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# Confronting Islamophobia in education<sup>1</sup>

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The *Religion and Diversity Education* program of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding includes innovative training for elementary and high school educators on addressing religious pluralism in school. This paper highlights the program and its curricula which confront Islamophobia by teaching students concrete skills for living in a pluralistic society.

## Introduction

Despite the significance of religion in public life in the USA, American school curricula generally fail to address religious pluralism. This omission is creating problems that are compounded by increasing Islamophobia (defined as having an irrational fear of or prejudice toward Muslim people or people who may appear to be Muslim.) Taken together, these trends call out for a response—educational programming that effectively promotes interreligious respect and inclusion, notwithstanding the complicated and difficult history of religion in public schools.

The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding's Religion and Diversity Education program has created innovative training for educators on addressing religious pluralism in the classroom. The program includes elementary and high school curricula that confront Islamophobia in schools by teaching students concrete skills for living in a pluralistic and democratic society. This chapter will introduce the reader to the Tanenbaum Center's Education Program, the rationale for the program's design, a description of its implementation and how the program confronts Islamophobia.

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### **Religious life and Islamophobia in America**

Religion plays an important role in the lives of many Americans. About 90% of Americans believe in God, and 80% of Americans cite religion as an important part of their lives (Nord & Haynes, 1998). The US is also one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world with recent immigration continuing to expand the diversity of American religious life (Eck, 2001). Included in this diverse population are six million Muslims. But as the US witnesses a growth in the number of Muslim residents, it is also, unfortunately, witnessing the growth of Islamophobia.

The latest nationwide survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, released in the summer of 2005 indicates, 'About a third of Americans (36%) say the Islamic religion is more likely to encourage violence among its followers' (The Pew Research Center, 2005). A *Washington Post*–ABC News Poll released in the spring of 2006 further documents the increase in the negative perception of Islam in the US. According to the poll, 'nearly half of Americans—46 percent—have a negative view of Islam, seven percentage points higher than in the tense months after the Sept. 11, 2001'. A report released in September 2006 by the Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported that anti-Muslim incidents in the US increased almost 30% from the previous year. Another recent survey conducted by CAIR Research Center (2006) asked people to respond to the open-ended question 'When you hear the word *Muslim*, what is the first thought that comes to your mind?' Out of 1000 interviews conducted during this survey, 26% of respondents made negative comments, including 'violence', 'hatred', 'terrorists', 'war', 'guns' and 'towel-head'.

This kind of bias and discrimination is reflected in anecdotal reports, including an incident reported by the *New York Times* (Dewan, 2003) about a boy physically assaulting a 14-year-old Muslim girl while uttering an anti-Muslim slur. Surveys conducted by CAIR, document that anti-Muslim incidents are affecting children in schools. In 2006, 7% of reported anti-Muslim incidents involved students in school settings. Considering that such incidents tend to be underreported, the actual number of anti-Muslim incidents in schools may be much higher.

### **Religion in American public education**

While it is clear that religion is important in the lives of most people in the US and that religious bias is present both in society and schools, it is rare for school staff or curricula to address issues regarding religious diversity. Indeed, the role of religion in public education has been the subject of much debate within the US. US courts have struggled with questions of prayer in schools, whether students can have on-premises released time for religious education, and whether ceremonial bible reading and school-sponsored group prayer are allowed and, if so, under what conditions (Michaelson, 1970). Even today, the courts are wrestling with high-profile issues that directly relate to the issue of religion in public schools, such as the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance—which includes the words 'under God'—in schools, or

school vouchers which allocate public funds to support attendance at private schools that are often religiously affiliated.

On one aspect of this debate, however, the courts have not wavered. It is legal for public schools to teach children about religion. Teaching about religion is, in fact, encouraged by the courts and by educational experts, as reflected in Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark's opinion in *Abington v Schempp* (1963) regarding religion and schools:

It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be affected consistently with the First Amendment.

The National Council for Social Studies (1998) relates studying about religion with achieving specific curriculum standards and asserts: 'Knowledge about religions is not only characteristic of an educated person, but is also absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity.'

