

**Cultivating Confidence in the Identity of Diverse Students through Effective Decision
Making**

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Abstract

Amongst the typical struggles of adolescence, comes the day to day challenges of developing a sense of confidence with a youth's diverse identity. Educators, administrators, and parents/guardians can use collaborative methods to cultivate a better understanding of Islam amongst our community's youth. This paper will provide suggestions on how to foster a nurturing environment for our students to grow and develop confidence in their identity through an emphasis on group decision making as an essential component of this goal. In a time where misconceptions and a lack of understanding of diversity exist, minority students and young Muslim students need to develop confidence and positive self-esteem in order to promote inclusion, ethnic appreciation, and enhance overall group performance throughout their postsecondary education and in the workforce.

Speaker Biography

Bushra Haq attained her Bachelor's of Science from the University of Texas at Dallas, and her Master of Education in Education Policy and Leadership with a specialization in Higher Education from Southern Methodist University. Bushra has taught at a faith-based college preparatory at the secondary level, and conducted academic summer programming for elementary and middle school students. She is currently serving her sixth year in the field at Lloyd V. Berkner High School as an Advanced Placement US History and Government teacher.

Introduction

Whether students attend a public school or faith-based institution, all youth should benefit from the services and resources provided by a religiously affiliated academic institution. Educators play a significant role in refining students' judgments and decisions regarding moral and social issues, and preparing students for life beyond academia. Parents/guardians can support these goals, and further enhance their children's adolescent experiences by supporting initiatives led by educators and local Islamic schools. A common struggle regarding decision making amongst educators, administrators, and parents/guardians include the lack of alignment of opinions and goals in raising a generation of productive adults proud of their identity. This paper will provide suggestions for how educators parents/guardians, and institutions can collaborate to instill confidence in Muslim-American youth. I will emphasize group decision making as an essential component to this paper using *de Bono's Six Thinking Hats*. Our community must collaborate effectively to ensure we maintain a common goal and to permit those who play a part in serving young Muslims an equal opportunity to voice their opinions, concerns, and suggestions.

A critical goal of an educational institution is to create a campus climate that respects and accommodates diversity through flexibility, inclusion, and understanding. With an increasingly diverse society, teachers and administrators must recognize the various historical and cultural backgrounds of students. Teachers and administrators must also acknowledge the differing personal experiences students may encounter that vary greatly from the majority group, such as refugee or asylum-seeking families.

An individual's ethnic identity is the way in which individuals identify with those whom they have a common origin with or feel a common bond with. The process of ethnic identity development involves an individual's progression toward a conscious identification with their cultural and religious beliefs, values, behaviors, and traditions (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). A lack of confidence in one's ethnicity, stereotyping and prejudicial treatment of an individual based on their ethnic identity, and a clash of value systems with a minority culture and a society's dominant culture can impede one's ethnic identity development. As a result, school aged children and adolescents may not have the confidence to challenge the mainstream or conventional perceptions of their ethnicity or race, that could otherwise support their ethnic identity development. Mohan summarizes these points by stating that a student's ethnic identity development is the negotiation between an individual's own self concept and the perception of others (2010).

Schools play a critical role in students' ethnic identity construction processes. A study found that a student's positive ethnic identity is correlated with higher levels of academic performance, greater confidence in academia, and higher educational ambitions (Mohan, 2010). Thus, it is essential that Islamic schools promote students' self-esteem and support students' ethnic identity development through advocating appreciation of diverse ethnicities, focusing on shared commonalities and cooperation, and eliminating intolerance and negative preconceived notions through teaching about cultural norms, customs, and values of various ethnic groups.

After briefly identifying the obstacles students encounter to develop a positive ethnic identity, it is evident that Muslim youth desperately need educators, administrators, and parents/guardians to support them in their effort to develop a positive religious identity and self-image.

Furthermore, the role of Islamic schools in serving and supporting current students and alumni in developing confidence in their identity, must be extended to serving students that are enrolled in non-faith based institutions as well. This feat is not easy to achieve when educators, administrators, and parents/guardians all have differing opinions on how to tackle the challenges youth face with developing positive identities. Hence, implementing an effective decision making strategy, such as de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats*, can allow for educators, administrators, and parents/guardians to explore different perspectives to formulate strategies for complex challenges.

This paper will cover my exploration of how teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians can collaborate to promote ethnic identity development and instill confidence in diverse student populations, specifically Muslim American youth, through an effective decision making strategy. I will first separately examine the role of teachers, administrators and parents/guardians in supporting Muslim youth develop confidence and a positive self-image. Next, I will discuss how all three groups can utilize de Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* to strategically achieve this goal through campus wide collaborative efforts. It is only when teachers and administrators collaborate with families and communities that we gather diverse perspectives and resources to ensure students achieve success beyond the classroom.

The Role of Teachers in Instilling Confidence in Diverse Student Populations

A diverse student body can consist of students from various ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Our schools are filled with minority students, international students, students with different home lives or past experiences, English Language Learners, and students with differing cultural and religious backgrounds. Educators must effectively respond to

the increasingly diverse student population in America to ensure academic and social success for all students.

