

The Importance of Arab Islamic Culture in our Curriculums

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Abstract:

Empirical research as well as theoretical formulations suggest that culture plays an important role in students' lives both on the social as well as the academic level. This paper looks at the Arab Islamic culture and its role and position in the English curriculums of our educational institutions.

الخلاصة:

أظهرت الأبحاث الميدانية والنظرية أن الثقافة تؤدي دوراً مهماً على الصعيدين الاجتماعي والأكاديمي وهذا البحث يستعرض دور الثقافة العربية الإسلامية وموقعها في المناهج الإنكليزية المتبعة في مؤسساتنا التعليمية .
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Culture is very important to those who identify with it. Culture, from an anthropological perspective, is defined as “the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and world view created and shared by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and or religion” (Nieto, 1996, p138). And each person maintains an image of the behaviors, beliefs and norms (i.e. culture) appropriate to members of the ethnic group which is known as a cultural identity (Ferdman, 1990).

Inclusion and representation of cultures in school curriculums have been shown by empirical research to have important, if not crucial, consequences for students, both on the social and academic level.

Empirical research as well as theoretical formulations suggest that in general, students perform better and are more academically and socially successful when their culture is recognized, portrayed favorably in the school curriculum, and used as a fundamental source of information (Nieto, 1996; Diamond and Moore, 1995; Au, 1993).

Research suggests that students’ cultures, histories, and experiences need to be made visible by making them part of the curriculum and of education in general.

Educators and community leaders, whether in the 1880’s or the 1990’s, recognize the importance of culture in students’ lives. They stress that recognition and inclusion preserve languages and cultures. Recognition and inclusion also assert the intrinsic and cultural values of the different languages as well as legitimize their heritage in the eyes of others. This

legitimization in turn "perpetuates" ethnic identity among ...children (Seller, 1992, p.13). This perpetuation of ethnic identity not only brings about consciousness of one's ancestry, but may have other influences. According to a Norwegian novelist, "young people who were cut off from the culture of their parents lacked creativity as well as character" (Seller, 1992, p.13). Seller supports this assertion with quotes from administrators and educators who stated that this consciousness of one's ancestry is "potential in giving tone to the individualization of youth" (p.13), and exposing children to their parents' traditions increases the children's respect for their parents (p.13).

Recognition and inclusion of cultures not only preserves cultures, but can instill a sense of pride and ethnic identity in children who will learn that "their collective pasts extended beyond the squalid tenements to glories of ancient civilizations and the achievements of great scholars, artists, and kings" (Seller, 1988, p.159). This identity and pride in one's self and cultural heritage can have psychological effects on individuals. From a social-psychological perspective, it gives them a sense of belonging and group membership (Ferdman, 1990). It answers the important question "Who am I?" (Gordon and Browne, 1996), and legitimizes one's existence in the eyes of others. This legitimization becomes quite important, especially if one is from a culture which has been devalued and demeaned, as in the case of the Arabic culture (Suleiman, 1996; Wright, 1995).

Educational systems, from institutions, agencies, to organizations are supposed to transmit knowledge and cultural heritage which in turn will

influence not only the societal but intellectual growth of the individuals in society.

In countries like the United States, schools are viewed as the institutions most responsible for literary education and socialization in society (Apple, 1996). And in many cases, literary education tends to be left primarily to the school. As a result, many students become literate in the cultural images represented by their school, and so, in this respect it can be assumed that literacy education can constitute a form of socialization. Learning becomes synonymous with the unquestioned acquiring and absorbing (Walsh, 1991) not only of skills, but also of behaviours, values, and principles of the school culture which in the west is that of the white middle class. And, whether it is deliberate or not, the process of becoming and being literate in school involves becoming and being identified with a particular culture, the culture of the school.

It is this influence, that in multicultural societies like the U.S., that can be used negatively. It is in western countries where this situation exists that, according to Shujaa (1995), the nature of a group of people's experiences and the process of schooling need to be brought into question. Shujaa (1995) looks at the African American students' situation where he believes that the students' behaviors (and in a way their academic and social success) in schools "are responsible to schooling as a process of formal socialization that aims to shape their understanding of the world in accordance with the interests of the elite within the social hierarchy" (p.197). So, if the interest of the elite is to portray a culture negatively, using negative characteristics, Shugaa (1995) believes that the characteristics that

are attributed to a group of people, or students, have been shown to end up becoming a 'deficiency' that is associated with that particular cultural group (Shujaa, 1995). The people soon begin to see themselves as "deficient human beings--people who have little or no self-esteem or who lack knowledge of themselves" (p.199).

