DEVELOPING U.S. EDUCATORS' SKILLS IN TEACHING ACROSS LINES OF SEXUALITY, RELIGION, AND NATIONALITY

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About the Centers

Great Lakes Equity Center (Center) is an educational research and service center located in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. The Center engages in equity-focused technical assistance and related research with educational and community agencies focused on systemic improvements to serve all learners with particular focus on educational access, participation and outcomes for those who have been historically marginalized. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center is a project of the Center and provides technical assistance related to educational equity based on student race, national origin, sex, and religion at no cost to public educational agencies throughout its 13-state region in the Midwest and Plains.

Introduction

This equity tool prepares U.S. school leaders, counselors, educators, and other stakeholders with ways to ensure the safety and engagement of students when discussing topics across the lines of sexuality, religion, and nationality. This tool focuses on two frameworks: engagement and safety.

Educators, counselors, and school administrators come from different backgrounds and have varied values and levels of understandings of sexual, religious, and national diversity. To ensure that students are provided safety, affirmation, and opportunities for engagement at school and in their classrooms, school teams must start with a shared understanding of what safety and engagement means. This tool focuses on students' safety and engagement in schooling and provides strategies and recommendations at the school and the classroom levels. This tool asks school personnel—such as educators, counselors, and administrators to work on the following areas:

1. Creating an understanding of safety and engagement
   - Reflecting on what safe and engagement looks like
   - Engaging in reflection on bias
1. Engaging students by learning about them
2. Providing resources to build conversations about one another's lives and experiences
3. Representing multiple perspectives when introducing topics that connect to sexuality, religion, and nationality

By employing these strategies, educators, staff, and school administrators can create learning environments where students feel safe, included, and engaged with their cultures.

Background Information

Providing safe, affirming, and inclusive classrooms and school learning environments is essential for student success. GLSEN's National School Climate Survey, however, found that 57.6% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 43.3% because of their gender expression (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, Danischewski, 2016). Students reported educators' contributions to hostile environments, either by ignoring students' requests for help (63.5% of LGBTQ+ students reported this) or by actively contributing homophobic or transphobic remarks (56.2% of students reported hearing homophobic comments and 63.5% reported hearing transphobic comments) (Kosciw et al, 2016). Based on their studies, GLSEN asserted that there is an "urgent need for action to create safe and affirming learning environments for LGBTQ+ students" (Kosciw et al, 2016, p. 14).

Just as LGBTQ+ students experience hostility at school, so, too, do Muslim students. Forty-two percent of Muslim children report bullying in their K-12 experiences because of their faith; this is double the average for students from other faiths (Mogahed & Chouhoud, 2017, p.13). Furthermore, the Institute for Social Policy (2017) reported that one in four Muslims experienced bullying incidents that involved a teacher (Mogahed & Chouhoud, 2017, p.13). In 2016, the U.S. Education Department issued a statement to address the surge in anti-Muslim beliefs and behaviors, urging colleges as well as K-12 schools to be proactive about preventing and interrupting bullying incidents and discrimination related to these sentiments (Brown, 2016). As the above makes evident, safe, affirming, and inclusive classrooms and school learning environments are often not available for LGBTQ+ students as well as Muslim students. For these reasons, these students are the focus of this equity tool.

Of course, some LGBTQ+ students are Muslim, and some Muslim students are LGBTQ+. These identities are not mutually exclusive (Habib, 2016). According to one poll, one in ten Muslims identify as bisexual, refuse to answer, or identify their sexual orientation as something other than straight (Mogahed & Chouhoud, 2017). Just as sexuality and religion are not mutually exclusive, neither are these identities exclusive to others, including nationality. It is the students at these intersections with whom we are concerned and for whom educators can examine their own beliefs and practices in order to create safe, accepting, and inclusive educational settings where all students feel valued for the entirety of who they are.

Students from nations outside of the U.S. are increasingly present in U.S. classrooms (Nguyen & Martinez Hoy, 2017), and, in 2016, about 3% of the overall 44 million immigrant population in the United States were from majority Muslim nations in the Middle East and North Africa (Cumoletti & Batalova, 2018).