These statements recognize that children must be prepared through their education to live in and to participate actively and positively in a democratic society, which is among the most diverse in the world.

Nonetheless, perhaps because of the complicated history and contentious debate about religion in American public schools, schools and educators shy away from discussing religion, and by extension, steer clear of any discussion on Islam. Many schools have overly stringent policies in an unnecessary effort to avoid legal difficulties. Likewise, educators often avoid any discussion of religion in the classroom for fear of being sanctioned by school administration or having to confront outraged parents and guardians. The result is that many Americans have incorrect ideas about Islam, which are not being countered with the facts. According to a 2005 study by the Pew Research Center, roughly two-thirds of Americans (65%) say they know little or nothing about Islam and its practices, while just 5% say they know a great deal about the religion.

In addition, the public is simultaneously being bombarded with negative, sensationalized images of Muslims in the media, contributing to the rise of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim incidents. And these images are often targeted at children. As just one example, in Disney's animated feature, *Aladdin*, the protagonists have light skin and American accents, whereas the villains are dark-skinned and have Middle Eastern accents. Lyrics to songs in the movie encapsulate the negativity toward Arab culture:

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. (Wingfield & Karaman, 2002).

Many people are exposed to negative images of Muslims in movies such as *G.I. Jane* and *The Rules of Engagement*, television shows including the immensely popular and highly acclaimed *24*, as well as comic books including Tarzan and Superman. Regardless of the diversity within Muslim culture, Muslim men are most often portrayed as Arabs, specifically Arab terrorists, 'oil sheiks' and tribesmen, and Muslim

women are presented as 'belly dancers and harem girls'. Positive and non-stereotypical images of Muslims are rarely found in the media (Wingfield & Karaman, 2002).

### **Tanenbaum Center's Elementary Education Program**

The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding is a non-sectarian, non-profit organization founded in 1992. It is the leader in the United States in providing the practical programs needed to prevent the growth of verbal and physical conflict perpetrated in the name of religion. The Tanenbaum Center's Religion and Diversity Education program is a key part of its strategy for achieving its mission. Through this program, the Tanenbaum Center offers training and curricula for K-12 educators regarding issues of religious diversity in the classroom.

When the Elementary Education Program was first conceived, the Tanenbaum Center partnered with Union Theological Seminary and The Institute for Christian and Islamic Studies and Relations. The first step was to gather a core group of experts in the fields of religion and education to delineate the four goals of the project, which were then defined as follows: to create a positive foundation for mutual respect, to enhance knowledge and awareness of cultural and religious legacies, to reduce prejudice and stereotyping, and to create new educational materials that support the Tanenbaum Center's mission and can be used in formal and informal, secular and religious educational settings.

The core group completed research identifying a representative sample of available materials in the field. This research, combined with information that was gathered from focus groups including teachers, leading educational experts and developmental psychologists, revealed a dearth of educational programming for elementary school children that is both multicultural and interreligious, and that promotes the values of respect and inclusion while expanding worldviews.

The core group discovered that the programming and resources that existed generally fall into one of two categories: programming for secondary education or programming that advocates for (but does not necessarily provide curricula for) teaching about religion in schools. Programs on interreligious understanding are available for high school students. For example, in the US, Facing History and Ourselves is a stellar national curricular and training program for high school students and their teachers that critically examines racism, prejudice and antisemitism. Also, the Three R's program in California and Utah is an innovative initiative that seeks to advocate the role of religion in the curriculum to educators in those particular states.

It is for these reasons that the Tanenbaum Center decided to develop an innovative program focused on interreligious understanding for elementary school educators and the young children they teach.

### **Educating our youngest children**

Kindergarten is an appropriate time to begin teaching civic involvement, social-emotional skills and the religions of the world, for both developmental and

academic reasons. Research indicates that children can exhibit racist attitudes as early as preschool (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999). In fact, even toddlers can form negative prejudices in an environment with 'clear ethnic friction' (Cameron *et al.*, 2001, p. 124). These writers refer to the Bar-Tal study, where Israeli children as young as two-and-a-half years old rated a photograph of a person more negatively when the person was identified as 'Arab.'

