

John Nicholas Brown Center Public Humanities Fellowship

What I learned in Islamic School: The Role of a Private School as a Public Cultural Institution in the Interface of Community Change and World Events

Robin Pringle

Spring 2006

From November 2001 through February 2005 I worked with the Islamic school of Seattle on program development and improvement of instruction, first as a volunteer, then as a consultant. In the months following the events of September 11, 2001, I had come to the school as a professional in educational development concerned to learn more about Islam and Muslims. The staff warmly welcomed me into the school. When they learned of my educational experience I was invited to work with them on stabilizing a school challenged to meet the needs of a complexly diverse community and on achieving a uniquely ambitious mission of providing child-centered, active learning in an Islamic context. I found myself in a community unified in their devotion to Islam but holding diverse interpretations of values in relationship to behavior, communication, child-development, discipline, and the content and goals of the curriculum. The varying levels of fluency in English of both parents and staff presented an additional challenge to my skills in professional development. I approached my work as a community organizer, spending several months observing in the school, interviewing staff, students, parents, and Board members, sharing my observations in opening larger conversations, and building a shared agenda for school stabilization and improvement. Over the next three years I

developed processes with the staff and parents to work toward these goals, particularly towards a common understanding of expectations, communication, and discipline in a child-centered context, through sharing of personal and cultural perspectives interpreted through an Islamic framework. This work was a continuous process of leaning for myself as well as the staff. I found myself in the midst of cultural and historical wealth that was not reflected in readily available curricula.

During this time I witnessed the impact of September 11 and the subsequent War on Terror on a community that already bore many stresses: for some, immigration and adjustment to a new language, new community, new ways of life, separation from family members, for others, the impact of racial discrimination within the community, and for others, severe trauma to themselves or family in their homelands. The school was challenged to serve a social mission far beyond its charter as a school, and struggled to sustain adequate resources. Teachers were pressed to create their own resources to reflect and sustain the cultural and linguistic heritages of their students, and further, to place these resources in a context of being American. Parents sometimes challenged teachers about the true nature of Islamic education. A number of students struggled, with their limited English and a more authoritarian experience of relationship with adults, to adapt to routines of resourcefulness and independent responsibility. In three years the administration changed three times.

In spite of these stresses the community held an exceptional cohesiveness, kindness and hospitality. After September 11 other schools and organizations called upon the Islamic School and its founder to serve a public need for education about Islam. In the midst of the internal challenges of serving the needs of a complex community, and the occasional external threats to the school and its children that began with September 11 and continued with new events, the school community was pressed to interpret Islam and such sweeping categorizations as “the Muslim world” and “Muslim identity” for a curious and anxious public. The steady stream of requests were received graciously and hospitably, but over time put great

demands on a staff challenged to serve their students well in a time of stress, and a peculiar focus on children as spokespeople for their cultures and their religion.

With the support of the Public Humanities Fellowship I am exploring the implications of this political context for educational development as a whole and for children's development in particular. My experiences in the school raised many questions for me about the role of educational and cultural institutions in increasingly pluralistic communities, and particularly about the impact on children's development when the complexities of civic, cultural, and religious identity are reduced to simple categorizations. Did the demand for public education further isolate the children, or constructively engage them in a wider world? Was the public that made these demands sufficiently informed of, and responsive to the challenges faced by Muslim children in American society today? Do cultural education programs give children opportunities to understand diversity and the complexities of identity within their own communities? Are there opportunities in these presentations for greater connections to trends in human experience or do these attempts at "understanding" widen division?

As I deepen my understanding of the religious, historical, and cultural dimensions of being Muslim, I am developing a series of dialogues for the university and the wider community to explore the questions that emerged from my experience. My hope is that these explorations will prove useful to educators in Islamic schools, other private schools, and public schools as well. As communities become increasingly pluralistic in the United States and abroad, what are the implications for educational and cultural program design and decision-making? What strategies shape meaningful understanding of human diversity and unity? Whose stories should be told? Who tells the stories, and how? Should children be involved? What resources might support authentic integration of the many dimensions of young people's identity? How might children, communities, and schools put in a spotlight of negative public attention be given opportunities for curiosity, leadership, and growth in "cultural competence" as well as self-

explanation? Is it possible to speak from a faith perspective on one's own religion in a way that respects the existence of other religions yet does not diminish one's belief? What enduring resources might be drawn from the cultural and social diversity of a school community?

Through engagement of principles of "constructive dialogue" on potentially divisive issues I hope these dialogues will inspire and inform the development of new resources for cultural and educational programs to support children's self-awareness and constructive engagement in the world.