But knowledge and cultural identities, as Giroux (1994) explains, "are produced in a variety of sites" where schools are just one of them (p.132). Through language, messages, symbols and so forth, we begin to internalize ideas about ourselves and others (Gudykunst, 1994). The messages we hear can influence our minds. It is for this reason that what is portrayed in the 'hidden curriculum' of the school and society, can be just as effective as what is presented in the formal school curriculum (Giroux, 1987). What is meant by 'hidden curriculum' is the ways in which students or different cultural groups are sorted out, categorized, and represented, mostly in negative ways, in the school as well the social settings in a subtle manner by virtue of ethnicity, race, or other characteristics: People find themselves often positioned within forms of knowledge, institutional structures, and social relationships that have a "creeping or quiet" kind of hegemony about them" (Giroux, 1994, p.157). According to Giroux, sometimes these members are made to inhabit 'spaces' that shape their identity in a particularly harmful way.

Shannon (1992) believes that the decisions that curriculum developers, administrators, and most importantly educators make are usually actual negotiations over whose cultural values, interests and beliefs will be validated in schools. And, in western societies like this, Shannon

believes that teachers are political, whether they are conscious of it or not. Their acts contribute to or challenge the 'status quo' in educational curriculums of these schools and these societies where the enforcement of the 'status quo' leads to a kind of 'silencing' (Fine, 1987).

So as it stands in western countries, it seems that the legacy of colonialization is still highly perpetuated through the educational as well as the societal curriculums.

But interestingly enough, this 'hegemony' and these 'spaces' seem to have crossed over the borders to education curriculums even in countries where the cultures are predominantly non-western, like the Arabic Islamic, Indian, and African contexts to name a few. As it seems in Africa, according to Ngugi wa Thing'o's personal experience of what he terms 'performace space' in his country of Kenya, these spaces seem to be "tied to time...history and that therefore they are sites of physical, social and psychic forces" in postcolonial societies (Thing'o, 1997). These cultures and their contributions seem to also be repressed and silenced even in their own cultural curriculums.

This paper puts across the question: *Why is the Arabic Islamic culture and its contributions being silenced in the English curriculum in schools and higher education institutions even in countries that belong to this culture?* In the case of this culture, its contributions seem to be ignored not only in some of its own educational curriculum, but also in its societal curriculum as well.

One may tend to ask or think that maybe that which has been produced by this culture is little or of no importance, or just not recognized

by the literary or educational world. But in the case of the Arabic Islamic culture that does not seem to be the case. The educational community has no doubt about the importance of this culture in the history of mankind whether in the scientific or literary world.

This is the culture that led the world in all the different sciences from the 7th to the 15th century, for about eight centuries (Al-Makhzangi, 2000). This is the culture that belongs to the civilization that has seen no comparison (Hitti, Philip, 1972), the civilization that is given credit not only for preserving the Latin culture, but the language as well. This is the culture whose scholars, as Sidou explains, "taught Europe about all the sciences" (See Abo Thiab, T. 1988). According to the French philosopher Rinan, sciences and civilizations alike were indebted to the Muslims only for a period of six centuries for the flourishing and development of knowledge. Not only did they preserve cultures and languages by their translations and transliterations, but they made inventions and discoveries that set the foundation for modern sciences (Huff, 1993). Not only did they bring change on the academic and scientific level, but according to Fahd (see Awaa, 1983), they introduced many changes on the social level as well.

This is the culture that many European scientists and scholars such as Leonard Fibonacci, Bortollitti, DeVilleneove, and Lulle have given credit to its contributions by acknowledging them in their works (Awaa, 1983). Many renowned western institutions today still hold this civilization in high esteem and acknowledge their great contributions to humanity. In honor of this culture's great scientists, halls and wards are being named. Princeton University gave the name of the scientist who is known as the "The Father

of Medicine," Al-Razzi, to one of its best medical wards in recognition of his contributions to medicine. Paris University still has the pictures of Ibn Sinaa and Al-Razzi on the walls of one of its biggest halls. Recent conferences given in European universities about cultures, such as that given in the University of Montpellier (1977) in France, acknowledge the fact that their university was established with the help of Arab Islamic scholars (Abu Thiab, T., 1988).

This culture was not only known for its love and commitment to knowledge, but were just as willing, eager, and devoted to share and spread this knowledge to all the lands they came across and give what they have learned and discovered to all those who wanted this information. Their willingness to give and take, share and spread cultural awareness encouraged others to take an advantage of this great generosity. In the Middle Ages, Germany's interest in Arabic Islamic culture led to heads of states like King Fredrick II (who died in 1250) to become so intrigued and influenced by this culture, that he became well versed and knowledgeable in many aspects of its religion and society. He established the first university in his country in 1212-1214, where a section was dedicated to translating Arab Islamic literature. King Roger II (who died in 1154) also took interest in this culture and encouraged translations of all its works (Abu Thiab, 1988). The interests and works of scholars like Goethe, Hiegel and Spinglo are also examples of European interest in this culture.