Even in environments where ethnic friction is not as pervasive, children go through two important social cognitive transitions that affect their development of prejudice in the early elementary grades. The first transition is the attainment of racial constancy, when children begin to understand that 'they are a member of a racial group that is unchanging over time and across superficial transformations' (Cameron *et al.*, 2001, p. 124). This transition, which occurs around the age of five, affects preferences and behaviors, including the way children view themselves and others and seek information about their identity.

The second transition occurs between the ages of seven and nine, when 'children show a qualitatively different understanding of person traits, shifting from primarily physical and concrete, to internal and psychological' (Cameron *et al.*, 2001, p. 124). This is also a time when children are beginning to examine 'dispositional characteristics with long-lasting implications (i.e. abilities) rather than simple outcome comparisons' (Cameron *et al.*, 2001).

During these two transitions, children acquire critical skills and attitudes about racial, ethnic and religious differences. They learn about their own identity, are establishing their views of others and are beginning to ask questions about culture, race, ethnicity, religion and identity. These transitions are key moments in the development of prejudices, because they relate to how a child learns to assign value and judgment to themselves and others. As such, it is particularly important to address issues of multiculturalism and interreligious understanding during these early elementary stages of a child's development.

The early elementary grades are also a critical time for learning about race, ethnicity, religion and culture, because these issues tie directly into the academic content focused on families and communities that children are studying in these grades. Just as knowledge of religion is necessary for older students to understand international conflict and great literature, it is equally important for young children to learn about religion in the context of foundational concepts such as self, community and culture.

The Tanenbaum Center's training and curricula for elementary school educators are designed to help teachers address the subject of religion in their classroom in a developmentally appropriate way. Children in the early elementary grades are not prepared to learn detailed and abstract histories of the world's religions or how to conduct themselves within the intricacies of a working democracy. However, during these early years, they are being prepared for future life experiences, and the concrete skills they should be taught are necessary to prepare them for effectively participating in a multicultural democracy, i.e. communication, inclusion, personal responsibility and participation in community. Through the Tanenbaum Center's

curricula, children are also introduced to an initial discussion of religion and culture to expand their worldviews.

### **Content integration**

Current educational theory supports the conclusion that multicultural instruction occurs best when fully integrated into the academic program. For this reason, the Tanenbaum Center's elementary curricula are arranged thematically and include lessons in literacy, math, social studies, research, technology, science and art.

In addition, teaching about one religion (Islam in particular) in isolation from other concepts and religious traditions can backfire, by putting students in an unwanted spotlight or creating more anti-Islamic sentiment. This kind of backlash is less likely to occur when using a curriculum that integrates content on Islam with thematic content and content about other cultures and religions in a holistic way, so that children learn how to value the diversity of cultures, and come to see this as an important and natural part of everyday life. Muslims are not taught about or introduced as an 'other' but are, instead, included in the curriculum along with many cultures.

In a Tanenbaum Center lesson on nutrition, for example, children learn that some people have to do more than choose foods that are healthy. Some people are allergic to nuts or are on special diets because they might have diabetes or epilepsy. Some people make choices because they believe strongly about something—such as being vegan. Others cannot eat certain foods because of their religious beliefs. At the end of the lesson, the students are presented with a food challenge. They have to plan a meal that Olympic athletes from different parts of the world can enjoy. The meal must be healthy, something everyone can share and provide for all of the athletes' different dietary restrictions: Amar, a swimmer from India, is Hindu, does not eat any meat and hates bananas; Sarah, a sprinter from England is allergic to nuts, is Jewish and eats only Kosher food; Ayo, a gymnast from Nigeria is Muslim and does not eat meat that is not Halal. By including Muslim characters and traditions into the curriculum in this integrative way, students learn about Muslim practices and to be sensitive toward issues that affect Muslims in a context which does not single them out. Instead, being Muslim is normalized.

