within her own Muslim community. She does not simply assume solidarity on the basis of shared identity.

Kadija's conscious rejection of the expectation that she represents an entire group reflects a strong sense of self-awareness and a refusal to be defined by societal perceptions.

Kadija explicitly stated that she does not "represent anybody" or "an entire religion or belief system." She expressed a desire to "free [herself] from the burden" of constantly worrying about whether she is "doing this right" about how she is perceived. Kadija stated that she "really do[es] not care" what others think about her or her group, because "a person that's hell-bent on believing what the media says, what anybody says, is not a person that I want to be around." Her unwavering stance reflects a refusal to seek validation.

Whiteness as Property and Norm

Kadija actively discusses, encounters, and challenges policies and practices of whiteness in her role as an educator. She addresses challenges faced by Muslim educators in public schools. She values diverse perspectives and supports diverse administrations. Kadija advocates for her Muslim identity in white-dominated spaces and calls for more Muslim representation in district leadership. She also addresses the lack of protection for Muslim teachers and the challenges associated with supporting a ceasefire for Palestine.

Kadija discusses a recent fight involving her favorite students, who were kicked out of school owing to violence. Kadija expressed frustration with the school's tendency to simply "kick out" students involved in fights rather than taking a more holistic, supportive approach. She said, "If students are being violent, there's a reason why. Instead of us [educators] as adults helping them to address it, they [school leaders] just kick them out." She challenges the dominant, punitive mindset that often characterizes disciplinary policies. Kadija refused to label her students as "crazy kids" and took into consideration the underlying emotional and social factors that may have contributed to their behavior. She decenters the dehumanizing language and stereotypes often applied to youths—stereotypes that are usually rooted in white supremacist ideologies. Kadija's criticism of the school's decision to press charges against the students involved in the fight suggests an awareness of the racial biases that often lead to harsher punishments for students of color. Despite the potential backlash, Kadija's willingness

to write a letter supporting her students demonstrates a strategic use of her positionality as an educator to advocate for more equitable and compassionate practices.

Kadija acknowledges that being in a "very Muslim-dominated" school environment can sometimes make her feel "complacent," as she may think that she doesn't have to deal with issues that Muslim educators face elsewhere. However, participating in these halaqas prompts her to reflect more deeply, suggesting that she actively resists the complacency that can arise from operating within a seemingly inclusive environment. She said that this space is "making me reflect on the ways that the school isn't showing up for me in terms of my identity as a Muslim person and a Muslim staff member." Kadija's reflection highlights her advocacy for institutional accountability and change, challenging the typical power dynamics to which marginalized groups are expected to conform. She raises doubts about the inclusivity of her school environment, questioning the assumption that a Muslim presence equals true inclusion.

Kadija stated that she wants her students to remember her as someone who "stood up for injustice and oppression and allowed them to think critically about the world around them." Her direct stance against oppressive forces indicates a willingness to confront and dismantle systems of racialized oppression, even in the face of potential resistance. Kadija's focus on academic excellence and her aim to "allow them to think critically about the world around them" suggests an approach that empowers students to challenge dominant narratives and question oppressive systems.

Essentiality of Co-Conspirators

Kadija's approach to having allies to combat anti-Muslim racism is multifaceted. Working in a school with a large Muslim student and staff population provides a supportive base. While noting that surface-level support isn't always enough, Kadija acknowledges that her school administration allows and funds activities for Ramadan and Eid, suggesting some level of allyship from school leadership. Kadija's outspokenness may help identify and mobilize allies

who are willing to stand up against anti-Muslim racism. Her actions and attitudes indicate that she builds alliances through education, via community engagement, and by creating opportunities for others to show support and understanding for Muslim experiences in educational settings.

Because of past burns and resentment, Kadija questions performative allyship and expresses guardedness toward older black women in power. She shares the example of a friend who was "written up because she was helping a child do her hair," questioning why, "as a black woman," this deed would be seen as problematic, given the historical significance of hair in the black community. Kadija suggests that the decision to "write me up to flex your power" was not about addressing the issue, but instead was a display of authority by the administrator. She critiques whiteness-centric practices, arguing that identity alone isn't enough for true co-conspirators: They must recognize cultural context, as well as reflect on actions, and not abuse power.

Kadija expresses frustration with representation politics, stating that it doesn't represent her own experiences and preferences. Questioning performative allyship, she said, "The things that they want for the black community are not the things that I want or not the things they're prioritizing, which is what I prioritize." Kadija wants to create supportive communities of Muslim educators and allies who can collectively challenge anti-Muslim racism. She challenges the notion of what an ally is. Kadija's explicit rejection of the need to "represent anybody" or "an entire religion or entire belief system" serves as a model for how to engage authentically as an individual, rather than as a representative of a group.

Kadija shared her experiences with black women educators and their collective efforts to challenge various forms of oppression and exclusion. She mentions that the group "went up against Zionists together" when a Palestinian student was trying to share her experiences at the school. She described their relationship: "We ran that school to support, hold each other down, and plan lesson plans together. Anything racist, homophobic, sexist, whatever happened, we

were there to check them.” When Kadija experienced bullying for supporting a Palestinian student who was talking about her experience going through checkpoints, the women supported her: “Our group of black women teachers just held each other down.” These black women teachers demonstrated solidarity and support for a student, combating oppression and anti-Muslim racism. Their collective resistance fostered their potential for transformation into influential allies.

By organizing Eid celebrations and decorating the school for Ramadan, Kadija and her Muslim colleagues actively work to educate their non-Muslim colleagues about Islamic practices and holidays. She said, “I have a really supportive admin in terms of that stuff. My principal paid for the stuff.” Celebrating Eid as part of a school tradition helps to normalize Islamic holidays. Kadija described how a non-Muslim colleague “commented about why we’re doing all this for Eid,” and her other colleagues stopped the acts of anti-Muslim racism. She and her Muslim colleagues have cultivated a sense of collective power and accountability within their work environment, a concerted achievement that is more impactful than individual efforts. Kadija's emphasis on creating a welcoming and inclusive space for Muslim students and staff, as well as her compassionate approach toward her students, can serve as a model for her non-Muslim colleagues to emulate.

Kadija describes her administration's support as “surface level.” Even though she has support from her colleagues, Kadija can feel isolated in her advocacy efforts without the full backing of the school's leadership. She said, “It's very exhausting.” Organizing events and activities for Ramadan and Eid, and advocating for policy changes and inclusive practices, add to Kadija's workload on top of her regular teaching responsibilities. She criticized the administration for not taking time to monitor the fasting time of Muslim students and understanding what accommodations they need: “I just think the admin could do a lot more, considering the population is too much for me to lead this.” Kadija recognizes that her administration does not truly know its Muslim students, so the responsibility falls on her.

Kadija's reflection on the need to be more proactive in addressing the school's shortcomings in supporting Muslim identities and practices implies that she is grappling with balancing her advocacy work with other professional and personal responsibilities.

At the first halaqa, Kadija desired to develop affinity spaces and support networks for Muslim educators in her local community and country. She said, "I also wanted to learn how to create and develop affinity spaces because I'm trying to start one here." Kadija acknowledges that, as a Muslim educator, she often finds that her voice and experiences have been overlooked or marginalized, and she hopes to change that situation through this research study. Kadija is in a unique position within a district with a significant Muslim population, allowing her to mobilize and empower this community to become active allies in combating anti-Muslim racism. She said, "Empowerment would look like schools partnering with Muslim organizations and masjids to create more equitable spaces and environments for Muslim students and addressing Islamophobia present in schools." Kadija acknowledged that the gains in equity and Islamic representation in her district resulted from grassroots work by educators, rather than top-down initiatives. Her recognition of the power of community-led action demonstrates an understanding of the need to build alternative centers of influence rather than relying on or conforming to prevailing societal structures.

Post-Halaqa Impact

Kadija was unable to participate in a post-intervention interview.

Sarah: "I'm Not the Only One Going Through This"

Sarah is a third-grade teacher and a first-generation immigrant who expressed that she had to balance her Islamic and ethnic cultures with the dominant culture in the United States. She grew up going to public and Islamic schools on the weekends. Sarah participated in five of the six halaqas. She previously worked in an inner-city district with a high ESL population but

now works in a suburban district with a lower ESL population. Sarah is currently interested in pursuing further education: a doctorate in either curriculum and instruction or educational leadership. She shares that she is the only Muslim educator in her state. (See Figure 47.)

Figure 47

Sarah's Word Cloud: Positivity (Source: WordCloud.app)

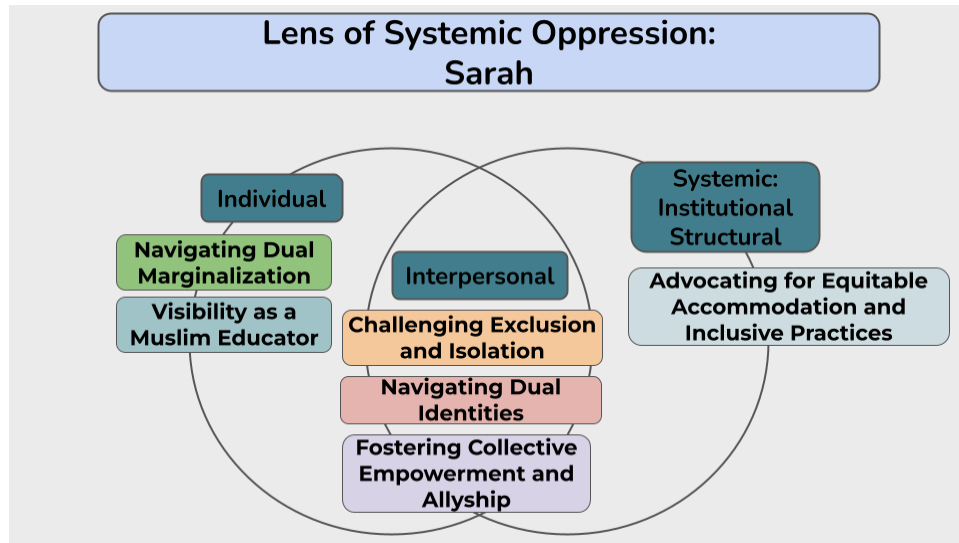


Anti-Muslim Racism

Sarah actively works to create safe, supportive environments, bridge cultural divides, foster community, and amplify marginalized voices, advocating against racialized oppression within the education system. A first-generation immigrant, Sarah initially aspired to become a police officer but chose to become a teacher because of the school's safety and support system. She advocates for creating inclusive learning spaces, bridging cultural divides, and amplifying marginalized voices, particularly for Muslim students. (See Figure 48).

Figure 48

Applying Lens of Systemic Oppression: Sarah



Sarah aspired to become a police officer but became a teacher because “school had always been safe. I enjoyed being at school more than being at home with my family because it was tough. It is tough when you are the first child in the family, in the first generation, and you're growing up trying to keep your Islamic culture, but then also your ethnicity, your ethnic culture, and then also trying to assimilate.” She fosters a learning space that is inclusive and welcoming, particularly for Muslim students who may face systemic challenges and discrimination. By sharing her authentic experiences, Sarah highlights the systemic challenges faced by immigrant and minority students, and positions herself as a bridge builder to help students navigate these cultural and religious divides.

Sarah's experience working with high school, middle school, and elementary school students has allowed her to recognize the need for tailored, culturally responsive approaches. She draws from her experiences as a student: “I was very lonely as an ESL child.” Sarah experienced bilingual or dual-language teachers in a Hispanic-majority school, struggling with classroom support until a new ESL teacher could teach all core subjects with compassion: “She was able to do all of that. During my experience working with her, she taught me how to be empathetic as an individual and be patient. These are two skill sets that I learned from her. I apply that with my students.” Sarah actively works to adapt her teaching methods to support her

students' diverse needs better. Her background as an ESL student and her commitment to empathy and patience inform her efforts to reject dominant narratives and perspectives that oppress non-English-speaking students and their experiences.

Sarah discusses the need for Muslim educators and students to accommodate their religious holidays and practices, such as having Eid off or having a half day for Ramadan. She said, "I think empowerment should be inclusive, especially when I think about being Muslim educators in our community and school, even if it's not accepted." Sarah emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and demonstrates an awareness of the biases and negative perceptions that persist among many non-Muslims. She recounts how "adults sometimes do not have the most positive thoughts about students and parents" from marginalized backgrounds, including Muslim students.

Sarah wants everyone to remember her for her commitment to integrating her students' diverse backgrounds and identities into the classroom. She said, "I want my students and the adults in the building to remember me as an inclusive teacher, bringing in my students' cultures, beliefs, and faith." She is committed to validating and incorporating aspects of students' identities that may be suppressed. Her holistic approach to education goes beyond just academic content, and her intentional effort to center diverse backgrounds, cultures, and identities in her teaching practice directly challenges the white-centric norms that often dominate educational spaces. Sarah has acknowledged the troubling reality that "adults sometimes do not have the most positive thoughts about students and parents," even when those adults are teachers themselves.

Sarah shares the experiences she had in her first year of teaching, when she felt isolated and excluded by her team members. She described how she felt about her teammates: "When I needed that support, that circle wasn't there." During Sarah's second year at school, she had a new teaching assignment, and her new teammates invited her out. She was initially hesitant; however, she eventually built connections, took the initiative to plan outings, and became

friends with her teammates. Her former teammates saw this and invited her to events. She said to them, “No, thank you. I don't want to be part of your group.” Sarah challenges the exclusionary practices that can make Muslim and minority educators feel excluded. By inviting her colleagues and building relationships, she models inclusive behaviors and creates her own spaces that inspire others to be more welcoming and supportive of diverse educators.

Impact of Muslim Identity

Sarah acknowledges the identity crisis faced by Muslim communities and the double consciousness Muslim educators face in navigating their identities and belonging. Sarah has engaged in self-reflection to cultivate resilience and a strong sense of self. She recognizes whitewashing practices and aims to be an inclusive teacher, bringing in students' cultures, beliefs, and faith. She advocates for better representation and visibility of Muslim educators in her community. By modeling vulnerability and openness, Sarah can create a collaborative environment for addressing systemic racism and creating a sense of support for Muslim students and educators.

