

Constructing Muslim Identity in the Classroom

Through collaborative and deliberate efforts, educators can construct a positive Muslim identity for their students.

BY PATRICIA SALAHUDDIN

TO CONSTRUCT OR BUILD ANYTHING, one has to start from a plan or design that provides a blueprint on how to evaluate the completed structure's appearance. After that is in place, the builder determines the material and resources needed to produce the desired structure. God, the Planner and Designer in terms of constructing the Muslim identity, describes the final product in Q. 23:1-11. With the Quran and *Sunnah* as materials and resources, the constructor is entrusted with implementing the building plan.

When it comes to constructing our own character, each person is responsible for developing steps or strategies, setting the plan in motion and properly utilizing the materials and resources. Al-Bayhaqi's hadith collection contains the Prophet's (*sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) statement: "Whenever a Muslim endeavors to do something, he/she seeks to perfect it." In other words, we should strive diligently in all of our endeavors.

Before we start this process, we need to consider two things: the necessity of a deliberate effort (purpose) and the fact that God is in control and thus the outcome is not in our hands (limitations). Nevertheless, we are responsible for putting forth the maximum effort.

To construct Muslim identity in the context of the classroom, the essential question is: What pedagogical strategies are effective in constructing positive images of the Muslim self? Quran 23:1-11 informs us that the main element of Muslim identity is *taqwa*, which is defined as God-consciousness and the sincere determination to please Him in whatever we do. That is a pretty strong element. Can we really expect children to do that? Do we do that?

Taqwa is the foundation upon which the Muslim's core identity rests. The integrity of the subsequent walls and roof, as well as the entire structure, depends heavily upon it. By

reflecting upon our own experiences, we strengthen what God breathed into us before we were born: our innate character (*fitrah*). Through guided discussions of experiences and discovery, children learn to hold God and His creation in awe, which engenders their awareness of and love for Him. The goal is to form an identity that seeks only to please God, "O humanity, worship your Sustainer, who created you and those who lived before you, so that you might remain conscious of Him" (Q. 2:21).

In essence, to develop *taqwa* the builder must also think about creating an environment that will allow children to experience things that can shape or construct it. Three pedagogical strategies can help teachers achieve this goal in the classroom: modeling, storytelling and service-learning.

Modeling: The familiar adage "Actions speak louder than words" highlights the influence of action over speaking. Teachers who exhibit the behavior expected from students are far more effective in constructing Muslim identity than those who just lecture or talk about it.

According to character education researchers, modeling is the most effective strategy for teaching character (Berkowitz, M.W., & Bier, M.C. [2004]. Research-based character education, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, 71-85.) and almost anything else. Therefore, teachers should embody a positive Muslim identity themselves if they are serious about constructing a positive Muslim identity in students. One effective way to achieve that is to study the life of Prophet Muhammad, obviously the model Muslim, and apply his *Sunnah* to their personal and professional lives.

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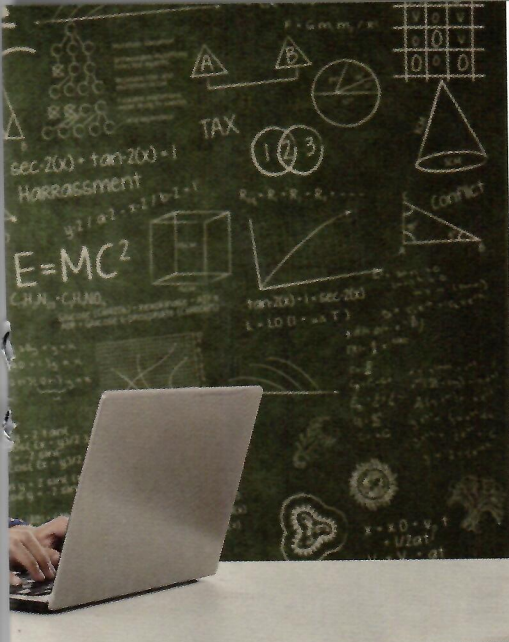


In his words, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." This statement supports the importance of Muslim teachers increasing their Islamic knowledge. Thus, this goal should be a major component of each Muslim teacher's professional development. In fact, it should be just as (if not more) important as perfecting their knowledge of reading, math or any other discipline or subject. Obtaining this knowledge will enable them to become more effective role models of Islamic values and practices and prepare them to construct their students' Muslim by example.

