ADC

Arab Stereotypes and American Educators

by Marvin Wingfield and Bushra Karaman

After the September 11 attacks, a five-year-old girl in San Francisco came home from school and asked her father, "What does it mean, terrorist? The other kids called me a terrorist." Children on a school bus told a 7 year old, "you're Muslim, you did it." Arab-American high school students overheard comments in the hallway, "let's kill all those Arabs. I hate those camels."

Arab-American, Muslim, and South Asian students across the country encountered harassment and hostility, and sometimes so did Hispanics and other minority students mistaken for Arabs. An Arab-American girl in a Detroit school was grabbed, kicked and slammed into a locker.   Girls who wear the hijab faced taunts and had the traditional Muslim headscarf pulled off. Many parents kept their children home in order to avoid such encounters. In the months after 9/11, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee documented over 700 violent incidents against Arab Americans, Arab nationals, Muslims, and others mistaken for them.

Prejudice and discrimination against Arab Americans is often rooted in negative stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims. Individual Arab Americans are associated with or blamed for the acts of small groups of extremists who share their ethnicity or religion. News reports of acts of political violence are one source of these sentiments. Another is the popular commercial culture which is filled with negative images of Arabs, where Arab men are portrayed as violent terrorists, oil "sheiks," or marauding tribesmen who kidnap blond Western women, and Arab women are seen as belly dancers and harem girls.

The Arab world -- 22 countries, the locus of several world religions, a multitude of ethnic and linguistic groups, and hundreds of years of history -- is reduced to a few simplistic images. It is as though American society were to be portrayed solely in terms of cowboys, gangsters and Britney Spears.

It is the responsibility of educators to counteract the harmful influence of popular culture. Negative stereotypes should be replaced with an in-depth understanding of Arab history and civilization and an appreciation for the lives and cultural background of their Arab-American neighbors.

Arabs in Popular Culture

The most damaging images are those of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists. Decade after decade, film after film, these images have been repeated. Lebanese-American media analyst Jack Shaheen has documented over 900 Hollywood films portraying Arabs in a negative and offensive manner; 12 films had positive characters and 53 were even-handed. (Shaheen, 2001) In recent years these have included some of the most high profile films: *Rules of Engagement, True Lies, Executive Decision, Back to the Future, GI Jane, The Mummy, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Broadcast News, and Patriot Games.* In *The Siege*, after Americans of Arab heritage carry out attacks in Manhattan, an over-zealous American general makes all too plausible a case for imposing martial law and rounding up Arab-American men en masse in prison camps. Top ranked TV shows like *West Wing, The Agency* and *JAG* compounded the problem. There were less than a handful of films that had positive Arab characters: *Three Kings, The 13th Warrior, Party Girl, A Perfect Murder*.

After 9/11, the terrorism theme was greatly heightened in prime time TV shows such as *Alias*, *24*, and episodes of *Law and Order*. But positive Arab characters also began to appear more frequently. There was a Palestinian-American on the White House staff on *Commander in Chief*, and a positive Arab-American character on *Lost*. Ridley Scott's Crusader epic *Kingdom of Heaven* presented a very fair picture of Arabs, and George Clooney's *Syriana* depicted the political economy of oil with unprecedented complexity and nuance. Warner Brothers distributed the Palestinian film *Paradise Now*, which won a Golden Globe award and was nominated for an Academy Award.

But it is no surprise that children exposed to negative portrayals of Arabs in the popular culture react to incidents of real violence by blaming the innocent and venting their feelings on their classmates.

Even seemingly innocuous films are sometimes problematic. When American children hear the word "Arab", what is the first thing that comes to mind? Perhaps the imagery of Disney's Arabian Nights fantasy film *Aladdin*, a film which has been immensely popular in theaters and on video and is sometimes shown in school classrooms.

Although in many ways it is charming, artistically impressive, and one of the few American films to feature an Arab hero or heroine, a closer looks reveals some disturbing features. The light-skinned lead characters, Aladdin and Jasmine, have Anglicized features and

Anglo-American accents. This is in contrast to the other characters who are dark-skinned, swarthy and villainous, cruel palace guards or greedy merchants with Arabic accents and grotesque facial features.

The film's opening song set the tone:

Oh, I come from a land
From a faraway place
Where the caravan camels roam,
Where they cut off your ear
If they don't like your face.
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.

Thus the film immediately characterizes the Arab world as alien, exotic, and barbaric. Arab Americans see this film as perpetuating the tired stereotypes of the Arab world as a place of deserts and camels, of arbitrary cruelty and barbarism.

Therefore, Arab Americans raised a cry of protest regarding *Aladdin*. The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) challenged Disney and persuaded the studio to change a phrase in the lyrics for the video version of the film to say: "It's flat and immense, and the heat is intense. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home." While this is an improvement, problems remain. It is not recommended for classroom use.

Grassroots protest has on occasion been successful in combating the troubling elements of the *Aladdin* film. In Illinois, a 10 year old Arab-American girl persuaded a music teacher leading the school chorus to discard the lyrics, although she had to explain three times why the lyrics were offensive before the teacher "got it."