Sarah was acutely aware of her identifiability as an ESL student. She lived in different “worlds” and had to balance what she represented in each place. She reflects on the challenges of maintaining her authentic self while operating in predominantly non-Muslim and non-immigrant spaces. Sarah acknowledges that Muslim communities often face the “biggest identity crisis as we grow up in America.” She said, “It's easier to stay neutral, whether it's for outsiders or whether it's people from our community, just not causing too much attention.” She is aware of the challenges Muslim individuals, including herself, face in navigating their identities and belonging in the American context, where their religious and cultural affiliations may not align with societal norms. Sarah's reflection on the tendency to “stay neutral” suggests an awareness of the double consciousness that Muslim educators may experience: the need to simultaneously navigate the expectations and perceptions of the dominant society together with

the internal dynamics and pressures within the Muslim community. Sarah's comments reveal a nuanced perspective on the complex interplay among identifiability, double consciousness, and the challenges Muslim educators face in being recognized and accepted, both within and outside of their own community.

Sarah shared that, when she goes to the mosque or community events, she finds that some South Asian or Muslim women do not want to engage with her once they realize that she is an educator. She said of them, "I go to the mosque, a community dinner, or something. Once they realize that I'm not a housewife—I have a profession, I'm very career oriented, and I have my degrees—they don't want to talk anymore." Sarah navigates a dual marginalization—both from the dominant (white) society and from within her own cultural/religious community. In response to this experience, she has learned to be "okay" with being her authentic self, even if it means not being entirely accepted by either group. Sarah's decision not to conform to the expectations of her cultural/religious community and her choice to be "present" but not engage in activities that she is not interested in shows that she prioritizes her own authenticity over the need to belong to a specific group.

Whiteness as Property and Norm

As an ESL student, Sarah recognized whitewashing practices. Her ESL teacher taught her empathy and patience, both of which she applies to her students. Sarah aims to be an inclusive teacher, incorporating students' cultures, beliefs, and faith and ensuring that her actions and character speak first. While Sarah has sometimes actively decentered practices of whiteness, she is also still becoming aware of these practices as the norm and exploring them through self-reflection.

Sarah said, "I grew up in a community where, now, we have a lot of Muslim students. We have people like us, but I'm the only Muslim educator in [my state]. So that was one thing that pulled me into education." Sarah highlights the lack of both representation and visibility of

Muslim educators in her community. She recognizes the dominance of non-Muslim, and likely white, educators in her local context, indicating an awareness of whiteness as the normative standard. By being present and vocal in this space, Sarah both advocates for better representation and challenges the systemic barriers that may have prevented other Muslim educators from entering the field.

Sarah's intentional approach of ensuring that her "actions and character speak first," before her words, indicates that she centers her Muslim identity and experiences rather than deferring to dominant (white) cultural norms and expectations. She educates her colleagues and the broader school community about Muslim identities and practices. By openly sharing her experiences as an ESL student, Sarah is willing to be vulnerable and transparent about her challenges. Her openness can break down barriers and defensiveness in discussing systemic racism, fostering a more collaborative environment for addressing policies and practices of whiteness. By being empathetic and culturally responsive, Sarah can create an environment in which Muslim students and educators feel heard, understood, and supported.

Essentiality of Co-Conspirators

Sarah joined this halaqa to learn from Muslim educators and develop friendships. In her work, she applies her Islamic values and shares why this halaqa is essential to having co-conspirators, as it provides a fresh perspective on the challenges Muslim educators face. Acknowledging the importance of allies, Sarah tries to identify those allies in order to combat anti-Muslim racism. She hopes to share her experiences with other Muslim educators in the future.

In the first halaqa, Sarah explained her reason for joining this group: "I want to join a group of Muslim educators to learn from their experiences and, hopefully, in the future, develop more friendships through this group and continue learning." Her desire to build community and support networks among Muslim educators demonstrates her recognition of the importance of

collective identity and solidarity in navigating the challenges of being a Muslim educator. Sarah centers on the visibility and normalization of Muslim identities, a focus that can inspire others to become allies in combating anti-Muslim racism. Her actions can help cultivate empathy and a foundation for allyship.

In the fifth halaqa, focusing on empowerment and dreaming, Sarah expressed empathy and support for Asiya's experiences and stood in solidarity with fellow Muslim educators. She connected deeply with Asiya on the challenges Asiya faced with her colleagues. Sarah also engaged with and learned from Umme-Rumaysa's experiences, suggesting an open dialogue and receptiveness to alternative perspectives. Sarah's expressions of support and solidarity with her fellow Muslim educators, such as her wish for Asiya to enjoy cooler weather, indicate an understanding of the importance of collective empowerment in navigating societal perceptions and challenges. In the last halaqa, Sarah reflected:

The issues that we discussed gave me a fresh perspective that I'm not the only one who's going through these challenges, even though we don't have a lot of Muslim educators in my city....Having that space means I'm not the only one going through this. In the future, as I'm going through challenges and having a tough time, I can recall some of the experiences we've had with you ladies.

Sarah's statement suggests the profound importance of having a space in which she can connect with and feel supported by a community of fellow Muslim educators. The connections, insights, and sense of community gained here will be a source of strength and resilience for her, going forward.

Post-Halaqa Impact

The halaqas provided Sarah with a safe and empathetic space in which she felt comfortable and understood. She felt "at home" with the group, as everyone was respectful and compassionate toward one another's experiences as Muslim educators. Sarah said, "I felt at

home with this group, that we could share our perspective, and everyone was very respectful." This space allowed Sarah to learn from the experiences of other Muslim educators in the group, particularly those working in more diverse urban settings. Listening to fellow Muslim educators gave her a broader perspective on their challenges in different contexts.

Sarah also stressed how creating a safe and empathetic space was essential to her: "Nobody was judging anybody because people knew that we're all working women." Participating in the halaqa empowered Sarah, validated her own struggles, and gave her a sense of purpose in supporting her fellow Muslim educators. The discussions during the halaqa inspired Sarah to consider ways to advocate for more inclusive practices in schools, such as celebrating diverse holidays and being aware of the religious and cultural identities of students and staff.

Sarah said the halaqa "made me feel powerful that I'm able to provide that safe environment." She learned that being Muslim and from another culture can sometimes make it difficult for different teachers to react to similar situations. She also realized that current events can affect teachers more when they have Muslim students and staff, and that education and faith should never mix. Sarah's willingness to share her experiences and connect with other Muslim educators creates opportunities for collective action and advocacy against the challenges they face in educational settings.

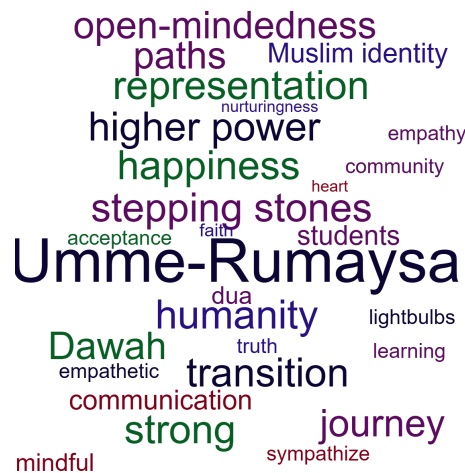
Umme-Rumaysa: "I want people to see that this is my Dawah."

Umme-Rumaysa is a second-grade teacher who previously worked as a kindergarten assistant for 9 years. She is a multilanguage learner who did not know English when she first came to the United States. She grew up in the United States and has worn the hijab since she was in 7th grade. Umme-Rumaysa also wears a niqab and an abaya. She transitioned to wearing the niqab gradually, starting with more traditional clothing and eventually adopting the full covering. Umme-Rumaysa has faced challenges in navigating her Muslim identity within the

public school system, but she is committed to being her authentic self and sharing her faith through her actions and interactions. She makes an effort to be extra friendly and expressive, especially with parents, to compensate for the fact that they can't see her facial expressions. She participated in four of the six halaqas. Umme-Rumaysa emerges as a dedicated and self-aware Muslim educator who is deeply committed to representation, inclusion, and empathy in her teaching practice. (See Figure 49.)

Figure 49

Umme-Rumaysa's Word Cloud: Stepping Stones (Source: WordCloud.app)

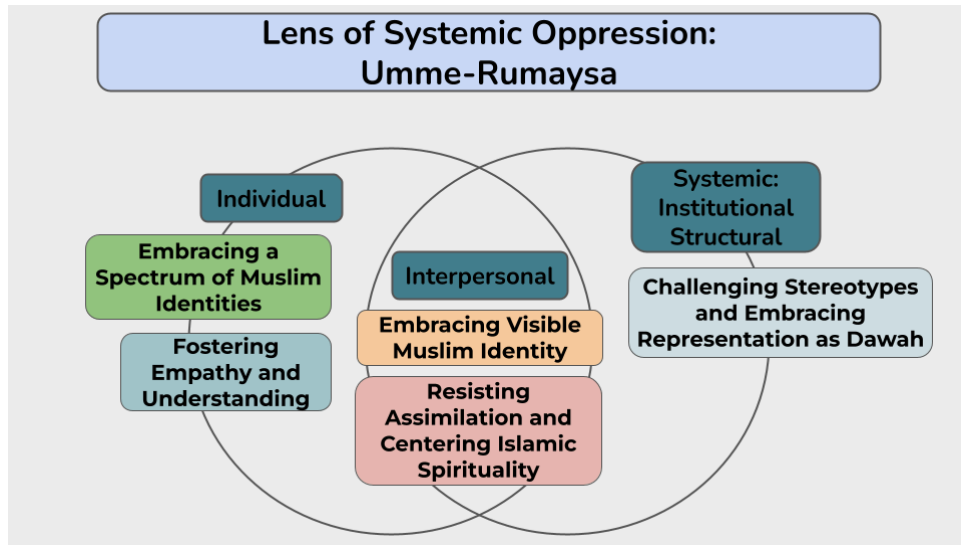


Anti-Muslim Racism

Umme-Rumaysa's daily work as a visibly Muslim educator in a public school setting inherently pushes back against exclusionary systems and norms. Her presence and positive contributions help create more inclusive educational spaces. Umme-Rumaysa describes her dress as a stepping stone to show her diversity and modesty. She aims to be open to any question and not force others to conform to her style. Umme-Rumaysa advocates for authentic representation of Muslims in the media, stating that there are scarce representations of Muslims and too many terrorist tropes. (See Figure 50.)

Figure 50

Applying Lens of Systemic Oppression: Umme-Rumaysa



Umme-Rumaysa describes why she wears a niqab: "I want people to see that this is my Dawah. In a sense, I want people to see that I dress this way, but that does not mean that I'm forcing someone else to be like me or my ideas on others." Umme-Rumaysa expresses her desire to "demystify what a Muslim educator is like," challenging any negative stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslim educators in order to show that Muslim educators are "not terrorists" and are "not strange." She further challenges stereotypes: "What you see on the news about people from Third-World countries or other countries, what you see there is not true, and that people like me, like someone like me who's dressed like this, I talk to men, I talk to women." Through her self-reflections, Umme-Rumaysa confronts oppressive stereotypes about Muslim women and uses her identity to challenge and transform these biases.

Umme-Rumaysa said that her students are "totally chill" with her wearing the hijab and niqab, as they have seen her face and know she is a "real person." She educates her students about Islamic practices and about challenging stereotypes. Umme-Rumaysa said her students and colleagues were comfortable with her transition, and she felt accepted in her new community. Initially, she was hesitant when she became a full-time teacher, as the other teachers in her grade level had built a team: "You do you, and I'll do me, as long as they're not actively against me, which they're not." Her gradual transition in her dress code indicates that

she has navigated institutional policies and expectations, and created positive relationships with her students and colleagues. Umme-Rumaysa's willingness to share her personal journey of embracing her Muslim identity can be a powerful tool for advocacy. By sharing her experiences, she can inspire and empower others to challenge systems of racialized oppression.

Impact of Muslim Identity

Umme-Rumaysa shows a deep level of self-reflection about her identity and how she is perceived by others. She works to bridge the gap between societal views and her authentic self, embodying the concept of double consciousness while striving to create understanding and acceptance in her professional environment. Umme-Rumaysa communicated openly with her principal, adjusting her communication style to avoid societal perceptions. She learned Spanish to bridge cultural gaps, educated her students about her attire, prioritized her students' well-being, and emphasized inner qualities. Umme-Rumaysa views her role as an invitation to Islam, demonstrating that Muslim women can be active members of society.

By sharing her experience growing up in the United States and balancing her Muslim identity with the dominant culture, Umme-Rumaysa demonstrates a strong sense of self-reflection and a commitment to separating herself from how society may view her as a Muslim educator. Umme-Rumaysa describes why she became an educator: "I felt the nurturingness of being a woman. I wanted to help students. I love the idea that they have something when their little lightbulbs and their eyes shine. It made me feel good that I'm giving back to the community." As a child, she was a multilanguage learner and did not know English. Umme-Rumaysa recounted that some teachers said, "Hey, let me help you, even though I don't speak your language," while others "would help me halfway through and not complete their teacher duties." The challenges she faced while navigating the education system as a student helped her reflect on her current tensions and difficulties associated with maintaining her authentic self while operating in predominantly non-Muslim and non-immigrant spaces.

Throughout her journey of wearing a niqab, Umme-Rumaysa invites others to ask her questions and is transparent in her reasons for wearing the niqab. Using humor, she also explains her journey in a language that her colleagues and students can understand. For example, she calls her abaya “a Harry Potter robe,” as it was “the best way for me to describe it to people.” Her positive attitude and outlook are inspiring. Umme-Rumaysa describes her approach with her students: “My students are chill with me. And they just know that [I] cover when [I’m] outside, and with men in the classroom. They have seen my face. They’ve all seen my hair. They all know I’m a real person.” Umme-Rumaysa’s self-reflection in educating students about her Islamic practices and identity demonstrates a commitment to bridging the gap between her own perceptions and those of others, particularly in a professional setting, and to presenting her Muslim identity openly, rather than deferring to societal expectations.

Umme-Rumaysa reflects on the challenges faced by the Muslim community, particularly in terms of wellness, healing, and mindfulness. She compares the environment of her school with the Muslim community and describes how her school, “put more pictures of individuals wearing hijabs on the school’s website and tried to incorporate that.” Although she received mixed reactions from Muslim parents, she says “I’ve gotten more snarky remarked looks, not words, from parents who are Muslim, rather than from people who are not Muslim.” Umme-Rumaysa openly discusses feeling more accepted by non-Muslims in her community than by other Muslims, acknowledges the complex internal dynamics and tensions within the Muslim community, and chooses not to internalize or be defined by these judgments. She envisions what wellness and healing could look like: “Having a stronger community within the Muslim community to back each other up would be a moment of healing.” She would love to be fully accepted by the Muslim community. Umme-Rumaysa firmly believes that her choice to wear the hijab was her own and that she was not there to be judged by others, be they Muslim or non-Muslim.