Imagine the benefits that their students would derive if this were to become a reality. Such teachers would become conscious of their actions' underlying intentions, positive and compassionate in their interactions, concerned with their wellbeing, empathetic and therefore able to teach empathy, and peaceful communicators whose words would heal and calm the soul. In short, they would know the difference between "firm" and "mean."

According to K. Ryan and K. Bohlin [1999]. Building character in schools: *Practical ways to bring moral instruction to life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Jossey-Bass), students learn from the *person*, not the teacher. Hence, the person charged with constructing a positive Muslim identity has to exhibit his/her own positive Muslim self-image. Prophet Muhammad is the model that we follow and teach our students to follow. To be effective constructors of Muslim identity, teachers must project that image of positive Muslim identity onto their students and thereby illuminate the light from within.

Storytelling: Do you remember Super-



man, Batman, Spiderman and the stories behind them? Those stories are popular because everyone loves a good story with a hero that exhibits shared values or traits. A teacher in an Islamic school has many opportunities to construct a positive Muslim identity through stories. The Qur'an and *ahadith* offer parables and stories about people who had exemplary characters, as well as those who did not (Salahuddin, P. [2011]). *Character education: A case study of a Muslim school's curricula*. Germany: Scholar's Press).

When constructing Muslim identity through storytelling, select the value or behavior you wish to teach, the historical figure or Companion who exhibits it and allow students to analyze and reflect upon the person's value and behavior. Who would not want to identify with Abu Bakr al-Siddiq's loyalty to and love for the Prophet with Khadijah's wisdom, courage and strength? Stories give students opportunities to raise questions, discuss and listen to the views of their classmates (Ryan & Bohlin [1999]). Through reflection, students may contemplate personal connections with the character's behavior. How would they react in a similar situation? Is this a trait they would like to strive to obtain or perfect in their own lives?

Storytelling is the oldest and one of the most effective strategies for teaching. To implement it, select the Muslim trait you want to highlight, as well as the Muslim figure (historical or contemporary) who exhibits it, and then create a grade-appropriate lesson so students can explore and discover information about the character, reflect and then make personal connection with him/her. As Q. 39:27 states, "Thus, indeed, have We propounded unto humanity all kinds of

parables in this Quran, so that they might bethink themselves." The Islamic tradition contains many stories/parables upon which one can reflect and learn.

a Fire whose fuel is people and stones" (Q. 66:6). When students walk through the school's doors, they become members of its family and therefore are entitled to

THROUGH REFLECTION, STUDENTS MAY CONTEMPLATE PERSONAL CONNECTIONS WITH THE CHARACTER'S BEHAVIOR. HOW WOULD THEY REACT IN A SIMILAR SITUATION? IS THIS A TRAIT THEY WOULD LIKE TO STRIVE TO OBTAIN OR PERFECT IN THEIR OWN LIVES?

Service-Learning: Charity is Islam's third principle. Service-Learning, a powerful pedagogical instructional strategy, integrates meaningful community service with learning and reflection and also promotes the Islamic principle worshipping God by serving others, namely, charity. According to Colorado State University, which offers programs such as Student Leadership, Involvement and Community Engagement (SLICE), this approach benefits the students both academically and effectively because it enhances their critical thinking and analytical skills while preparing them to be life-long learners, good citizens and more effective and socially developed individuals. As a land-grant institution, Colorado State upholds service and outreach as essential elements of its mission. But most importantly, they experience moral and ethical growth. Service-Learning not only empowers and gives them a sense of belonging to a community of compassionate and giving people, but also transforms them into change agents in their community and the world.

Implementing the relevant instructional strategies could help their students build a positive Muslim identity. The websites of Edutopia (www.edutopia.org), Buck Institute for Education (<https://www.facebook.com/biepb1>) and the Teaching Channel (<https://www.teachingchannel.org>) contain a great deal of useful information in this regard.

The condensed steps for its implementation are as follows: Select a value or behavior to highlight or teach, discuss it with your students, allow them to suggest a project and then plan, implement and reflect.

God reminds us, "O you who believe, protect yourselves and your families from

its protection. Through collaborative and deliberate efforts, educators can construct a positive Muslim identity for them. By working together, stakeholders can create an environment that will produce lessons and learning experiences that encourage students to love and live Islamic values. ■

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