Another example of the way in which Islamophobia is confronted through the Tanenbaum Center's integrative curricula is reflected in a science lesson about the Earth, the Sun and the Moon. In this lesson, students participate in class activities that demonstrate how shadows are cast on the Earth and how the positional relationships between the Earth, the Sun and the Moon affect the phases of the Moon. The phases of the Moon are then linked to festivals and holidays such as Ramadan, Diwali and Hanukkah, which are connected to the Lunar Cycle. Once again, Islamic culture is introduced in an integrated academic and multicultural context that may be familiar to students, teachers and parents, thereby decreasing the potential of Islamophobia.

### Addressing developmental appropriateness

A major challenge in creating educational programming that addresses issues of citizenship, multiculturalism and interreligious understanding in the primary grades is developmental appropriateness. Religion, culture and respect are all abstract concepts, and elementary school students are typically concrete thinkers. To this end, the Tanenbaum Center identifies discrete skills that are essential for citizenship in a pluralistic democracy and builds upon them in its training and curricula so that they can be used with students in concrete, hands-on ways. For example, in a series of foundation lessons in the curricula, students are taught specific ways of asking questions of each other respectfully. Students then use this language in subsequent class discussions, including structured exchanges on students' cultural and religious traditions.

A major pedagogical underpinning of the Tanenbaum Center's Education Program is the use of cooperative learning. Studies have shown that using a cooperative learning model in the classroom can be effective in reducing prejudice in students. Aboud and Fenwick's (1999) work *Exploring and evaluating school-based interventions to reduce prejudice* examined a study that compared teacher-directed instruction and peer socialization. They found that 'the collaborative framework ensured that students were engaged, open in expressing their views, and intent on explaining and evaluating their views' and could be more effective in reducing prejudice than didactic teacher-led instruction.

An important benefit of cooperative learning is that it allows the children to act as both teacher and learner. Just as children learn about different cultures and traditions from the children they read about in books, they also can learn from the children in their classroom. Effective cooperative learning gives children an opportunity to benefit and learn from the diversity among their classmates, even in relatively homogeneous settings. Having children talk to and learn from each other is also a rich opportunity for children to practice their developing communication skills in creating a respectful environment in their classroom. This type of cooperative education is particularly relevant when teaching children about the diversity that exists among practices both within and between religions.

In a lesson about holidays, for example, music and poetry are used to explore the similarities and differences between and within traditions. Students learn about different forms of poetry by reading poetry about religious holidays. One of the poems is an acrostic poem about a Muslim holiday:

Eid

E is for Everybody

I is for Invitations to Visit

D is for Dressing Up

Students then write their own poems about what is important to them about a holiday or tradition they follow. Once the poems are shared, teachers facilitate a discussion



about what is important to each student about the holiday or tradition they wrote about, and help students compare and contrast individual points of view.

Opportunities for cooperative education are enhanced throughout the Tanenbaum Center's curricula by incorporating quality children's literature. Narrative stories introduce the children to different traditions and experiences in an accessible way. This not only allows children to access information, it also helps them associate what they are learning about different cultures with children, with whom they can identify, without forcing students from those cultures into the role of spokesperson. For example, in one lesson, children talk about family differences and similarities by posing the question 'Do all families believe in the same thing?' Students read narratives by other children about their families using the book *Families* by Susan Kuklin (2006)—a book that reflects the differences and similarities between families of varied cultures and religions, including Muslim families. The book is then used as stepping stone for respectful class discussions about students' families and traditions, allowing all students a chance to share their experiences with and question each other, without putting the onus exclusively on Muslim students.

### **High school education program**

Along with rising Islamophobia, identity-based conflict, including interreligious conflict, is increasing around the world. The majority of civil wars today are based on ethnic and/or religious identity. Even in conflicts without an overtly religious dimension, religion is often used to stir up hatred and violence.

*COEXIST: A Skills Based Curriculum for Understanding Conflict Resolution* is the Tanenbaum Center's innovative curriculum for high school students which was piloted in 2006. The curriculum is designed to teach students critical skills for resolving conflicts that arise owing to misunderstandings about diverse beliefs and cultural assumptions. Students gain an understanding of how religion and other forms of identity can be both misused to fuel conflicts and employed to help resolve them.