Whiteness as Property and Norm

Umme-Rumaysa is aware of how whiteness is viewed as the norm and shifts herself from policies and practices of whiteness. She challenges the norms of whiteness and Christian culture in American schools by wearing her hijab and niqab. She also emphasizes cultural responsiveness, connecting with students from diverse backgrounds, particularly Latin American students. Umme-Rumaysa negotiates religious accommodation with her principal, advocating for religious expression, which may differ from that of mainstream Christian practices. She emphasizes building positive relationships with students and families, challenging stereotypes, and focusing on serving students, rather than enforcing rigid policies.

In explaining a reason for being an educator, Umme-Rumaysa acknowledges the "spectrum" of Muslim identities and practices, emphasizing the importance of unity and acceptance within the community and wanting people to "see all sides of humanity." Her perspective demonstrates a level of self-reflection and a willingness to embrace the diversity of Muslim experiences, rather than conform to white-centric narratives about what it means to be Muslim. As a result of her acknowledgment and acceptance of her identity, Umme-Rumaysa feels empowered to dress in a way that aligns with her beliefs without needing to defend or protect herself constantly.

Umme-Rumaysa's grounding in Islam represents a refusal to assimilate and instead assert the validity and importance of her own cultural and religious identity. In response to the group reflecting on the importance of being true to oneself and on the truth, even in positions of power, Umme-Rumaysa said, "We have to be better, not just for ourselves but for our higher power, for respecting and believing in our prophet, Peace be upon Him. We have to try." Umme-Rumaysa's use of "we" language suggests a collective responsibility and solidarity rather than an individualistic approach. By invoking the words and example of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him), Umme-Rumaysa places Islamic principles and spirituality at the center of her perspective, rather than deferring to values and beliefs promoting secularism.

Umme-Rumaysa encourages the fellow women in the halaqa: “We have to be strong in the sense of just making dua that Allah is gonna take care of us, and have that belief, not just from lip service, but actually put it in our heart that it's gonna work out.” Umme-Rumaysa acknowledges the difficulty of the situation and the natural human tendency to feel anger. Still, she encourages a response rooted in patience and self-improvement, rather than reacting angrily to oppression. She shifts from centering individualism and immediate gratification to the need to be “better people,” not just for oneself, but for a “higher power” and out of respect for the Prophet. She centers on the importance of moral and spiritual development over material or worldly concerns.

By sharing a personal story about helping a friend in need without any expectation of reciprocation or recognition, Umme-Rumaysa refocuses on the values of collective care and mutual support, and decenters from the individualistic and transactional nature often associated with white-centric policies and practices. She grounds herself in Islamic values and beliefs. She shared with the group, “The more we help people, the more likely Allah will open our paths. That's what I've noticed in my life.” Umme-Rumaysa's experience of unexpectedly receiving a positive outcome after helping her friend, without any direct request or effort on her part, suggests a more holistic, interconnected understanding of how acts of kindness and generosity can be rewarded. Umme-Rumaysa expresses that kindness to the group: “ I'm helping you because I'm helping you. I feel like that's how I want to be in this group, just to give, even if it's just a kind statement or gesture.” Umme-Rumaysa models selfless leadership and emphasizes human relationships and their potential for mutual support and growth.

Umme-Rumaysa continues to resist assimilation. In a conversation with the group about allyship, she challenges the performative allyship often seen in systems dominated by whiteness. Umme-Rumaysa said, “If we truly, as people, as Muslims, believe that there is a truth and the truth is absolute, then....it will never demoralize you. It will never deface you. You will be victorious because Allah is on the side of truth, and truth never dies.” Umme-Rumaysa's stance

suggests rejecting the notion that individuals must compromise their principles or hide their true beliefs to gain or maintain power. Umme-Rumaysa's emphasis on being true to oneself and one's beliefs, even in the face of potential consequences, can inspire collective empowerment within Muslim communities.

Essentiality of Co-Conspirators

Umme-Rumaysa acknowledges the importance of allies. She expresses gratitude for having a supportive principal who accepted her changing dress code and religious expression. She recognizes the positive environment at her school, contrasting it with challenges other Muslim educators may face elsewhere. Umme-Rumaysa highlights the importance of being open, friendly, and willing to help as a way to build connections with parents and students, even when there may be initial hesitation due to her appearance. Umme-Rumaysa demonstrates an appreciation for those who support and accept her as a Muslim educator, thus creating a positive work environment that allows her to practice her faith while doing her job effectively and using these opportunities as Dawah.

Umme-Rumaysa's description of the supportive environment at her school, where Muslim and non-Muslim teachers work together, suggests a model of allyship and solidarity that others can emulate. She said, "We have a lot of Muslim teachers, both who cover and who don't cover. It feels very welcoming because our principal keeps it that way, no matter who it is." Umme-Rumaysa further emphasized the importance of being open minded and nonjudgmental toward students, even when their beliefs or practices differ. She stressed the importance of treating all students with respect and compassion, regardless of their beliefs or practices. By modeling inclusive practices, challenging harmful stereotypes, and promoting a culture of compassion and solidarity, Umme-Rumaysa creates an environment conducive to transforming individuals into allies committed to combating anti-Muslim racism.

Umme-Rumaysa emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment for her students to feel a sense of community and belonging. She describes how her students don't speak English and she wanted to share her experiences with them: "I told them, 'Listen, I was just like you once, maybe not with the Spanish language, but it doesn't matter. We spoke a different language, and we came, and we're trying to work so hard to learn a different language while at the same time passing exams and speaking.'" By cultivating this learning environment, Umme-Rumaysa works to counter the systemic exclusion and isolation that multilanguage students may experience in the education system. Her empathetic approach can help build connections and understanding between her and her students, their families, and the broader school community, laying the groundwork for potential allies.

Post-Halaqa Impact

Umme-Rumaysa felt comfortable and at home in the group, which honored her identity as a Muslim educator. Part of the reason was that the group had "a variety of people, and they all came from different backgrounds and different ethnicities and different everything." This diversity made her feel accepted, especially as someone who does feel accepted by her Muslim community. Umme-Rumaysa highlighted the positive impact of connecting with specific individuals such as Khadijah and Sarah, and how their openness and energy were inspiring. She described them as "a ball of energy" and "a joy to work with." The halaqas fostered the development of supportive relationships and a sense of community among the educators. The halaqas also "honored [her] identity as a Muslim educator," a gesture that was important for her sense of belonging and comfort. After challenging workdays, Umme-Rumaysa said that attending the halaqas was "a refresher" and something she "still look[ed] forward to because I was able to reconnect with what I was feeling and what they were feeling." As a result of feeling a sense of community, Umme-Rumaysa felt empowered to share her narratives.

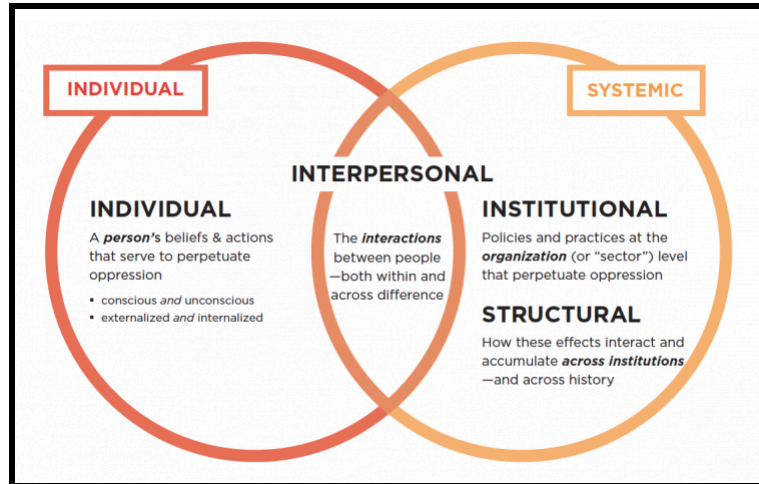
The halaqa conversations and connections helped Umme-Rumaysa reflect on her own life and experiences, and become more mindful and appreciative of what she has. She shared that the mindfulness practices helped her "comprehend that just because I'm in my best life doesn't mean that everyone else is on the same page, on the same path," as well as helping her look at people who were experiencing different things, thereby enabling her to "appreciate what they have or don't have" and gain a broader perspective. The halaqas helped Umme-Rumaysa become less defensive and more willing to listen to and understand others' perspectives before reacting. This approach increased her awareness and empathy toward the experiences of other Muslim educators. Umme-Rumaysa felt understood because she could relate to the experiences of those other Muslim educators, even if their situations were different from her own.

Examining Muslim Educators' Experiences through The Lens of Systemic Oppression

In these halaqas, Muslim educators addressed the various types of systemic oppression: individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural. In the National Equity Project's Lens of Systemic Oppression framework (see Figure 51), systemic oppression happens at four levels: (1) individual: a person's conscious and unconscious beliefs and actions that perpetuate oppression; (2) interpersonal: the intersection of individual and systemic levels of oppression; (3) institutional: harmful policies and practices that perpetuate oppression; and (4) structural: the macro relationship among institutions (National Equity Project, 2024). In examining each type of oppression, I identified specific examples in education with that level of oppression, and the people affected by the current inequity being discussed: primarily Muslim educators and their students.

Figure 51

National Equity Project's Lens of Systemic Oppression (National Equity Project, 2024)

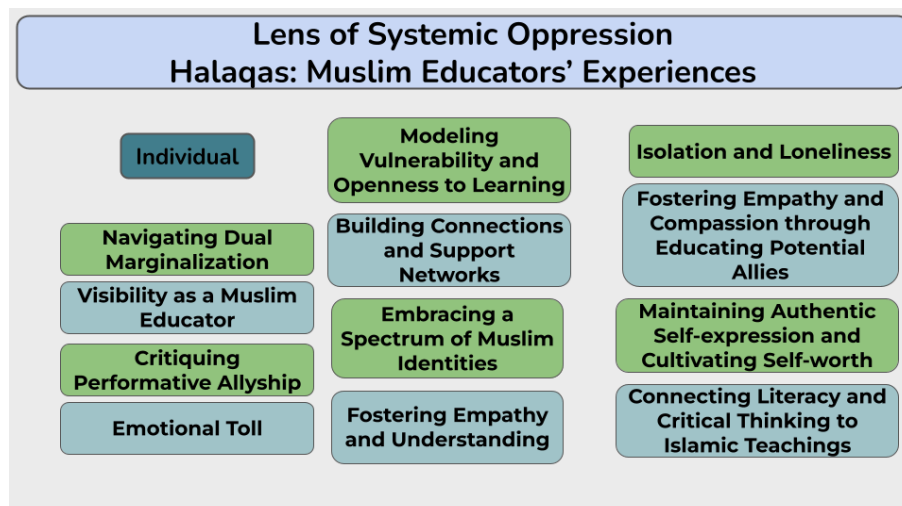


Lens of Systemic Oppression: Individual

Muslim public school educators shared examples of colleagues', students', and families' conscious and unconscious beliefs and actions that perpetuate oppression against them. The themes are modeling vulnerability and openness to learning, isolation and loneliness, building connections, fostering empathy and compassion, navigating dual marginalization, visibility as a Muslim educator, embracing a spectrum of Muslim identities, maintaining authentic self-expression and cultivating self-worth, critiquing performative allyship, connecting literacy and critical thinking to Islamic teachings, and emotional toll. (See Figure 52.)

Figure 52

Examples of Individual Oppression



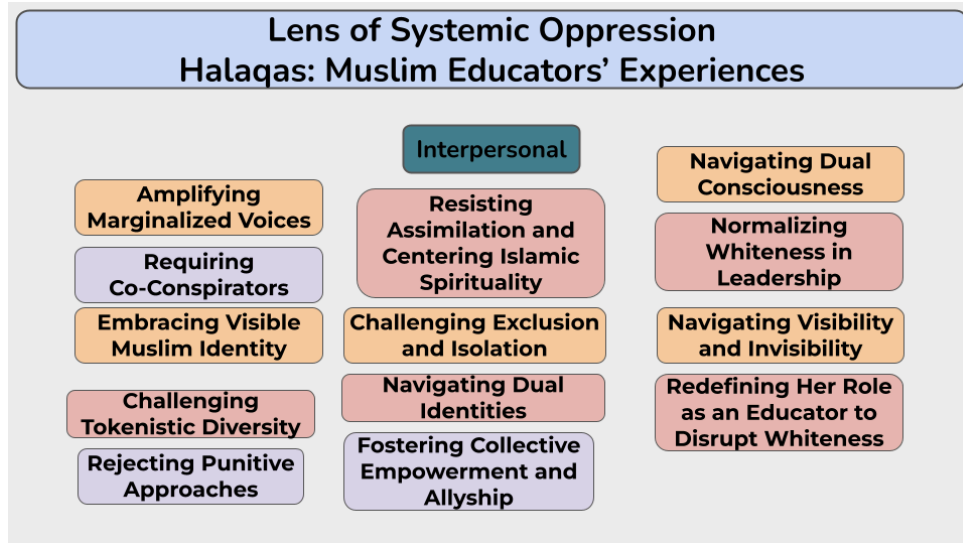
Many of these themes are positive, as a result of Muslim educators responding to individual levels of systemic oppression. For example, Hawa's reaction to her colleagues is vulnerability and openness to learning, which demonstrates a commitment to continuous growth and decentering from whiteness-centric practices. Umme-Rumaysa fosters a sense of community and belonging in which Muslim and non-Muslim teachers work together, promoting a culture of allyship and solidarity, thereby challenging stereotypes and promoting respect for all students. Some educators felt isolated and excluded from social interactions beyond work, highlighting unconscious biases among colleagues. By sharing their experiences, Muslim educators help raise awareness about the challenges they face.

Lens of Systemic Oppression: Interpersonal

Muslim public school educators shared stories about the intersectionality of oppression between individuals and their school systems. These stories focus primarily on the MusCrit tenet of identifiability and the intersectionality of race. Examples of themes include navigating dual consciousness, amplifying marginalized voices, resisting assimilation and centering Islamic spirituality, normalizing of whiteness in leadership, requiring co-conspirators, embracing visible Muslim identity, navigating visibility and invisibility, challenging exclusion and isolation, redefining roles as educators to disrupt whiteness, challenging tokenistic diversity, fostering collective empowerment and allyship, and rejecting punitive approaches. (See Figure 53.)