First, teachers must create a comfortable and respectful classroom environment to ensure all students are able to not only navigate the course, but further enhance their academic and social development. Educators must establish a climate that encourages open discussions on the day to day challenges of the 21st century student and how to overcome such obstacles. Students and teachers should participate in open dialogues about diversity, appreciation, and ways to tackle the issue of discrimination. Students must be given the opportunity to speak with teachers about their experiences being a young Muslim struggling to find a way to commit to the teachings of their faith, while also trying to steer clear of the daily struggles they encounter (drugs, alcohol, dating, etc.). Educators must respond with respect and understanding, and provide students with realistic approaches to their current challenges and similar scenarios they may encounter in the future. Evidently, teachers in Islamic schools serve as role models for their students and can validate the religious identity of their young Muslim students. In fact, a study by Saluja, Early, and Clifford found that teachers that shared their students' ethnic background could lessen the differences between school and home (2002). However, even teachers that do not share their students' cultures can still provide instruction that is culturally compatible if they understand the students' cultural ways of communicating, understanding, and behaviors that exist within their homes (Moll 1994, 2001).

Second, teachers should be open and flexible to new ideas and cultures, and promote diversity in the classroom. Most students in Islamic schools share a similar trait that instantly promotes a sense of unity amongst the student body - they are all young Muslim Americans that

need support to develop confidence in their identity. However, students' cultural backgrounds vary greatly, which thus requires teachers to value each students' unique cultural values and traditions. This also requires educators to promote inclusion of student cultures into the course curriculum for effective instruction that will further enhance students' social development.

Educators must also be mindful of how they implicitly view and explicitly treat their students, ensuring that they eliminate teacher bias. Students should develop a worldview and be well informed about histories of unfairness and inequality, how to distinguish fact from fiction in regards to stereotypes, and how to respectfully and appropriately inquire about religion, culture, race, and identity (Center for Interreligious Understanding, 2011). Teachers can incorporate discussions on covert and overt discrimination and prejudice, and challenge students to eliminate preconceived notions and stereotypes they may hold about various cultures. Educators must teach about sensitivity and respect towards those that hold different values and come from different backgrounds, and can do so by including examples from the Qur'an and Sunnah. In order to create an enriching learning environment that celebrates cultural differences, teachers must understand and appreciate students' different cultural strengths.

Third, teachers can incorporate projects in their curriculum that encourage and support students to develop confidence to challenge mainstream perceptions of their faith and cultural background. Examples of projects that achieve this goal include cross cultural, interfaith, and service learning or volunteer projects. A cross cultural project could require students to visit a variety of religious places of worship, such as a Synagogue, Church, Gurdwara, or temple, and present their newfound appreciation of other faiths to their peers. While students visit a place of worship, they must converse with followers of another faith to clear mainstream perceptions of

Islam and the other religions students aim to explore. An interfaith project could involve the school at large by conducting a community-wide interfaith event. Muslim youth around the community can participate in hosting the event and leaders of various religious groups around the metroplex should be invited to speak and attend. Volunteer projects require students to get out of their comfort zones and interact with people different than themselves, and also allows students to better others' perceptions of Islam. Coaches can also play a significant role in helping their students develop confidence in their identity and ability to lessen mainstream perceptions of Islam. For instance, the Texas Association of Private and Parochial Schools (TAPPS) offers private schools an opportunity to compete in school sponsored athletic competitions. The TAPPS member schools maintain their unique traditions while encouraging student and school understanding and appreciation for diverse cultures through athletics. Such initiatives can also address the issue of clashing value systems students encounter at public schools, outside their Islamic school, during their postsecondary education, and in the workforce.

The Role of Administrators in Instilling Confidence in Diverse Student Populations

Administrators must hold high expectations for educators, staff, and students to ultimately create a welcoming campus climate that values a culturally diverse atmosphere. School leaders must provide positive direction and exercise positive influence, and help the institution develop shared goals (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004), such as promoting and appreciating campus diversity. It is important to note that professional development, professional learning communities, and innovative ideas that promote parent/guardian and student engagement in decision-making can all benefit an institution.

Staying up-to-date with teaching strategies and skills, advances in technology, and other trends in education through professional development is imperative to create a successful educational environment. Providing instructional guidance can be achieved through setting standards, assessing work, and ongoing professional development for educators (Leithwood, et. al., 2004). Along with diversity training, administrators should consider providing additional professional development opportunities for teachers that provide strategies to enhance students' self-esteem and confidence.

Administrators have the responsibility to empower faculty and staff to collaborate and create significant decisions for campuses (Leithwood, et. al., 2004). School leaders can also encourage the implementation and successful use of professional learning communities that allow for a segment of teachers' discussions to heavily focus on ensuring that the school's and community's young Muslim students are given support and guidance. Collaboration is essential to create programs and initiatives for student support. For example, departments at the elementary, middle school, and secondary levels can complete an analysis of best practices Islamic schools and other religiously affiliated institutions around the nation implement to enhance students' religious and ethnic identity development. Departments can also create a list of challenges students must overcome to develop confidence in their identity and strategies to tackle these issues. After each department of an institution compiles a list addressing the issue of diversity and ethnic identity development, department heads and administrators can create a larger list combining strategies and recommendations from all departments. This drafted list should be presented to faculty and staff during the school's regular staff meeting and any last suggestions from faculty and staff should be utilized to create a final list. Strategies placed on

this list should provide all administrators, faculty, and staff, with practical methods of implementation that can be utilized in the classroom and as a campus at large.