The inspiration for this curriculum came from a case study developed by the Tanenbaum Center on two religious leaders from Kaduna, Nigeria—Imam Ashafa, a Muslim, and Pastor Wuye, a Christian—who were once at war with each other and then came to use their respective religions as resources for conflict resolution. The curriculum focuses on religious conflict as a basis for understanding identity-based conflict and conflict at large.

Throughout the curriculum, students make connections between issues of conflict and identity in the case study and their own personal experiences. At the end of the curriculum, students apply the skills they have learned through the curriculum, including tactics for peer mediation and negotiation, to resolve conflicts in their own lives.

The case study that forms the core of the curriculum was chosen partly as a result of the interreligious partnership of the two peacemakers. By offering two

different perspectives on the conflict, Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye help students understand how perceptions of the 'other' affect the dynamics of interreligious conflict. Students also study the techniques that these two religious leaders employed to resolve the conflict between their communities. One such technique is the use of religious texts—and the sense of authority these texts carry—as tools to teach about perceiving the 'other' with compassion. Accordingly, students learn how the scriptures of these and many other religions can be resources in supporting peace instead of conflict.

In addition, Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye act as powerful examples that forgiveness and reconciliation are possible—and that one can be transformed from fighter to peacemaker. In the face of inaccurate beliefs that many people hold about interreligious conflict, particularly with regard to Islam, this in-depth, integrated study of these two peacemakers offers a compelling lens through which students learn key skills to examine critically their assumptions about identity.

### **Challenges and successes**

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges in implementing educational programs that confront Islamophobia and build interreligious understanding is the fear that many educators have about raising the issue of religion with their students. This is not a concern that only affects US public schools. Educators in private settings, where federal laws may not apply, also sometimes feel apprehensive about addressing religion because of possible resistance from students, parents, guardians or administrators. The situation is compounded because many educators feel inadequately informed about religions, particularly Islam, and therefore hesitate to address the topic at all.

To address these concerns, the Tanenbaum Center offers training for educators that includes information about the First Amendment of the US Constitution and the legalities involved with teaching about religion. In addition, the trainings focus on techniques for cultivating a culture of interreligious understanding and inclusion in classrooms and schools. The training reaches educators from a wide variety of schools and educational settings, including public, private and independent schools as well as after-school programs. Because ongoing training is considered the foundation for creating a sustainable culture of respect, staff remain accessible throughout the year for on- and off-site support, questions and continuing guidance to those who have participated in training.

Another concern that educators have when it comes to teaching about religion is that they are already under substantial curricular demands. In the age of standards-based reform, teachers are under increasingly stringent policies about what they need to teach and expectations of how their students must perform on standardized tests that are becoming the measure of accountability. In some areas, such as New York City, the government often mandates entire curricula. As a result, teachers, and even administrators, sometimes lack the freedom to choose materials. Those who do have the freedom often remain hesitant, as they are under so many other mandates and demands. The Tanenbaum Center's Elementary Education Program

tackles this concern by offering materials that integrate content on interreligious understanding with standards-based academic content.

Although there have been initial anxieties about implementing programs on religion in educational settings, the Tanenbaum Center's Education Program has overcome many of these challenges and has proved to be effective. In 2006, an independent evaluation of the Tanenbaum Center's Elementary Education Program found that many educators were themselves introduced to cultural and religious differences as a result of the Tanenbaum Center training and curricula and have indicated that their comfort level in discussing these subjects has increased.

### **Conclusion**

Combating Islamophobia and religious bias is a deep-seated and challenging societal issue. It must begin with preparing youth to become curious—rather than fearful—about Islam and, indeed, about people with the full range of religious and other differences. From the earliest age, this involves both educating students about different religions and cultures and teaching the necessary skills for living in a pluralistic and democratic society. The Tanenbaum Center's Education Program helps to encourage and reinforce a positive culture characterized by interreligious understanding that helps students, teachers, schools and communities to become more familiar with Islam and consequently to decrease the potential for Islamophobia.

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### **Note**

1. Derived from a work by Beth Finkelstein.

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