Figure 53

Examples of Interpersonal Racism



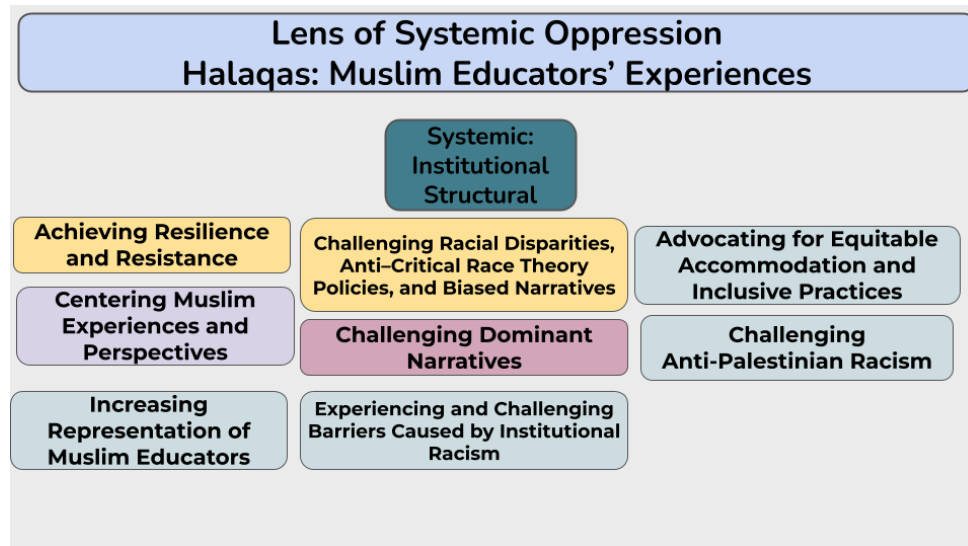
For example, Kadija expressed frustration with the burden of representation and with the need to balance advocating for Muslim students with being seen as a cooperative staff member. Also, as a reaction to experiencing interpersonal racism, Iman redefines her role as an educator, emphasizing teaching students how to think and learn, rejecting authoritarian models, and connecting education to real-world relevance. Her Muslim values and beliefs challenge societal norms. Sharing these experiences helps challenge stereotypes about Muslims and provides a more nuanced understanding of their diverse experiences and perspectives.

Lens of Systemic Oppression: Institutional and Structural

Muslim public school educators shared the extent to which anti-Muslim policies, norms, and practices have affected them. They used storytelling to create a network, call forth awareness, and identify how they can collectively heal as an ummah. Themes identified from the halaqas are achieving resilience and resistance; challenging racial disparities, anti-Critical Race Theory policies, and biased narratives; advocating for equitable accommodation and inclusive practices; centering Muslim experiences and perspectives; challenging anti-Palestinian racism; challenging dominant narratives; increasing representation of Muslim educators; and experiencing and challenging institutional barriers. (See Figure 54.)

Figure 54

Examples of Institutional and Structural Racism



These themes reflect the experiences and challenges that Muslim educators face in addressing anti-Muslim racism. For example, Sarah focuses on fostering a welcoming learning environment, especially for Muslim students, who face systemic challenges and discrimination. The resilience and resistance that Hawa has achieved in voicing concerns about racialized oppression, such as the genocide in Palestine, demonstrate her advocacy for raising awareness. Iman advocates for changes in the curriculum and emphasizes the importance of educating others about the complex experiences of Muslim students and the urgency of addressing their experiences in public schools. By sharing their experiences and advocating for their students, Muslim educators contribute to creating a more equitable and inclusive education system for all.

CHAPTER 9: ANALYSIS: HALAQA AS A SPACE OF TRANSFORMATIVE KNOWLEDGE

Defining Themes of Transformative Knowledge

Research methodologies that promote community acceptance and knowledge are influenced by their evolving realities, practices, experiences, and aspirations (Nakhid et al., 2023). Researcher Farah Ahmed (2014) states that halaqa honors the sacred, spiritual, and transformative nature of 'ilm, or knowledge, valuing Muslims' beliefs, cultural aspirations, and collective autonomy. Through halaqa, educators express viewpoints as human beings and co-constructors of knowledge, and contribute to self-development and community goals through 'ilm, fostering personal growth and collaboration (Ahmed, 2014). After facilitating each halaqa, I reflected on the use of the researcher's analytic memo (as detailed in the intervention chapter). I answered the following questions about storytelling: (1) Which stories were interesting, insightful, or resonating to me? (2) What images, feelings, reactions, and meanings did I see? and (3) What themes of transformative knowledge did I hear?

Using my researcher's analytic memos and situated in narrative inquiry, I have identified themes of transformative knowledge. Themes are also literary devices used in stories to demonstrate an author's message about how humans feel, experience, and endure challenges so that we can understand humanity. I remember how my students struggled with understanding themes. Often, they would identify a one-word idea for a text, such as suffering, defeat, isolation, or perseverance. I would have to probe them further and ask them, "So, what is the author trying to say about suffering?" Then they would explain a little bit more, and I would continue to push them: "What in the text shows this? How do you know that this is true? Where do you see this?" After my students identified examples, we analyzed the text by examining the language itself. My students would annotate words and make inferences. By identifying and analyzing examples, they could compose an essay exploring a message that the author is conveying about the human condition—for example, how humans can suffer under terrible circumstances or face extreme

loss, but change their perspective and become better individuals in society. There are so many messages, and they are open for interpretation. In identifying themes of transformative knowledge, I applied this same process, pushing myself to ask, “So what?” and “Why is this knowledge transformative and important?”

Accordingly, I define themes of transformative knowledge as repeated main ideas and concepts that reflect the human condition and demonstrate the collective and personal growth of Muslim educators and the knowledge co-constructed by Muslim educators in the halaqa space. (See Table 7.) The knowledge conveyed would not have occurred outside the halaqa space. The conditions, facilitation, and environment established in the halaqa, combined with the life experiences of these Muslim educators, led to the creation of these themes of transformative knowledge that can reflect their own human condition to the rest of the world. The themes of transformative knowledge also connect back to my theory of change, which was as follows:

IF WE	empower Muslim public school educators to share their authentic identities and experiences in an affinity-based space,
THEN	Muslim public school educators will use storytelling practices, practice mindfulness of body and emotions, and create community,
AND WE WILL SEE	those Muslim public school educators create their own ummah, build a network of support, reflect after mindfulness practices, and share stories of their experiences as Muslim public school educators.

By centering educators' “worldview[s] as a credible reference point for ‘findings,’ halaqah validates meanings that participants collaboratively generate. This validation is transformative for participants, giving them ‘voice’ and agency in shaping a way forward for their communities” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 572).

Table 7*Themes of Transformative Knowledge from Muslim Public School Educator Halaqas*

#	Topic	Themes of Transformative Knowledge
1	Teaching as Dawah	Dawah humanizes Muslim educators' identities, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions as it centers on personal stories, thereby inviting students, colleagues, and communities to see these educators as complex individuals who contribute positively to public education.
2	Knowledge and empowerment	Halaqas provide Muslim educators the knowledge and community support to navigate their professional environments that transform their individual experiences into collective strength, enabling them to feel more in control of their professional narratives and more capable of effecting change.
3	Anti-Palestinian racism	The halaqas provided a space for Muslim educators to express their profound sadness and horror about anti-Palestinian racism and find support among peers who understood their unique position as Muslim educators in navigating their professional roles while staying true to their beliefs.
4	Sisters' ummah	Muslim women expressed self-love, acceptance of one another, and love for their students, all grounded in their faith.
5	Collective healing	Through collective healing and shared experiences, Muslim educators find empowerment, resilience, and a unified voice to navigate challenges, affirm their identities, and create positive change in their educational environments.

Teaching as Dawah

Dawah is not just about explicit preaching, but is embodied in Muslim educators' everyday actions, presence, and professional excellence in supporting the Muslim community and their students and in navigating their workspaces. Educators recognize that their mere presence as visibly Muslim professionals in public schools is a powerful form of Dawah. Dawah humanizes Muslim educators' identities, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions as it centers on personal stories. Muslim educators' practices invite students, colleagues, and communities to see these educators as complex individuals who contribute positively to public

education. Muslims' appealing personalities and behaviors attract non-Muslims, influencing them to investigate Islam, deconstruct biased reports, and reflect on their views, despite not intending to perform Dawah themselves (Chen et al., 2020). Chen et al. (2020) suggest that closer relationships between non-Muslims and Muslims foster direct discussions about Islam, with Muslims acting as guides.

Asiya shared how a student with autism mimicked her hijab, showing the impact of her visible Muslim identity. Asiya also discussed how her passion for literacy and her podcast became a way to represent Islam positively in the educational field. Muslim educators view their professional competence and dedication as a form of Dawah. Asiya's view suggests that Dawah can and should be inextricably linked to the pursuit of justice, dismantling ignorance and uplifting excluded communities. Muslim educators view their role in correcting stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam as an essential aspect of Dawah. Iman discussed her efforts to educate others about Ramadan, appreciating the respectful responses while acknowledging the exhaustion of being the one to do the educating. Asiya shared how she supported a fasting student during Ramadan, providing a safe space for, and understanding of, the student. Educators' efforts to educate their students about Islamic practices, such as Asiya's use of the book *Under My Hijab*, can also be seen as a form of transformative Dawah. They invite others to engage with and appreciate the broad spectrum of Muslim identities by providing accurate information and creating opportunities for dialogue.

Umme-Rumaysa emphasized the importance of her everyday presence as a Muslim educator and said that everyone knew she was Muslim “just because of how I carried myself.” As a Muslim woman wearing a niqab and hijab, she sees her self-representation as a form of Dawah, where she can challenge negative stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslim women. In working with her students, Iman models Dawah so that her Muslim students can authentically express and celebrate their religious identity, rather than feeling the need to assimilate. Iman emphasized the importance of “empowering Muslim students to center their

faith and identity, rather than feeling the need to suppress or ignore it." Sarah highlighted how her inclusive teaching approach serves as Dawah: "I openly talk about different cultures, especially the Middle East." Sarah emphasized her commitment to bringing diverse cultures and beliefs into her classroom to show how Dawah can be embodied through inclusive teaching practices that validate and celebrate diverse religious and cultural identities. The Muslim educators' stories and experiences represent an approach to Dawah in which the invitation to Islam is not just about proselytizing or religious observance, but about aligning one's faith with a broader commitment to social and educational equity.

Knowledge and Empowerment

As a result of participating in halaqas, Muslim educators gained insights into different experiences of Muslim educators in various settings across the United States—experiences that broadened their understanding of the challenges they face. Halaqas provide Muslim educators the knowledge and community support that they need in order to navigate their professional environments that transform their individual experiences into collective strength, enabling them to feel more in control of their professional narratives and more capable of effecting change.

As part of increasing their knowledge, Muslim educators share how they experience, challenge, and dismantle anti-Muslim racism. Anti-Muslim racism is rooted in the belief that white Christians who harbor racial hostility toward Muslims are primarily colonizers and their religious feelings and imperial/colonial impulses continue to shape contemporary conflicts (Razack, 2021). Kadija mentions teaching in a predominantly Muslim city, contrasting her experience with those in the U. S. South. She says, "I don't know how y'all people in the South teach. God bless y'all. I would get fired, like, super quickly." Her awareness of regional demographics led her to understand how she wanted to advocate for Muslim students' and educators' rights, even in a predominantly Muslim area. Sarah compares her experiences in suburban and inner-city districts: "I don't see that much diversity, but I also live by the

university, so I do see a lot of protests." This comparison increases awareness of how school settings affect Muslim educators' experiences. Kadija discusses the lack of protection for Muslim teachers advocating for the Palestinian cause, and all the educators discuss the challenges of addressing global issues, particularly as related to Palestine, thereby revealing systemic biases in curriculum and school policies. The structural violence of anti-Muslim hate is deeply intertwined with the political and historical global context (Saleem et al., 2022). Sarah later revealed that she was unaware of these nuances, and the conversations she had with other educators in the halaqas helped her learn how those issues affected other Muslim educators.

Understanding the broader context of their experiences allows Muslim educators to recognize that their challenges are often systemic rather than personal. To challenge anti-Muslim racism's practices, assumptions, and logic, it is crucial to recognize anti-Muslim racism as a systemic issue rather than an individual bias (Abdul Khabeer et al., 2017). This knowledge empowers these educators to address issues more effectively and advocate for change. Fear of Muslims plays a crucial role in the territorial and symbolic foundation of whiteness (Razack, 2021). Muslim educators recognize the fear and fight against it. In the third halaqa, when Asiya shared her frustration that the school shooter training focused on Muslim shooters, this awareness empowered her to question the fairness and bias in the training, rather than internalizing it as a personal issue. The discussions about the lack of diversity in leadership positions empower participants to aspire for and work toward leadership roles, knowing that their presence is needed and valuable.

Awareness of systemic issues helps Muslim educators identify areas in which change is needed, empowering them to take targeted action. Discussions about leadership academies and continuing education inspire participants to pursue further professional growth as they begin to feel empowered by the knowledge of these opportunities. For example, Hawa's reflection on her journey to education and leadership roles during the first halaqa demonstrates how awareness of one's path and challenges can lead to empowered career choices. A greater understanding of

the educational landscape and its challenges empowers Muslim educators to make informed decisions about their careers and advocacy efforts.

Anti-Palestinian Racism

In the halaqa, Muslim educators expressed deep emotional responses to anti-Palestinian racism. Their emotional responses reflect the deep connection many Muslims feel to global issues affecting Muslim communities. The halaqas provided a space for Muslim educators to express their profound sadness and horror and to find support among peers who understood their unique position as Muslim educators in navigating their professional roles while staying true to their beliefs. Their internal conflicts already added to the emotional stress of navigating their workplaces as Muslims.

After October 7, Muslim educators faced heightened scrutiny and unfair treatment. Kadija notes a Muslim teacher being pulled out of the classroom for her stance on Palestine, whereas a Jewish teacher who violated student privacy was not punished. Muslim educators felt constrained in expressing their views, fearing professional repercussions. Muslim educators feel an added burden to educate others about Islam and counter misconceptions, especially in the wake of heightened tensions. Iman describes educating staff about Ramadan. Muslim educators struggled with how to teach about the conflict objectively while dealing with their own emotional responses.