So, as it seems, this culture is neither lacking in knowledge nor heritage, for the legacy of the Arab Islamic civilization is overflowing with contributions that have acted as a catalyst to bring about what is now known

as the modern world. For where would Kepler, Galeleo, and Newton be without the great Arab Islamic scholars, that came before them hundreds of centuries, such as Ibn Sina'a, Ibn Al-Haythem, and Gaber Bin Hayan?

Now, if according to the research presented at the beginning of this paper, attributing the students' contributions will enable the students to become more successful in their academic and social endeavors, then these contributions should be included in school curriculums. But as it seems in English curriculums in schools and higher education institutions in the Arab Islamic world, there still seems to be some kind of hegemony that exists. In almost all higher education institutions in the Arab Islamic world there are "English literature" departments that teach almost nothing but the literature produced by the English writers and ignore many of the world's cultures and their literary contributions including their own. Many may argue that these departments are meant to teach the English language, because of its importance in world technology, but if so, then they should be renamed to English language teaching departments and not English literature departments. For if there is English literature departments why shouldn't there be Indian, African, or Chinese literature departments, for example, or world literature departments that take into consideration all the world literatures and their contributions?

If, for argument's sake, let's say that there can only be English literature departments, then why aren't the Arab Islamic culture's contributions to this field mentioned? This may seem to be the department least affected by this culture, yet all fields of knowledge were affected by

the cultural contributions of this culture, and English literature is no exception. Below are a few examples of these contributions.

The subjects of literary criticism and history, in the English curriculum of higher institutions, are two major subjects that are always included. Undoubtedly, these subjects will always refer to famous Greek and Roman philosophers and thinkers. Yet, there is no mention of the fact that it is the Arab Islamic scholars who have passed on to the rest of the world the way of life, ideals, principles, and philosophies of these same thinkers and philosophers. And, to a great extent, most of what has been transferred in translations and analyses may have been tinted by the Arab Islamic scholar's thoughts and ideologies that did the translations. Many scholars argue that no translation or transfer of a culture from one to the other, even in translations, can be done without some sort of effect being left on the literary work (Hilal, 1977). If this is the case, then literary professional ethics demands that those learning about these cultures and their literatures be aware of this point. For if we are to be fair and true to these codes of ethics, or literary professionalism, we need to give credit to where credit is due.

In looking at the art of narration and the beginning of the short story, Badeeh Al-Zaman Al-Hamadani and his *maqamaa* need to be taken into consideration. This gifted writer who lived and wrote during the 4th century of the Higira calendar, about mid-900 AD, is said to have been the first in setting the groundwork for the modern art of narration and story telling. His *maqamas*, short stories engrained in social life, as Ghareeb states, contain all the elements that are able to feed any kind of art and most

importantly, the short story. It is believed that if he had continued writing these maqamas he may now be one of the most famous short story writers. As far as Arabic literature is concerned, he is the father of this new literary genre, which had direct affect on the Spanish Picaresca which in turn influenced the European short story.

In looking at some of the masterpieces of English literature, such as Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, it has been shown that it has Arab Islamic roots. Sendino, and Carulli, (see Hilal, 1977.) two Spanish researcher, have shown, beyond a doubt, that Dante's ideas, and even portions of this work, have been taken from the Islamic religious book written about Prophet Mohammad's ascendance to Heaven.

In poetry, one only needs to read about Fitzgerald, Tennyson, or poets like Edgar Allan Poe to see the Arab Islamic influences on this literary genre.

The perplexing question remains then, if schooling is a process of formal socialization, as stated earlier, which can shape understanding in accordance with the interest of some hierarchy, then to whose interest is it that the Arab Islamic contributions to civilization remain silenced, even in their own school curriculums? And if it has been shown that bringing in cultural contributions and history into school curriculum instill pride, ethnic identity and gives students a sense of belonging and affiliation to their great ancient civilization, and legitimates their "challenged" existence in the eyes of others, then why is this factor not being taken into consideration? Especially since the intellectual, academic and social outcome of students is so positive??

And, in the case of the Arab Islamic culture, where there is a “hidden curriculum” (which is no longer hidden) which has been shown to exist in the mass media of western communications (Patai, 1983) and powerful political propaganda (Wright, 1995), that aims at devaluing and vilifying this culture, don't educators, curriculum developers, and community leaders, who belong to this culture think it is time to rise beyond the framed image set for it by the west? Especially if the image portrayed is that of a “barbaric,” “treacherous,” and “the diabolical enemy” (Wright, 1995) whose members are nothing but “fools,” “pleasure seekers,” and “blood thirsty desert killers” (Patai, 1983)? Isn't it time for re-telling stories from the perspectives of those concerned instead of having their stories being told for them?

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