Former ADC President Ziad Asali commented, "I don't want my grandchildren being exposed to the same old tired stereotypes that my children were embarrassed by when they were growing up. It is long past time for Hollywood to portray Arabs and Arab Americans with the same complexity and dimension that other minorities are now accorded. When will Hollywood give us the Arab equivalents of *Dances with Wolves, Cry Freedom* or *Fiddler on the Roof*? And we want Arab-American actors, directors and scriptwriters to give us a fresh new vision of the Arab world, one that is true to the culture and true to the history."

Arabs are frequently cast as villains on Saturday morning TV cartoons, Fox Children's Network's *Batman*, for example. This cartoon portrayed fanatic, dark-complexioned Arabs armed with sabers and rifles as allies of an "alien" plotting to take over the Earth. Comic books frequently have Arab villains as a gratuitous element in their story line: Tarzan battles with an Arab chieftain who kidnaps Jane, Superman foils Arab terrorists hijacking a U.S. nuclear carrier, and the Fantastic Four combat a hideous oil sheik supervillain

Ethnic stereotypes are especially harmful in the absence of positive ethnic images. Shaheen observes that Arabs are "hardly ever seen as ordinary people, practicing law, driving taxis, singing lullabies or healing the sick" and "There is never an Arab hero for kids to cheer." (Shaheen, 1988, p. 10; 1980, p. 5) But now AK Comics in Egypt is fighting back with Middle East superheroes, defending the innocent from destructive forces.

Arab Stereotypes Among Educators

After 9/11, many educators were very supportive to Arab Americans and Muslims, but others were not immune from the widespread anger at Arabs and Muslims. Some of them let it seep into the classroom. There were teachers who asked their Arab-American students if they knew anything about the terrorist attacks, made fun of their Arabic names, or looked the other way when other students harassed them.

However, when American political leaders and educational officials made it clear that anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry was not to be tolerated, many schools initiated special programs to educate teachers and students about Arab Americans and the Arab world. Much more remains to be done.

Before September, educators often did not even perceive anti-Arab racism as a problem. Many multicultural books and curriculum materials failed to include Arab Americans and the Arab world. One educator in Fairfax County, Virginia, commented "The kids from the Middle East are the lost sheep in the school system. They fall through the cracks in our categories."

The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and the Middle East Outreach Council (MEOC) researched history and geography textbooks, finding an over-portrayal of deserts, camels and nomads in the chapter on the Middle East. Even some well-intended teachers use the Bedouin image as somehow typifying Arab culture. In fact, only about 2% of Arabs are traditional Bedouin, and today there are probably more Arab engineers and computer specialists than

desert dwellers.

American textbooks are often Euro-centric, while Arab points of view regarding such issues as the nationalization of resources or the Arab-Israeli conflict are presented inadequately or not at all. The MESA/MEOC study concluded that "The presentation of Islam is so problematic that it is perhaps time for educators at the college and university level to send a red alert to their colleagues at the pre-collegiate level. Crude errors and distortions abound." (Barlow, 1994, p. vii) Some textbooks link Islam to violence and intolerance, ignoring its commonalities with Christianity and Judaism. From a contemporary interfaith perspective, Yahweh, God the Father, and Allah (the Arabic word for God, used by Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike) can be regarded as the same God. But textbooks sometimes discuss Allah as if the word referred to an alien god remote from Jewish and Christian tradition. Recently, however, the Council on Islamic Education reports that there have been significant improvements in the textbook presentation of Islam.

Effects of Stereotyping on Arab-American Children

What does it feel like for Arab-American children to grow up surrounded by a culture that does not recognize their ethnic identity in a positive way? They may find that the messages about the Arab world in school conflict with the values and traditions passed on at home. The images of Arabs which are conveyed in the classroom may have nothing in common with their relatives and experiences at home or with their friends and relatives in the neighborhood, church, or mosque.
They also find their peers to be influence by negative and inaccurate images and preconceptions about the Arab heritage. Obviously, these circumstances lead to hurtful experiences.

Dr. Shaheen remembers being taught in his Lebanese-American home to be proud of his family's Arab heritage. But at school, he remembers teasing, taunts, and epithets: "camel jockeys, "desert niggers," "greasy Lebs."

Shaheen reports that his children were deeply upset when eight students in the annual Halloween parade at their school dressed up as "Arabs" with accessories such as big noses, oil cans or money bags to complete the costume. "Later, at the school's ethnic festival, our children were hesitant to wear ethnic costumes," he said (Shaheen, 1980, p. 2)

Others report similar incidents. Carol Haddad, a second-generation American of Lebanese and Syrian ancestry, describes her experience at age ten: "Each time I left the security of my family house, I experienced the oppression of being darker and different." Her family was stared at on the street, and Irish and German American children in their neighborhood mocked her family for "eating leaves" when they served grape leaves stuffed with spiced lamb and rice. During an argument, a boy in her neighborhood called her a "nigger." (Haddad, 1994, p. 218)

ADC received a report that an Arab-American student at a private school in Virginia was forbidden to go her school prom with either a black or white date. "You are a foreigner," she was told by her teacher. "You must go with someone who has the same features."