The educators felt overwhelmed by the scale of the tragedy and their limited ability to effect change from their positions. They worried about how these events were affecting their Muslim students. Despite feeling overwhelmed, the educators strongly desired to find ways to support affected communities and educate others about the situation. Each week, this space provided them a place to express their feelings and helped them move into conversations about what changes they would like to see.

Sisters' Ummah

As the halaqas progressed, the affinity space became more than just sharing stories and connecting. It started as a place with six strangers, whose only commonality was that they knew me in some form. The meeting space transformed into a space where Muslim women could support one another in a caring and supportive way that uplifted the group collectively. The group became an ummah, and with all educators self-identifying as women, it became a sister's area of the mosque. The Muslim women provided encouragement to and empathy for one another, as they understood firsthand what it was like to be a Muslim educator in a public school setting. In this halaqa, the Muslim women expressed self-love, acceptance of one another, and love for their students, all grounded in their faith. Underneath their stories was a deep appreciation and love for education.

The intention behind the driver's diagram on Muslim ummah was to create a space for Muslim public school educators to be in a community together—a space that can establish a network of support where listening and speaking truths can be healing. Muslim commonality—a shared religion and ethnicity—is crucial for social identification and fostering a sense of belonging among Muslims (Dana et al., 2017). Anti-Muslim racism disrupts individual, interpersonal, and structural systems (Samari, 2016). As an antidote to anti-Muslim racism, Muslim educators can create a sense of belonging and develop a sense of sisterhood or brotherhood that is naturally part of their faith.

Several strategies helped transform an affinity space into a collective, robust network of sisters. Each halaqa began with a structured opening, often including the reading of a Hadith. This practice helped create a shared spiritual foundation for the meetings. Educators shared their current feelings and experiences at the start of each halaqa. The mindfulness and grounding exercises helped educators connect with their identities as Muslim educators. Educators were given opportunities to reflect on prompts related to their experiences as Muslim educators and to share their thoughts with the group, fostering open dialogue, mutual support,

empathy, solidarity, and understanding. The regular, consistent meeting structure of the halaqas, including opening ceremonies, discussions, and closing reflections, helped create a familiar and safe space for Muslim educators.

At the end of each halaqa, Muslim educators shared hopes for one another, as if making dua or prayer for the group. The feeling was akin to praying in communal salat. The educators were encouraged to share moments of gratitude, which helped foster a positive and supportive atmosphere. Educators shared their hopes for the coming week, such as a hope for a calm week, rest, blessings, and one good thing in their day, as well as a hope that any positive experiences could serve as a "shining light at the end of the tunnel" during challenging periods. Other hopes included yearnings for ongoing support and connection within their professional and personal communities, the strength to face challenges in their work environments, a desire for peace, remembering their foundations, and staying grounded in their values and beliefs. Their collective hopes represent a personal way to communicate with one another, express their needs, and show gratitude, just as Muslims do when they make dua. Muslims believe that duas have the power to change our future, and in the same way, these hopes became a way for Muslim educators to uplift and change their future.

The halaqas themselves create a loving community. These educators' hopes became a gift of love. In developing a sisterhood, these Muslim women expressed deep care and love for their students; an understanding of, and support for, their colleagues; love through advocacy; love in teaching; and love through empathizing with one another's struggles. The love they experience and share is multifaceted, encompassing personal growth, professional dedication, cultural appreciation, and a commitment to creating inclusive and supportive environments.

Collective Healing

Through collective healing and shared experiences, Muslim educators find empowerment, resilience, and a unified voice to navigate challenges, affirm their identities, and

create positive change in their educational environments. The halaqas helped them combat isolation, validate experiences, build resilience, create a support network, share strategies, affirm identity, address systemic issues, and promote professional growth. The halaqas also allowed for emotional processing, fostered hope, developed a collective voice, and increased cultural competence. Several components of the halaqas contributed to collective healing: safe and inclusive space, shared experiences, mindfulness practices, cultural and religious affirmations, problem-solving discussions, emotional support, reflective practices, community belonging, professional growth opportunities, and dreaming of future aspirations. Combined, these elements created a holistic healing environment that addresses Muslim educators' emotional, spiritual, and professional needs, fostering community and empowerment.

The halaqas provided a judgment-free environment in which educators felt comfortable sharing their experiences openly. Sarah opined, "everybody felt safe to share their experiences." Educators found comfort in realizing that they weren't alone in their struggles. Sarah also noted that the halaqas gave her "a fresh perspective that I'm not the only one going through these challenges." Iman described the space as comforting and helpful in sharing experiences, allowing for emotional release and healing. The halaqas incorporated Islamic traditions and teachings, such as reading Hadiths and quotes from Islamic figures, thereby allowing educators to embrace their identities fully. Collective healing builds emotional resilience. Kadija mentioned how the group made her feel "more proactive in advocating for her identity." Educators collectively brainstormed solutions to everyday challenges, such as educating colleagues about Ramadan.

Muslim educators provided empathy and encouragement to one another, creating a supportive atmosphere, evident when Asiya shared her frustrations and received understanding from others. The halaqas encouraged introspection, helping educators understand themselves better. Umme-Rumaysa reflected on how the group helped her appreciate her own life more.

The sense of belonging fostered in the group helped heal feelings of isolation. Asiya's sharing of microaggressions resonated with others, creating a healing sense of shared understanding.

Sharing teaching strategies and addressing workplace challenges specific to Muslim educators helped build confidence. Collectively brainstorming solutions to common challenges helped educators feel empowered and less overwhelmed. After experiencing the benefits, Asiya considered starting her own support circle. Discussions about ongoing support and future plans gave educators hope. Many expressed interest in continuing meetings and collaborations.

As a facilitator, I led mindfulness exercises that helped participants ground themselves and process emotions. By incorporating mindfulness exercises and prompting educators to reflect on their experiences, I created space for individual introspection and growth, rather than imposing a specific agenda. These practices were incorporated into multiple sessions.

Incorporating Islamic traditions and teachings into discussions provides spiritual healing, offering a way for participants to overcome daily stresses and reconnect with their identities.

Sharing and witnessing one another's stories can have a healing effect. The space created allows for vulnerability, understanding, and the realization that the community "is in this together."

Through these various aspects, the halaqas create a healing environment for Muslim educators, addressing their emotional, spiritual, and professional needs in a supportive community context.

CHAPTER 10: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL SYSTEMS, MUSLIM EDUCATORS, AFFINITY SPACES, AND SELF

This chapter outlines the next steps for individuals involved in this PoP and relates their work to the larger education field. The chapter builds on the previous chapters, focusing on analysis. Liberatory Design is “an approach to addressing equity challenges and chang[ing] efforts in complex systems” that is meant to investigate “deeper causes produced by systemic oppression” (National Equity Project, 2023b). At the core of Liberatory Design is a set of beliefs:

1. “Racism and inequity have been designed into systems and thus can be redesigned;
 2. Designing for equity requires the meaningful participation of those impacted by inequity, and
 3. Equity-driven designs require equity and complexity informed processes”
- (National Equity Project, 2023a).

In this chapter, I first share the implications for school systems and how they can redesign how racism and inequity have been incorporated into them (National Equity Project, 2023a). I share the implications, lessons, and recommendations for school systems on the basis of the research presented and analyzed in this dissertation of practice. The implications for school systems include promoting representation, fostering inclusive environments, enforcing antidiscrimination policies, addressing systemic barriers, encouraging trust, addressing trauma, and providing professional learning opportunities. In the next section, I discuss implications for Muslim public school educators, highlighting the importance of collective action and solidarity among Muslim educators to dismantle oppression systems in their schools, thereby enabling them to challenge biases and advocate for change. I then discuss the implications and the value of culturally specific affinity spaces. Lastly, I discuss the implications for myself as an activist researcher–practitioner, as well as presenting my own learnings and laying out the next steps.

Implications for School Systems

Based on the statements and experiences shared by Muslim educators in this research study, several key implications arise for school districts to consider. (See Table 8.) These implications are important because they represent opportunities for school districts to meaningfully address Muslim educators' and students' needs and experiences, ultimately leading to more inclusive, supportive, and transformative educational environments. The term “school systems” used in this section includes individuals or organizations involved in decision-making processes that affect Muslim public school educators such as school leaders, the central office, school boards, educators’ unions or associations, superintendents, recruiters, and colleagues. The term can also apply to private sectors in education.

Table 8

Research Implications for School Systems

#	Implication	Brief Description
1	Acknowledging a need for representation and visibility	School systems should actively work to recruit, retain, and promote Muslim educators in order to reflect the diversity of their student populations better.
2	Fostering affirming and supportive environments	School systems should ensure that they are fostering inclusive cultures that validate and affirm the identities and practices of Muslim community members in order to better support, retain, and empower Muslim educators and other educators of color through their policies and practices.
3	Enforcing strong antidiscrimination policies	School systems need to have and enforce strong antidiscrimination policies that specifically address religious discrimination and anti-Muslim racism in order to prevent doxxing and harassment.
4	Addressing systemic barriers to leadership opportunities	School systems need to examine their policies and practices so as to identify and dismantle any systemic barriers that prevent Muslim educators from moving into leadership roles or any position of decision making.
5	Creating affirming and inclusive spaces to	School systems should provide resources, time, and space for Muslim teachers to connect, share experiences, find

	facilitate community and collaboration	solidarity, support one another, and develop strategies to address their unique challenges.
6	Fostering trust and understanding with Muslim communities	School systems should create platforms that facilitate open dialogues and collaborative committees involving parents, families, educators, and community members in order to foster mutual understanding and collective problem solving.
7	Addressing trauma and supporting educator well-being	Muslim educators experience the emotional and mental toll of challenging systemic issues, so school systems should provide comprehensive support and resources for their well-being.
8	Providing professional learning opportunities to combat anti-Muslim racism	The educators' experiences highlight the need for school systems to offer targeted professional development, mentorship programs, and resources to support the specific needs and challenges that Muslim educators and students face.

Acknowledging a Need for Representation and Visibility

School systems should actively work to recruit, retain, and promote Muslim educators in order to reflect the diversity of their student populations better. Anti-Muslim racism in public schools mirrors that in the broader society, replicating issues in the home, religion, communities, economics, and politics, in turn reflecting the replication of anti-Muslim racism throughout U.S. history (Fuller, 2018). The education system serves three functions: social integration, social placement, and social and cultural innovation, ensuring that students share beliefs, preparing students for future life, and fostering discovery among students (Sociology, 2016). Schools play a crucial role in promoting human growth and addressing historically inequitable conditions, as Sellars et al. (2023) have highlighted. Muslim educators can contribute valuable insights to curriculum development and instructional practices, helping to create more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments. Recruiting and retaining Muslim educators contributes to the overall diversity of the school staff.

The educators' experiences of feeling like "the only one" or lacking a sense of community within their schools point to the need for school districts to actively recruit, retain, and support Muslim educators, in order to ensure their meaningful representation and visibility in both schools and the larger society. Sarah and Hawa highlighted the lack of representation and visibility of Muslim educators in their respective school districts and states. Rosa's experiences highlight the need for school systems to closely examine their hiring, disciplinary, and support practices, to identify and eliminate any disparities or double standards affecting Muslim educators. Sarah's status as the only Pakistani and Muslim teacher in her district points to the lack of Muslim representation among educators. School systems should prioritize recruiting, supporting, and retaining a more diverse teaching staff that reflects the diversity of the student population.

Many of the educators teach in diverse Muslim-majority communities. Yet, the lack of Muslim representation in leadership and decision-making roles suggests a disconnect between the student population and the educators/administrators. Kadija and Asiya highlight the lack of Muslim representation in high-level leadership positions within their school districts. Accordingly, districts should actively work to recruit, develop, and promote qualified Muslim educators into administrative and decision-making roles.

Increasing the diversity of educators can help foster a sense of belonging and support for Muslim students. For example, Abidah's role as a visible Muslim educator and her positive impact on Muslim students bring out the importance of representation and the presence of Muslim role models in schools. Sehra takes pride in seeing a hijabi character represented in the school's library. Her own presence as a Muslim educator also provides positive visibility for Muslim students. Ensuring that Muslim educators and students feel seen, heard, and valued in the school community can have a powerful impact on their sense of belonging and success.

Fostering Affirming and Supportive Environments

School systems should ensure that they are fostering inclusive cultures that validate and affirm the identities and practices of Muslim community members in order to better support, retain, and empower Muslim educators and other educators of color through their policies and practices. School climate is influenced by individuals' experiences, norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching practices, and organizational structures, reflecting the overall school environment (Cohen et al., 2009). Educational institutions, like society, perpetuate racist practices through their own practices, cultures, and policies, which undermine human equity (Miller, 2020). School systems should work to reasonably accommodate the religious needs and practices of Muslim educators in order to support their ability to participate fully in the school community.

School systems should work to create more accommodating and understanding environments that allow Muslim educators to integrate their religious and cultural values into their professional roles. Bushra's daily routine of prayer, Quran reading, and fasting during Ramadan is essential to her Muslim faith. Iman and Umme-Rumaysa discussed the challenges of navigating their Muslim identities and practices within the public school culture. Abidah's experience of being offered the custodian's office as a prayer space suggests the need for schools to designate appropriate, dignified prayer areas for Muslim community members. Abidah struggles with inflexible school schedules and a lack of accommodation for her prayer times. Umme-Rumaysa and Sarah expressed the importance of creating "safe" and "supportive" environments for Muslim educators and students. School systems should be willing to accommodate the religious practices of Muslim educators, such as allowing time and space for prayer, without making them feel that they are "abusing" the privilege. Noor's advocacy for her Muslim students to have access to prayer spaces, Ramadan accommodations, and other resources demonstrates the importance of school systems being responsive to the diverse needs

of their student populations. Failing to provide such accommodations can exclude students and educators.

The educators' discussions around the challenges of observing Ramadan and celebrating Eid highlight the need for school systems to develop policies that accommodate the religious practices of Muslim students and staff. Sarah advocates accommodating Muslim religious holidays and practices, such as having Eid off or a half day for Ramadan. Sehra highlights the challenge of Eid not being officially recognized, unlike Christian holidays, such as Christmas. This omission requires her to navigate taking time off and creating her own family celebrations—a task that can be burdensome. Hawa's advocacy to get Eid greetings recognized highlights the need for schools to include Muslim and other minority religious holidays and traditions. Incorporating religious observances for diverse faith communities into the school calendar and policies demonstrates respect and accommodation for all students and staff.