Faculty, staff, students, and their families depend on school leaders to create and implement strategic school improvement plans. Administrators must productively develop plans based on student and teacher performance and effectively implement plans with staff input (Leithwood, et. al., 2004). To further shed light on diversity issues and identity development, administrators can creatively develop ways in which teachers, students, and parents/guardians can get involved in decision making regarding efforts to enhance student confidence in their identity. For instance, students can complete anonymous surveys regarding the level of confidence they feel in their identity and common struggles they encounter that inhibit their identity development, along with suggestions on how their Islamic school can support them through challenges they encounter as young Muslim Americans. Parents can also complete anonymous surveys for which they provide alternate opinions and views, however these surveys must be easily accessible by using printed surveys, automated phone calls, and/or emails.

The Role of Parents/Guardians in Helping Islamic Schools Instill Confidence in Students

One of the main ways in which parents/guardians can instill confidence in their student is by supporting school initiatives. Parents/guardians can participate through advocacy, fundraisers, and volunteering. In addition, they can attend school sponsored events aimed at respecting and promoting diverse ethnic identities. By becoming oriented with the school's goals and organization, parents/guardians can implement the same institutional atmosphere of respect of diversity in the home.

Moreover, parents/guardians can actively engage in campus wide efforts by becoming part of the institution's decision-making process. Parents/guardians can provide resources and innovative ideas to further support the goal of instilling confidence in their child's religious identity. By viewing institutional goals from an outsider's perspective, parents/guardians can examine and critique current initiatives to better fit the needs of their students and the community at large.

De Bono's Six Thinking Hats

For educators, administrators, and parents to reach practical solutions and strategies to address the challenges faced by Muslim American youth, and to instill confidence in students, we must first be able to respect and value opposing points of view. In order to form more holistic solutions and strategies, we must move away from habitual thinking styles. Using de Bono's Six Thinking Hats, educators, administrators, and parents/guardians are able to tackle complex challenges by formulating strategies through multiple perspectives (Walker & Tyler-Mackey, 2012). Using simple mental metaphors, this practical thinking tool provides a framework for decision makers to thoroughly evaluate and explore different issues and alternate solutions during meetings, workshops, or sessions. The mental metaphors include six different colored hats that an individual can "put on" or "take off." Each hat represents a different style of thinking, thus, when a hat is put on or taken off, an individual changes their way of thinking. The hats include a white, red, black, yellow, green, and blue hat (Walker & Tyler-Mackey, 2012).

The white hat represents objective thinking and utilizes facts and data. The red hat represents intuition, emotional thinking, and "gut" feelings. The black hat represents cautious thinking in which risks are evaluated and defensive insights are utilized. When using the black

hat, an individual tries to decipher what may not work and spot potential flaws or risks of a decision. The yellow hat can be seen as the opposite of the black hat. The yellow hat represents positive and optimistic thinking in which an individual explores benefits of a decision. The green hat allows for one to think creatively and generate alternate and innovative solutions. The blue hat is used by the individual facilitating the meeting. The blue hat represents metacognition, or thinking about thinking, and creates a structure for using the other hats. The blue hat enables an individual to regulate the thinking that is necessary about a subject, and can be used at the beginning of a meeting to set an agenda or at the end of a meeting to summarize decisions (Walker & Tyler-Mackey, 2012).

Educators can utilize this decision making strategy in the classroom or department meetings. Administrators can use de Bono's Six Thinking Hats in meetings with fellow administrators, staff, or parents. De Bono's Six Thinking Hats is an effective decision making strategy that increases creativity and productivity and allows for parallel thinking, while permitting the opportunity for decision makers to evaluate situations from different points of views. Through using the Six Thinking Hats, Islamic schools can ensure they are effectively evaluating all possible solutions to address the issue of a lack of confidence students might possess in their religious identity.

Conclusion

"Education is...a golden door of opportunity that enables people to transcend social, physical, economic, or cultural barriers to pursue their dreams. Increasingly diverse classrooms provide a venue for children to learn to embrace cultural differences and eliminate the barriers of racism...and prejudice" (Moore & Hansen, 2012, p. 26). Muslim youth need support to build

their confidence which will enhance life-long learning and creativity. Teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians should instill students with diverse values, crucial skills, and critical information about the unique cultural and religious beliefs and traditions to ensure they are ready for their postsecondary education and the job market. It is essential that administrators implement effective leadership and ensure that educators receive professional preparation and support, and that families are engaged in school decision making. In a time where misconceptions and a lack of understanding of diversity exist, minority students and young Muslim students need to develop confidence and positive self-esteem in order to promote inclusion and ethnic and cultural appreciation throughout their postsecondary education and in the workforce.

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