An ADC staffer recalls that, when she was growing up, her class was taught about Jewish culture. "We danced the hora and I came home singing Jewish songs." But there was no equivalent teaching about Arab culture. "My father was so mad!"

Like other ethnics, Arab Americans frequently encounter negative stereotypes disguised in the form of "humor." When they object, they are told that the derogatory comments were "not meant to be taken seriously." Today there should be greater public awareness and acknowledgment that not taking the identity of others seriously is just another form of racism.

More dangerous are the numerous incident of anti-Arab hostility which may erupt during moments of crisis-- as occurred not only after September 11, but also during the Gulf War with Iraq when schools and communities were swept by patriotic fervor. The flags, banners, yellow ribbons, and patriotic speakers from the military undermined teachers' efforts to encourage critical thinking about news reports and official statements. There was little chance of understanding Arab society or the humanity of the Iraqi people. Arab-American students often felt intimidated and silenced. In other cases, the presence of students of Arab origin, who sometimes had relatives in Iraq who were in danger from American bombs, served to heighten teachers' sensitivity to the human dimension of the conflict. (Knowles, 1993; Merryfield, 1993)

In Dearborn, Michigan, a proposal was brought before the Wolverine A basketball conference to disband all sports competition for the year. Some schools did not want to play with the team from Fordson High School, where half of the students and most of the basketball team were Arab Americans. Students from Fordson were told, "Go back to Saudi Arabia. You're not wanted here." A bomb threat was reported at the school. Students also reported fights with students from others schools during the previous year. (McCabe, 1991, p. 1E, 3E)

Despite the harassment after September 11, there were also many countervailing voices and an outpouring of support for Arab-American students from educators. The Fordson football team was covered by ESPN in a very favorable way and <u>Sports Illustrated</u> ran a story on Arab-American athletes.

Often as they mature, Arab-American young people consciously reclaim their ethnic identity. Lisa Suhair Majaj, a Palestinian-American poet and scholar, observed "Once I claimed a past, spoke my history, told my name, the walls of incomprehension and hostility rose, brick by brick: un-funny ethnic jokes; jibes about terrorists and kalashnikovs, and about veiled women and camels; or worse, the awkward silences, the hasty shifts to other subjects. Searching for images of my Arab self in American culture I found only unrecognizable stereotypes. In the face of such incomprehension, I could say nothing." (Majaj, 1994, p. 67) The emerging body of Arab-American novels and poetry, however, indicates that Majaj and many others are finding a voice that will increasingly be heard.

Educational Problems and Classroom Solutions

What effect does stereotyping and discrimination have on Arab-American students? What can classroom teachers do about these problems?

It is recognized that the more positive a student's self-regard, the higher their achievement level is. Teachers use various techniques to make students feel worthwhile and important. But when students see negative and erroneous portrayals in films, on TV, or in curriculum materials, they begin to feel inferior and ashamed, or perhaps belligerent and aggressive.

Students suffer as a result of this. And learning suffers. Caught in this spiral, Arab-American students may begin to believe that they, as a people, are inferior. They may stop trying to do their best and become convinced that they can never amount to anything. For many it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As educators, we must break this cycle by finding ways to intervene effectively.

In Dearborn, Michigan, the schools bilingual programs use Arab language and literature to make students from homes in which Arabic is spoken feel more culturally comfortable and to facilitate the learning of English and American culture. Special programs, however, are not enough. It is important for mainstream teachers to consciously rid themselves of negative and ill-informed

media images of Arabs. It is also important for them to learn about their students' cultures and to be prepared to teach about them in their classes.

The historic achievements of Arab culture are rarely discussed in American schools or perhaps are limited to 6th and 10th grade world history courses. In the culturally sensitive classroom, there is no good reason why a historical and cultural dimension cannot be provided. For example, math teachers can explain the cultural origins and development of "Arabic numerals," the decimal system, geometry, and *al-jabr* (algebra) in ancient Greece, India, and the medieval Arab world. Science teachers can present the history of astronomy from ancient Babylon, Hellenic culture, and medieval Arab civilization as the precursor of modern science. Music classes can teach about Arab music. Home economics classes can teach about Arab cuisine and its cultural meanings.

The Arabic language, a major world language, is spoken by some 200 million people. The Middle East is a region of strategic political and economic importance for the United States. Yet the Arabic language is taught in only a handful of U.S. schools. Even in Dearborn, where 40% of the students are Arab-American, Arabic is offered only in one elementary school. This lack in language training has been brought home and federal agencies are actively seeking more expertise in Middle Eastern languages. Federal funds are more available and new language programs are emerging.

In schools with minority populations, teachers should make an effort to abandon political biases and build on students' personal histories and existing knowledge bases, rather than ignore them or minimize their importance. Dearborn schools have made an attempt to build on the existing strength of their students, including their Arabic language skills. Only when educators regard Arab students as having a rich and living culture, separate and distinct from the popular media images, can we have a proud new Arab-American generation.

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