Enforcing Strong Antidiscrimination Policies

School systems need to have and enforce strong antidiscrimination policies that specifically address religious discrimination and anti-Muslim racism in order to prevent doxxing and harassment. Schools are social and cultural institutions with leaders who govern, control, and manage their systems, shaping their community's beliefs and values (Gibson et al., 2005). School culture, influenced by school leaders such as principals, teachers, and parents, is crucial for student learning and reforms, shaping norms, values, and traditions (Deal, 1998). The ongoing discrimination and fear among those who disagree with the claim that criticism of Israel is antisemitic continues to penalize individuals (Bakan et al., 2024). Policies promoting religious interaction can enhance trust among religious groups, as individuals are motivated to learn about others' trustworthiness (Thunström et al., 2021). Educators critiquing and disrupting dominant, white-centric narratives, policies, and practices within education should be protected by school system leaders.

Muslim educators faced attacks for their views, especially around political issues. The disparate treatment of the pro-Palestinian and Zionist teachers, as described by Kadija, suggests that school districts must address institutional biases and actively work to combat discrimination against Muslim educators and their advocacy efforts. Some educators felt constrained in discussing topics related to Muslim communities. School systems should have clear policies protecting educators' academic freedom to address current events. The educators discuss experiencing microaggressions, dismissal of their concerns, and selective policy enforcement. School systems need to review their policies and practices in order to ensure that they are truly inclusive and equitable without disproportionately affecting Muslim educators and students.

Addressing Systemic Barriers to Leadership Opportunities

School systems need to examine their policies and practices so as to identify and dismantle any systemic barriers that prevent Muslim educators from moving into leadership roles or any position of decision making. School systems should consider ways to actively support and empower educators of color, such as providing mentorship programs, leadership development opportunities, and pathways for career advancement.

Asiya and Hawa shared their experiences of being overlooked and denied opportunities for leadership and advancement despite their qualifications as educators. Sarah's interest in pursuing further education, particularly in curriculum and instruction or in educational leadership, suggests a desire to take on more influential roles within the education system. Asiya's struggles with advancing in her career and feeling dismissed or overlooked for her ideas indicate a need for school systems to provide targeted professional development, mentorship, and support systems for Muslim educators. Scholarships, leadership training, and pathways for career advancement could go a long way toward fulfilling that need. Rosa's struggles to get hired and establish herself indicate a potential lack of support and pathways for Muslim educators to

thrive in the profession. The educators' roles as advocates, experts, and leaders within their schools suggest that school districts should prioritize the recruitment, retention, and empowerment of Muslim educators in positions of influence.

Creating Affirming and Inclusive Spaces to Facilitate Community and Collaboration

School systems should provide resources, time, and space for Muslim teachers to connect, share experiences, find solidarity, support one another, and develop strategies to address their unique challenges. Sharing stories promotes meaningful connections, challenging white supremacy, separation, and human value hierarchies (DeWolf et al., 2019). Feeling isolated, many educators wanted to build "affinity spaces" and support networks among Muslim educators. Faisal is hesitant to openly share his "Muslimness" in the classroom, pointing to a lack of belonging and support. Bushra desires a professional network or forum specifically for Muslim educators. Kadija's example of the group of black women teachers who "ran that school" and supported one another demonstrates the power of collective action and solidarity. Through that support, Muslim educators feel empowered to bring their full identities to work without fear of marginalization or backlash.

Fostering Trust and Understanding with Muslim Communities

School systems should create platforms that facilitate open dialogues and collaborative committees involving parents, families, educators, and community members in order to foster mutual understanding and collective problem solving. Muslim generations and groups react differently to anti-Muslim racism, with many parents encouraging their children to remain silent because of safety concerns (Haque et al., 2019). Muslim families are grappling with the challenges of raising their children in an environment that does not accept them, exacerbated by negative media and social media sentiments about Islam (Haque et al., 2019). Bulut (2016)

suggests that increasing intergroup dialogue and understanding among Americans and increasing contact with Muslims could significantly reduce prejudice against Muslims in the United States.

Iman's experiences with Muslim students' reluctance to participate in school initiatives owing to a lack of trust in the administration point to the importance of school districts actively building relationships and fostering understanding with local Muslim communities. Huda's experience of Muslim parents and community members reaching out to her for guidance indicates the value of school systems actively engaging with diverse communities and building strong partnerships to address their needs and concerns. Hawa's principal and colleagues demonstrated allyship, which helped mitigate the impact of anti-Muslim bias. Noor's experience garnering support from the broader community, including administrators and parents, demonstrates the power of collective action in challenging systemic oppression. School systems should cultivate these partnerships to combat that oppression.

School systems can gain valuable insights into Muslim students' specific challenges, concerns, and priorities by directly engaging with the Muslim community. This practice allows them to develop more targeted and relevant support, resources, and policies to meet the community's needs and ease the responsibilities off Muslim educators' shoulders.

Addressing Trauma and Supporting Educator Well-being

Muslim educators experience the emotional and mental toll of challenging systemic issues, so school systems should provide comprehensive support and resources for their well-being. Anti-Muslim racism leads to adverse health outcomes and disparities, affecting individual, interpersonal, and structural systems, and highlighting the need for attention and action (Samari, 2016). Muslim mental health suffers from having to constantly defend Islam, causing stress, isolation, overwhelmingness, anxiety, fear of public violence, and feelings of inadequacy in answering questions (Haque et al., 2019). There is a need for school systems to

provide comprehensive support and resources, including access to mental health services, trauma-informed practices, self-care, and collective healing opportunities. This kind of support, in turn, can improve the overall quality of education and the stability of the teaching workforce.

Umme-Rumaysa's openness about her own struggles with time management and anxiety suggests a need for school districts to prioritize the mental health and well-being of their educators and provide appropriate resources and support. Faisal's experiences of feeling "tired" and "conflict averse" suggest the emotional toll that navigating racial and religious biases can take. School systems must address systemic inequities and provide robust mental health support to ensure the well-being and retention of minority educators.

Providing Professional Learning Opportunities to Combat Anti-Muslim Racism

The educators' experiences highlight the need for school systems to offer targeted professional development, mentorship programs, and resources to support the specific needs and challenges that Muslim educators and students face. These supports should be co-designed with Muslim educators, who should be compensated for their time and be acknowledged. The portrayal of Muslims in American media indirectly affects their worth, highlighting a failure to accept and value them based on their religious identity and potentially hindering their integration into society (Saleem et al., 2019). Americans often perceive Muslim Americans and Muslims as untrustworthy and violent (Sides et al., 2013). Muslim educators relay similar experiences in the halaqas and empathy interviews about their colleagues and community members, demonstrating a need for school systems to provide resources and training to change individual perceptions.

The educators' frustrations with insensitive comments and biased narratives from their colleagues suggest a need for school districts to implement a wide range of mandatory professional development and training on topics such as cultural competency, implicit bias, and effective allyship. Bushra's experiences indicate that some of her colleagues and parents may

have a limited understanding or biases regarding Muslim identities and practices. Noor deals with stereotypes and negative perceptions from colleagues and administrators. Naila encounters prejudiced assumptions and harassment from parents. Abidah describes intolerance and insensitivity from school administrators and colleagues. Hawa suggests "an all-encompassing, cultural class" to educate staff and students about different religions and cultures. Sehra's experiences suggest that many of her colleagues and the broader school community lack a deep understanding of Muslim culture, practices, and identities. Faisal's experiences indicate a lack of knowledge about, and accommodation for, Muslim educators within his school community. Kadija criticizes her district's professional development approach, arguing that it prioritizes antisemitism over Islamophobia. She suggests comprehensive training that addresses racism, bias, and unique Muslim educator needs.

Although school systems should invest in cultural competency training to help all staff better understand and respect the diverse backgrounds of their educators and students, they also need to acknowledge and understand the specific issues that Muslim educators navigate, such as Islamophobia, discrimination, and lack of representation. There is a lack of awareness and knowledge about Muslim identities, which leads to insensitive questions, assumptions, and even occasional discrimination toward Muslim educators and students. School systems should prioritize providing comprehensive training and resources to help all staff develop a deeper appreciation for religious diversity and the unique needs of Muslim educators.

By addressing all these implications, school systems can demonstrate a genuine commitment to equity, inclusion, and the empowerment of Muslim educators and students within the public education system.

Implications for Muslim Public School Educators

Based on the research study's findings, what implications should Muslim educators consider? Why is this important? Muslim educators can influence and feel empowered to

navigate challenges but cannot do it alone. Muslim educators can dismantle systems of oppression in their school systems, together with co-conspirators and through the community. Collective action and solidarity can amplify the voices of Muslim educators, allowing them to challenge biases more effectively and advocate for change. (See Table 9.)

Table 9		
<i>Research Implications for Muslim Public School Educators</i>		
#	Implication	Brief Description
1	Balancing visibility and self-care	The Muslim educators' reflections on the emotional toll of constantly having to educate their non-Muslim colleagues about their religious practices and identities highlight the need for Muslim educators to find a balance between visibility and self-care.
2	Integrating faith and social justice	Integrating an individual's faith-based values with a broader social justice agenda is a powerful approach to teaching and advocacy.
3	Building supportive communities	Muslim educators should actively seek out or create opportunities to connect with and learn from other Muslim educators within their own schools and across districts in order to build community and develop a sense of belonging.
4	Educating the community and cultivating co-conspirators	Muslim educators should prioritize educating students and colleagues about Islam and Muslim experiences through personal narratives, books, and other resources.

Balancing Visibility and Self-Care

The Muslim educators' reflections on the emotional toll of constantly having to educate their non-Muslim colleagues about their religious practices and identities highlight the need for Muslim educators to find a balance between visibility and self-care. Asking questions about our emotions can enhance our emotional awareness and promote self-compassion, thereby transforming our self-relationship and our relationship with others (Trachtenberg, 2023).

Maintaining boundaries and prioritizing one's own well-being can help prevent burnout and ensure that Muslim educators can sustain their advocacy efforts.

Integrating Faith and Social Justice

Integrating an individual's faith-based values with a broader social justice agenda is a powerful approach to teaching and advocacy. Asiya's perspective on aligning Islamic principles, such as "Iqra" (to read/learn) with efforts toward educational equity and justice suggests that doing so is an essential implication for Muslim educators. Iman demonstrated how she integrated Islamic teachings and practices into her educational philosophies and pedagogies. The educators' experiences of navigating the balance between their Muslim identities and professional roles point up the need for Muslim educators to find ways to express their faith while maintaining appropriate boundaries authentically.

Building Supportive Communities

Muslim educators should actively seek out or create opportunities to connect with and learn from other Muslim educators within their own schools and across districts in order to build community and develop a sense of belonging. Individuals create affinity spaces where people with similar identities “come together to process feelings, connect, build community, strategize, and heal” (Johnson, 2023, p. 29). When combined with increased religious involvement, mosque-based support programs are most protective of American Muslims' mental health, boosting community buy-in and self-efficacy (Ali et al., 2022).

The educators' desire to create networks and mentorship opportunities for other Muslim educators points to the importance of connecting with and supporting one another. The educators' descriptions of their colleagues quickly "shutting down" any open expressions of anti-Muslim racism suggest the value of Muslim educators building strong networks and collective power within their school communities, with both Muslim and non-Muslim educators.

Muslim educators should consider ways to mentor, support, and uplift their fellow Muslim educators both formally and informally.

Educating the Community and Cultivating Co-Conspirators

Muslim educators should prioritize educating students and colleagues about Islam and Muslim experiences through personal narratives, books, and other resources. Chen et al. (2020) suggest that closer relationships between non-Muslims and Muslims foster direct discussions about Islam, with Muslims acting as guides, thereby closing the fear-to-conversion gap. The educators' examples of organizing Eid celebrations and decorating for Ramadan point to the value of Muslim educators actively creating inclusive and celebratory spaces for their Muslim students and colleagues. The educators emphasize the significance of Muslim educators fostering cross-cultural coalitions and partnerships to challenge biases and advocate for change. Other Muslim organizations have achieved social inclusion by claiming space and visibility through alliance building and advocacy, enabling multiple belongings within their identity group and larger social entities (Seymour-Jorn et al., 2019).

Implications for Affinity Spaces

Based on this research study's findings, contributions to the research field build on the importance and creation of affinity spaces. Future facilitators should consider these implications when designing an affinity space for Muslims or religious minorities. Racial affinity learning spaces for educators help heal trauma from white supremacy, patriarchy, and other kinds of oppression by embodying wisdom, love, joy, and creativity (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Circles are a deliberate dialogue space that foster connection, empowerment, and understanding among participants through their structural elements, as Boyes-Watson et al. (2020) described. Halaqa honors the sacred, spiritual, and transformative nature of knowledge that values Muslims' beliefs, cultural aspirations, and collective autonomy in achieving their educational goals

(Ahmed, 2014). Although existing research examines the importance of affinity spaces, this research study adds new research to the design of an affinity space for Muslim public school educators.

Facilitators should ensure that the space welcomes Muslims from various backgrounds, cultures, and levels of practice, and should create an atmosphere in which participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences without fear of criticism or judgment. Indigenous communities increasingly value storytelling in preserving and safeguarding knowledge, as Eurocentric approaches are deemed culturally irrelevant or inappropriate (Nakhid, C. et al., 2023). Future halaqas should continue to center the narratives of marginalized Muslim voices, including those of women, educators, and other underrepresented groups. The halaqa demonstrated the transformative potential of integrating Islamic principles and values with a commitment to social justice and equity. Future halaqas should further explore ways to strengthen this connection, equipping participants with theological and practical tools to engage in faith-based activism and advocacy. Depending on the participants' levels of practice, facilitators could offer options such as dhikr or Quran recitation alongside secular practices.

Facilitators can address the need for educators to understand and support Muslim students' experiences in public schools and to explore ways to maintain Islamic values while navigating secular educational environments. Future halaqas should create space to explore the complexities of intersectionality and consider how Muslim communities can build meaningful alliances with other marginalized groups to combat systemic oppression. Future halaqas could intentionally facilitate the development of peer-to-peer support systems, empowering educators to continue connecting and uplifting one another beyond the halaqa setting.

These contributions underscore the value of culturally specific affinity spaces in supporting underrepresented educators, enhancing professional development, and, ultimately, improving the educational experience for educators and students.

Implications for Decolonizing the Research Process

Decolonizing methodologies challenge the Western academic canon's philosophy, pedagogy, ethics, organizational practices, paradigms, methodologies, and discourses (Smith, 2021). Decolonizing research involves challenging the historical and cultural assumptions embedded in traditional research methodologies (Bhattacharya, 2018). An Indigenous research paradigm comprises Indigenous ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, which together shape the tools researchers use to explore the cosmos (Wilson, 2008). One harmful impact of colonial Western research was that it utilized Indigenous story taking and storytelling as a tool to define, destroy, and devalue Indigenous knowledge, people, and practices (Archibald et al., 2019). Research lacking Indigenous methods can marginalize Indigenous peoples, perpetuating colonial ideology and ignoring Indigenous people's active participation in community, culture, language, and social practice (Windchief et al., 2019).

Decolonizing methodologies should critique colonialism and offer alternative solutions to the world's problems caused by colonialism and the failure of power structures (Smith, 2021). By understanding that research has been a colonizing enterprise, researchers can better understand the effects of colonization and its impact on their culture (Bhattacharya, 2018). Decolonizing research methodologies encourages Indigenous researchers to connect research to their worldviews and cultural notions, resulting in more meaningful and valuable research for their people (Archibald et al., 2019).

The process and practice of decolonizing research methodology is a topic of ongoing scholarly discussions (Thambinathan et al., 2021). By offering a chance to redefine research within the community, decolonization fosters a collective and collaborative effort between participants and researchers (Datta, 2018). Researchers should consider the sphere of decolonizing work, such as land, educational, and spiritual oppression, and examine whether they approach it from an ethical perspective (Bhattacharya, 2018). Researchers Thambinathan et al. (2021) emphasize the need for anti-oppressive research and propose key practices for

qualitative researchers based on decolonizing perspectives: critical reflexivity, reciprocity, respect for self-determination, embracing "Other(ed)" ways of knowing, and embodying transformative praxis.

Researcher Shawn Wilson (2008) proposes that an Indigenous research paradigm is crucial for Indigenous people, as it fosters the development of Indigenous theory and methods, and encourages an appreciation of history, promoting the critical examination of shortcomings and envisioning a future without demonizing or romanticizing the past. My research with MusCrit and halaqas mirrors Wilson's Indigenous research paradigm in that both seek to reclaim scholarly spaces, center marginalized experiences, and create models of transformative knowledge that honor cultural integrity and community wisdom. Datta (2018) describes the researcher's training as decolonization, focusing on becoming, learning, and taking responsibility for participants and emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural identity, interdisciplinary education, research skills, and understanding Western methodological challenges.

This dissertation of practice reveals exciting potential for decolonizing educational research by demonstrating how methodologies, such as narrative inquiry and liberatory design, can center Muslim-American voices. The next step in this research process is to develop a methodology that (1) prioritizes storytelling and lived experiences, (2) challenges traditional power structures in academic research, (3) creates collaborative, healing-centered spaces for knowledge production, (4) recognizes the researcher's positionality and personal narrative as integral to the research, and (5) develops frameworks that emerge from community experiences rather than imposing external theoretical models. Indigenous historical and modern stories teach valuable lessons about knowledge as a gift, with responsibility depending on the receiver's readiness and relationships playing a central role in sharing knowledge (Windchief et al., 2019).

The next step is to articulate this emerging methodology, documenting how it differs from traditional research approaches and demonstrating its transformative potential for

understanding Muslim-American experiences and how knowledge is conceived, produced, and valued. To further develop a research methodology centering Islamic traditions and decolonizing academic approaches, I will (1) consider strategies to explicitly develop MusCrit as a comprehensive Islamic-centered research framework, (2) use Quranic and Hadith-based storytelling traditions as methodological guides, (3) integrate Islamic epistemological principles such as holistic knowledge and collective wisdom, (4) design research protocols that center researcher reflexivity and spiritual mindfulness, and (5) build frameworks that recognize the diversity within Muslim experiences.

Implications as an Activist Researcher–Practitioner

This journey as a researcher has been a profoundly personal, life-transforming experience. Throughout this dissertation of practice, I've shared vulnerable experiences and narratives, as I am interconnected to this research on multiple levels. I've shared challenges I've experienced while researching and living with anti-Muslim racism. As I write this dissertation, contemplating what is in store for me in the next few years, I have found at every step of the journey that this research is more important than ever. I feel that everything in my life, as an educator, a writer, and an activist, has led up to this research. When I started the journey, I began to realize that there was a dearth of research on Muslim public school educators, and as I am finishing writing this dissertation of practice, I have come to realize that my work has just started.

Using researcher's analytic memos helped me focus on inclusive facilitation values. As described in my intervention chapter, in my Building Teams and Growth Culture class of Spring 2024, our facilitator, Dave Trachtenberg (2021), implemented inclusive facilitation modalities and practices to help embody social justice values in us, focusing on inclusive facilitation values such as collective wisdom, whole-person honoring, and community building. After facilitating

each halaqa, and later, during the transcription and analysis stages, I reflected on which values resonated for myself and whether any difficulties arose.

The most surprising moment for me in facilitating the halaqas was the feeling that I am a restorative justice (RJ) facilitator and that I can help others heal. In the third halaqa, I vividly wrote in my researcher's analytic memos how I finally felt like a true RJ facilitator. The following weekend, I met with my Ed.D. cohort at our annual residency gathering, and I remember describing the emotions I had experienced to my cohort mates. I realized that I can create a space, listen to the educators, model inclusive practices, and be present. This third session was most profound to me. While facilitating the mindfulness exercise during that halaqa, I took my time, breathed out, and listened to the stories, letting go of my agenda and facilitation style. I felt more chill and settled. I was less stressed out and sensed that these educators were part of my own "home." Hearing the stories of fellow Muslim educators was so healing and made me finally acknowledge myself as a true RJ facilitator. It was also healing for me when I noticed that they realized that they had no support except for the support given by this group and that such a group was what they had been looking for.

In the first halaqa, I focused on an inclusive facilitation value, "well-being embodied," to promote well-being and confidentiality, creating a safe space for educators to share their experiences. I acknowledged potential emotional burdens and reminded participants to opt out if they were uncomfortable. A challenge for me as a facilitator was letting go of content. I had too much planned and scheduled for that first halaqa, and I didn't want to rush the introductions. The whole purpose was to give everyone time to share, and I did not want to go beyond the time we had allocated. I had to let that go, and it was hard, as I spent a lot of time preparing the agenda and the content.

I learned important lessons as an RJ facilitator. The journaling prompts and the invitation to share hopes and reflections at the end of the session gave everyone space to process their thoughts and feelings, further reinforcing their value as individuals. Throughout all the

conversations, I acknowledged the educators' feelings, whether they were expressing joy, frustration, or vulnerability. This acknowledgment helped educators feel seen and understood. From the post-halaqa interviews and the last halaqa session, I gleaned that all the educators perceived that the halaqa was a safe and supportive environment in which they felt comfortable sharing their authentic experiences, because I set the tone and guided everyone through a mindfulness exercise.

I faced a lot of challenges in facilitating the halaqa space regarding maintaining an unbiased facilitation approach. When educators shared their struggles with marginalization, isolation, and discrimination, I listened attentively and validated their difficulties, showing that I recognized the weight of their experiences. I wanted to share my own experiences, but when educators shared their stories, I asked reflective questions that encouraged deeper exploration without imposing my own views. When discussions touched on hard issues, such as discussing Gaza, I did not take a stance but encouraged educators to share their perspectives without judgment. It was difficult for me, because I too, was processing my own emotions and feelings.

What helped me was writing my researcher's analytic memos immediately after I realized my feelings, and later debriefing in writing groups with members of my cohort. Having a space to reflect on my practices was critical to me as an RJ facilitator. My professors, Dave Trachtenberg and Dr. DeCuir, listened and asked me questions when I met with them. My cohort mates, Lisa Marie and Cass, and many others spent time with me on Zoom and on the phone. I met with fellow Muslim researchers who live and do their research in other parts of the country. In a way, I created small affinity spaces for me to share my own narratives, allowing me to express the nuances of my experiences as a Muslim educator and a facilitator.

The most incredible feeling, which I will explore in the final chapter, is that this journey helped me heal. Listening to these stories gave me the power to heal by validating my own experiences, inspiring others' actions, reframing narratives, instilling hope, and modeling the

transformative potential of collective care. The depth and authenticity of these accounts can be a profound source of healing for those who engage with them.

As a researcher–practitioner, I hope to continue researching and creating affinity-based spaces for educators of color and for Muslim educators in particular. I know there are a lot of possibilities within my own profession and within my community. I have been connected, thanks to Dr. DeCuir and Dr. Ali, to a wide network of Muslim researchers across the country and internationally, and I feel that more connections and research could be done in collaboration with some of them. Like the Muslim educators who want to mentor others, I want to elevate and support the voices of Muslim researchers.

Lastly, this journey through my dissertation of practice also affected my spirituality as a Muslim. In my life, as with many other Muslims, my level of practicing Islam varied with the trauma I was experiencing, the distractions or “craziness” that existed at the time, and what I was experiencing with my family. I felt myself changing, and at specific moments in this journey I felt my heart and spirit grow and deepen. Researching Hadiths and tafsir reminded me of my days as a Sunday school teacher and as a young Muslim scholar. It was as if I had suddenly remembered parts of my identity that I had to whitewash in order to survive as a Muslim public school educator myself. This dissertation of practice provided me an opportunity to reclaim these parts of myself, to return to my own roots of spirituality, and to let that spirituality ground me. That has been a true act of healing.

CHAPTER 11: RECOMMENDATIONS: DREAMING ANTIDOTES TO ANTI-MUSLIM RACISM EXPERIENCED BY MUSLIM PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATORS

Freedom Dreaming Antidotes to Anti-Muslim Racism

The problem-of-practice chapter introduces Liberatory Design, identifies Muslim public school educators' challenges, examines the historical context of anti-Muslim racism, and utilizes the author's position as a Muslim educator. My knowledge review discusses the intersectionality of Muslim identity, race, and faith; provides a definition of anti-Muslim racism; and examines the history of anti-Muslim racism, community perceptions, public schools as microcosms, ummah, and Muslim responses to racism. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the experiences of thirteen Muslim public school educators and use MusCrit to focus on grounding narrative coding, stories, and data analysis. That grounding process aims to understand and unpack their experiences. The theory of change that guided my intervention aimed to empower Muslim public school educators to share their authentic identities, practice mindfulness, and build community, leading to the creation of their own ummah, a network of support, and reflection. This theory of change had three primary drivers: Muslim ummah, mindfulness of body and emotion practices, and storytelling. In Chapter 7, I shared the narratives that I wrote depicting the stories and conversations of Muslim educators participating in the halaqas. In Chapter 8, I analyzed the experiences of Muslim educators, using the theory of change and the following MusCrit tenets: anti-Muslim racism, identifiability, the impact of Muslim identity, whiteness as property and norm, and essentiality of co-conspirators. I created a word cloud and visuals to highlight the individuality of each educator and their experiences. Chapter 9 identified themes of transformative knowledge, ideas reflecting the human condition, and the personal growth of Muslim educators, influenced by the conditions and experiences within the halaqa space—conditions and experiences that can be shared globally to reflect their own human condition. Chapter 10, on the implications of this research study, discusses the implications for school systems, including promoting representation, fostering inclusive environments, enforcing

antidiscrimination policies, addressing systemic barriers, fostering trust, addressing trauma, and providing professional learning opportunities. The chapter also highlights the importance of collective action among Muslim public school educators in order to challenge biases and advocate for change and the value of culturally specific affinity spaces. In the current chapter, I will discuss the broader lessons, impacts, and recommendations related to four main MusCrit tenets: anti-Muslim racism, Muslim identity, whiteness as property and norm, and the essentiality of co-conspirators. Under each tenet, I will provide background and connections from my knowledge review and what I learned from the data I collected. Then, for each tenet, I will provide recommendations for possible antidotes on confronting and dismantling the challenges Muslim public school educators face.

As I was reflecting on writing this chapter, I journaled about each MusCrit tenet. I started brainstorming how Muslims, the greater community, and school systems can address the challenges Muslim educators face with that particular tenet. As I journaled, I utilized the same dreaming practice I facilitated in the fifth halaqa. As part of the Liberatory Design, understanding and viewing our system is essential to humanizing individuals. Our stories, challenges, joys, families, and communities are critical to learning, and we genuinely want to disrupt different forms of racism. Freedom dreaming symbolizes revolution, reverberating through intergenerational movements and community care reimagining (Noire, 2023). Freedom dreams “are born when we face harsh conditions not with despair, but with the deep knowledge that these conditions will change—that a world filled with softness and beauty and care is not only possible, but inevitable” (Tourmaline, 2020). By envisioning and imagining wellness, empowerment, and humanity through “what if” questions, we can start seeing a world we want to be part of. The antidotes presented are part of this dreaming exercise, and I encourage everyone to use that exercise to think about the ways they can overcome practices and policies that oppress their community.

Initially, I presented antidotes for systems as well. However, given current events, I fully acknowledge that change needs to start with individuals who form coalitions and collectively create change. Systems will not change unless we drive that change. Therefore, these antidotes are recommendations for individuals who have a role in school systems, the greater community, and the Muslim community.

Antidotes to Anti-Muslim Racism

MusCrit asserts that the oppression against Muslims is rooted in a systemic, historical, prejudiced, and monolithic representation of the Muslim population (Ali, 2022a). Anti-Muslim racism is rooted in the belief that white Christians who harbor racial hostility toward Muslims are primarily colonizers, and their religious feelings and imperial/colonial impulses continue to shape contemporary conflicts (Razack, 2021). Anti-Muslim racism in public schools mirrors broader societal issues, replicating issues in home, religion, communities, economics, and politics, and reflecting the replication of anti-Muslim racism throughout U.S. history (Fuller, 2018). Based on the halaqa and empathy interviews, the following are recommendations for individuals and organizations to consider:

- **Advocate and facilitate:** Identify ways of influence to actively challenge systems of oppression and create more inclusive, equitable environments for any educator.
- **Educate and raise awareness:** Share accurate information about Islam and Muslim cultures with colleagues, community members, students, and administrators. This communication of information can help dispel stereotypes and misconceptions that often fuel anti-Muslim policies.
- **Document and report incidents:** Keep detailed records of discriminatory incidents or policies. Report incidents through procedures and protocols within the school system and, if necessary, to relevant educator unions, associations, and civil rights organizations.

- **Engage in professional learning:** Pursue opportunities for growth and leadership within the education system. Participating and leading professional learning can help challenge stereotypes and can position individuals to influence policy decisions.
- **Advocate for inclusive policies:** Push for the recognition of Muslim holidays, the creation of prayer spaces, and the inclusion of Muslim perspectives in curriculum and school activities.
- **Participate in decision-making processes:** Seek roles on committees, boards, or leadership positions in which you can directly influence policy creation and implementation.
- **Use legal resources:** Familiarize yourself with your rights and the legal protections against religious discrimination. Don't hesitate to seek legal advice and contact your union when necessary.
- **Challenge microaggressions:** Address subtle forms of discrimination directly, and educate others about the impact of such discrimination.
- **Practice self-care:** Recognize the emotional toll of constantly advocating for yourself and your community. Take time to recharge and maintain your well-being.

Antidotes to Overcoming Challenges with Identifiability

MusCrit highlights the significant impact of identity on the treatment of Muslims, with hijab-wearing women facing more racist attacks and bigotry, and Muslim men with religious signifiers facing greater surveillance and threats (Ali, 2022a). People identify as Muslim by cultural and appearance markers, allowing non-Muslims without conspicuous names, accents, or dress to pass as Muslims (Garner et al., 2015). Stigma in the United States has impaired Muslims' identity development, leading to discrimination and a shift toward an "American" identity, synonymous with whiteness (Sediqe, 2020). The landscape around Muslim identity will continue to shift and evolve. Muslim educators face challenges in a predominantly non-Muslim

workplace where their religious beliefs and practices, such as daily prayer, are not fully understood or accommodated. The following are recommendations for addressing identifiability:

- **Maintain a strong sense of identity:** Do not compromise your core identity, internalize negative stereotypes, or allow others' perceptions to define you, especially in moments of discrimination or microaggression.
- **Build relationships:** Build authentic connections and relationships with others. Use your position and actions to humanize your identity and demonstrate your true character.
- **Engage in self-reflection:** Cultivate a deep understanding of yourself, your values, and your experiences. Reflect on how societal perceptions may differ from your own self-perception, and consciously work to separate the two.
- **Cultivate a home:** Seek out supportive spaces where your full identity can be acknowledged and validated, even if that does already occur in your school or worksite.
- **Model:** Use your position as an educator to demonstrate positive Muslim representation and inspire both Muslim and non-Muslim students.
- **Be authentic:** Acknowledge the challenges and toll of navigating one's identity in a society that may not fully understand or validate it.

Antidotes to Whiteness as Property and Norm

The fifth tenet of MusCrit asserts that whiteness is a coveted property, often causing Muslims to feel that they lack cultural capital and require "whitewashing" acceptance (Ali, 2022a). Whitewashing practices include Muslims (1) using skin-whitening creams, wearing Western clothing, and speaking in English, (2) refraining from reacting to anti-Muslim racism, (3) self-invalidating their lived experiences, (4) self-othering and seeing themselves as outsiders, and (5) focusing on realizing the American dream (Ali, 2022a, pp. 7–8). Whites possess a

property that people of color do not, and possessing it grants them unique citizenship aspects (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Whitewashing practices include the erasure of identities. The experiences, histories, and contributions of Muslim communities may be overlooked, minimized, or erased in favor of dominant white narratives and perspectives. Muslims are depicted through reductive, stereotypical, or caricatured representations that reinforce harmful biases and assumptions that directly affect Muslim educators and students. The following are antidotes to overcome these challenges associated with whiteness as property and norm:

- **Advocate for inclusive policies and practices:** Work to influence and transform institutions and organizations' policies, curricula, and decision-making processes. Identify and advocate for changes in policies and practices that fail to meet the specific needs and experiences of underrepresented communities.
- **Share stories:** Openly share examples of prejudice and discrimination in order to acknowledge and discuss your challenges.
- **Develop a strong sense of self-identity and cultural pride:** Cultivate a deep understanding and appreciation of your own cultural heritage, values, and lived experience.
- **Challenge biases and discrimination:** When faced with hiring discrimination, microaggressions, or other forms of bias, be willing to speak up, call out the injustice, and demand accountability against the perpetuation of whiteness.
- **Engage in continuous learning and self-reflection:** Commit to ongoing education about the history, experiences, and perspectives of communities that have been othered.

Cultivating Co-Conspirators

The last tenet of MusCrit points out that the “essentiality of allies in voicing the injustice against Muslims can be seen in all instances of authentic social–political activism” (Ali, 2022a, p. 8). In essence, Muslim voices must be supported by non-Muslim voices to amplify

anti-Muslim racism for all to hear (Ali, 2022a). In applying the NEA Racial and Social Justice framework to my own work, I've adopted the term "co-conspirator" over the word "ally." As defined by NEA (n.d.), "A co-conspirator is someone who is compelled to take action against racism and oppression regardless of the consequences. A co-conspirator is unapologetically anti-racist and committed to dismantling the system of White supremacy culture and the benefits they receive from it." The concept of a co-conspirator itself is an antidote to anti-Muslim racism. Allies can provide resources and support on different levels, but true co-conspirators address and confront systemic issues of anti-Muslim racism. Transforming individuals into committed allies involves relationship building, influence building, empowering the next generation, confronting biases, and fostering inclusive spaces. The following are recommendations to identify and cultivate co-conspirators:

- **Build genuine relationships and connections:** Create authentic connections with colleagues, students, and community members by sharing personal experiences, actively listening to their perspectives, and showing empathy.
- **Leverage your position and influence:** If you have any power or visibility, use your platform to educate, advocate, and inspire collective action.
- **Mentor the next generation:** Build relationships with younger generations (both educators and students), listen to their experiences, and share resources.
- **Provide professional learning:** Offer training for all educators on Islamic cultural competence and addressing anti-Muslim racism in schools.
- **Empower Muslim students:** Encourage them to share their experiences, advocate for themselves, and take leadership roles in school activities.
- **Engage in community outreach:** Build partnerships between schools and local Muslim organizations to create more inclusive spaces and support systems.
- **Promote interfaith dialogue:** Encourage collaboration between faith groups to build understanding and allyship.

- **Confront biases and demand accountability:** Challenge biases, discrimination, and unjust practices directly, pushing for transparency and accountability. This strategy can transform individuals into more aware and committed allies.

Closing Narrative: “What If?”

On the morning of November 5, 2024, I spoke with my cohort mate, Lisa Marie. My boys were home from school, watching *Bluey* on an endless loop and playing MAGNA-TILES. I popped my AirPods into my ears, talking to Lisa as we always did, biweekly, for most of our time in our program at AU. We both had voted and were opting out of watching the election coverage. I was folding Aleem’s clothes, sorting pajamas into one pile and underwear and socks into another, and listening to Lisa describe her new learnings and insights into her research. I loved listening to her research as we bounced ideas off each other and sincerely supported one another. Deep down, I had this dread, this black pit in my stomach, as we avoided the topic we didn’t want to discuss. I talked to her about how I was still transcribing and analyzing the halaqa transcripts and the profound realizations I was experiencing: this sisterhood, this community.

Our conversation shifted, and I was placing Aleem’s clothes in his drawer by then. We asked each other, “What’s our plan for self-care in the next twenty-four hours? How are we going to take care of ourselves?”

At my fifth-semester review, Dr. Ali, Dr. DeCuir, and Dr. Benzon asked me those same questions after I presented my case for my intervention. Their main concern was for my well-being: Emotionally, how do we support ourselves, rest, and take joy in the people and community around us? I remember this moment when I was talking to Lisa. I described to her how I knew what would happen: the inevitable. After experiencing anti-Muslim racism this past year and witnessing individuals be progressive and liberal on every issue but refuse to acknowledge what was happening in Gaza, I became disillusioned with politics, even though I was a huge politics junkie. As I discussed in my narratives, my Abba instilled in me the

importance of watching elections, and we stayed up every election, watching the results come in. As an adult, listening to Steve Kornacki and Rachel Maddow's discussion about the big board and Leslie Jones's social media platforms during the election season was my therapy. Ethan continued my tradition with my Abba, by watching election coverage on Super Tuesdays and during special elections with me. I listened, watched, and read everything I could. Every election, every Tuesday, we watched the coverage.

But this past election, I didn't want to. The TV was off, and I was quietly reading my Kindle after I put Aleem to bed. Around 8:30 that evening, Ethan returned home from taking Adnan to karate, and he looked at me, sitting in our bed with two heavy blankets enveloping me. Confused at the blank TV, he shook his head and said, "You aren't watching the election coverage?"

I shook my head. "I'm going to bed." I couldn't watch what I felt was going to happen. We ended up turning on the TV thirty minutes later. I didn't sleep well that night and for nights after. I was in a different stage of grief than others I knew, and as I was trying to process it and explain why, I thought back to the research and the halaqas. I thought about the empathy interviews I conducted.

As I explained to Lisa in our conversation that particular morning, I realized that listening to the educators' visions for the future—supporting one another, empowering students, and creating change—instilled a sense of hope and possibility, which can be incredibly healing in the face of complex realities. Lisa and I continued talking about our cultures and faiths, as her Irish heritage had many similarities with my Muslim heritage. No matter the election's outcome, our past generations—the people who lived before us—had faced oppression and survived. They had endured levels of trauma and passed on their wisdom and love to us. My Dadi and Abba taught me that it's the people, the communities we build, and the spaces we cultivate that endure. We have to tend to our communities. Those are the bonds that transcend the present and go on to the hereafter.

These halaqas and this research were healing me in the process of experiencing multiple levels of racism. What I have not touched on in this dissertation of practice is the additional racism I faced personally and professionally over the past year that I can't write about yet. Even though I didn't share these experiences in a halaqa, the genuine care, empathy, and support expressed within this group of Muslim educators sufficed to create a model for how healing can happen in the community. Witnessing such a model inspired me to cultivate similar mutual understanding and compassion spaces.

As mentioned in my intervention, I facilitated the halaqas at the heart of the election coverage, from September to October. I continued transcribing and analyzing the halaqas and writing the narratives until the beginning of December. This acted as a form of therapy for me. Several educators discussed how they integrate their Islamic faith, practices, and values into their teaching and professional roles. They refuse to compartmentalize or suppress one's identity for the sake of conformity. Hearing the shared experiences of marginalization, isolation, and challenges helped me feel validated and less alone. Knowing that others faced similar struggles fosters community and connection. I felt a sense of well-being from listening to and connecting with their stories. They became my superheroes.

These stories paint a rich, multifaceted portrait of Muslim identity that resists simplification. The educators who shared those stories highlighted how Muslim individuals and communities actively shape their own narratives, assert their agency, and cultivate empowered, integrated, and resilient forms of identity. Their stories have profound implications for how Muslim identity is understood and represented, both within and beyond the Muslim community. They are resilient and full of hope. Dreaming helped me develop this research's concept, ideas, and intervention. And I will continue to dream, inshallah.

Evoking dreaming is a healing practice, a way to move forward. Although we may not know what will happen in the years to come, we can keep using dreaming to invoke our past generations and to express our hope for future generations. What could this future look like and

feel like? The following are words spoken by these Muslim educators who have significantly affected and uplifted me, posed in “What if” questions, so we can collectively dream together a future that is hopeful and healing:

- **Rosa:** What if I can be my “authentic self” and be “openly” Muslim?
- **Huda:** What would it feel like if you were not “the only one?”
- **Sehra:** What if people could “walk into a field full of grass” and see me as “that flower?”
- **Bushra:** What if “at the end of the day, when you're going to your grave, that's what you want to be recognized, that ‘Alhamdulillah, she was a Muslim,’ a strong Muslim?”
- **Layla:** What if our allies don’t “expect something in return?” How can our Muslim students not “feel like outsiders?”
- **Noor:** What if you can understand that “I'm on the right side of history?” What if you “stand next to me?”
- **Faisal:** What if “young Muslims” don’t need to “reconcile what it means to be a person between two different identities?”
- **Abidah:** What would it look like and feel like if people understood why “I love what I do” because “our first command was to read” and that teaching is “a blessing for me?”
- **Naila:** What if people want to “learn the difference?” What if they “know how Muslims identify themselves?” How can they understand that we aren’t “all Arab Muslims from the Middle East?”
- **Sarah:** What if I “felt at home” with “a group of Muslim educators” and “learn[ed] from their experiences” and developed relationships? What if I always had a space where everyone was “empathetic and understood where each of us was coming from?”
- **Iman:** What if we empower “a generation of students to center their experiences as Muslims in the public school system and not feel as though they have to suppress it, hide it, or otherwise just ignore it?”

- **Kadija:** What if my students and colleagues “remember me as somebody who stood up” to fight injustice and oppression “and allowed them to think critically about the world around them?”
- **Hawa:** How can we “spread the word that Islamic educators are good people?” How can people learn that Muslim educators “help children,” “want to be in leadership positions,” and want “a voice,” and that “the Muslim mind is a beautiful thing?”
- **Asiya:** What if you acknowledge and empower me “when I speak up about something?” How can you “see me as a potential leader?”
- **Umme-Rumaysa:** What if we “try to find the good and magnify it so that it can...reduce the darkness into smaller pieces?” What if we “find the good thing and make it bigger?” How would “that one big thing... be your light, like your shining light at the end of the tunnel?”

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FLYER: EMPATHY INTERVIEWS

Seeking K–12 Public School Muslim Educators for a Research Study

Participate in a research study that explores the experiences of Muslim public school teachers.

To participate, you must live in the U.S., be 18+ years old, identify as Muslim, and teach in a public school.

Participation involves answering 5 questions in a 30–50 min video call.

You will remain completely anonymous within the report.

 To learn more or sign up, please contact
Ambereen Khan–Baker:
ak2841a@american.edu
(301) 500–0490
 **@ambereenkb**

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APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT FLYER: AFFINITY CIRCLES

Join Affinity Circles for Muslim Public School Educators

- Participate in a research study that explores the experiences of Muslim public school teachers in an affinity-based circle.
- To participate, you must live in the United States, be 18+ years old, identify as Muslim, and be an educator in a K-12 public school.
- Attend six affinity circle sessions on Mondays, 8-9pm EST, September to October: tentatively 9/9, 9/16, 9/23, 9/30, 10/7, and 10/14
- You will remain completely anonymous within the report.
- If interested, complete interest form: <https://bit.ly/MuslimCircles>
Or contact Ambereen Khan-Baker, ak2841a@american.edu (301) 500-0490



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