The Office for Civil Rights prohibits schools from discrimination against national origin (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964). Indeed, by law (*Plyer v. Doe*, 1982), all children are entitled to public K-12 schooling and equal access and opportunity regardless to "their or their parents' actual or perceived national origin, citizenship, or immigration status" (Adelman & Taylor, 2015). Still, we know that the reality is that immigrant students suffer hostility provoked by an overall anti-immigration attitude in the U.S. and these immigrant students, in particular, suffer further discrimination grounded in a fear and hatred of Muslims. In short, the minoritization of people based on their sexual, religious, and national identities is ubiquitous in U.S. schools and has a profoundly negative impact on students who lives at these intersections. School leaders and educators, though, are key to providing safe, affirming, and inclusive educational experiences to LGBTQ+ Middle-Eastern American, Middle-Eastern immigrant and/or Muslim students.

The differences in experiences of immigration and growing up in the United States might make some students feel disconnected from their own parents' cultures. LGBTQ+ immigrant students might feel at the crossroads of their parents' experiences and the experiences of bullying by school leaders or educators, and other students might feel themselves rejected and unsafe. The disconnect between students and their parents combined with rejection from American counterparts can create a feeling of unsafety and more confusion for students searching for their own identities. Because of the centrality of the role of schools, conversations about sexuality, religion, and nationality may affirm students who are at these intersections, provide a sense of safety, promote inclusive and equitable educational experiences. In this tool, we provide strategies and recommendations to reach these goals.

EDUCATORS

School leaders, counselors, educators, and other stakeholders can use the tool below to reflect on their skills in teaching across lines of sexuality, religion, and nationality. Independently, those using the tool should answer the questions and identify school-based examples.

1. How do you define students' safety and student engagement?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

2. What are your explicit and implicit understandings and values in relation to sexuality, religions, and nations of origin or immigration?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

3. What are your implicit and explicit biases with respect to Middle Eastern American or immigrant students?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

4. What are the forces and circumstances that shaped these biases?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

5. How do you define safety pertaining to sexuality, religion, and nations of origin?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

6. How might your biases conflict or coincide with your initial definitions of students' safety?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

7. How might these biases interfere with students' safety and impede students' engagement at the school level?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

8. Think of examples of bullying incidents that happened in the classroom or the school, based on a students' sexuality, religion, or national origin (without providing identifying information). How did you resolve the bullying incident?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

9. What steps for intervention do you wish the school employed that may have enabled you to ensure students' engagement and safety?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

After answering and providing related examples to the list of questions, educators using the tool should analyze their responses, paying particular attention to the questions focused on biases (questions # 3, 4, 6, & 7). These are tough questions that can make the person responding feel vulnerable. Responding to and reflecting on them, however, is imperative to teaching across lines of sexuality, religion, and nationality. With that in mind, educators should analyze their responses and note, in the fourth column, how their definitions of students' safety and engagement may be evolving and how they address incidents that arise in classrooms and otherwise on school premises that conflict with their growing understanding of students' safety and engagement.

Educators should also note anything that stands out to them, such as "ah-ha" moments, when they really understood something new, as well as sticking points, where they just could not think of an answer or example. Educators should use these notes to identify topics that might demand further investigation. It is recommended that educators schedule time to meet and engage in thought partnership with other colleagues who may have expertise on these topics. Not all schools, though, have such on-site experts. In that case, we suggest seeking educative resources. For those struggling with biases in terms of people from the Middle East and/or Muslims (questions 3 and 4), we suggest:

- Selod, S. (2014). Targeting Muslim Americans in the name of national security. *Religion. Race and Ethnicity. Security & Intelligence.* Retrieved from https://scholars.org/brief/targeting-muslim-americans-name-national-security

- Considine, C. (2017). The Racialization of Islam in the United States: Islamophobia, hate crimes, and "Flying while brown." *Religions 8* 165, 1-19. Retrieved from https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/8/9/165

For educators struggling with biases in terms of LGBTQ+ people (questions 6 and 7), we suggest:

- Blackburn, M. V., Clark, C. T., & Schey, R. with Penn, J. I., Johnson, C., Williams, J., Sutton, D., Swensen, K., & Vanderhule, L. (2018). *Stepping up!: Teachers advocating for sexual and gender diversity in schools*. New York: Routledge.

- Blackburn, M. V., Clark, C. T., Kenney, L. M., & Smith, J. M. (Eds.) (2010). *Acting out: Combating homophobia through teacher activism*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Giga, N. M., Villenas, C. & Danischewski, D. J. (2016). *The 2015 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN.

For people noticing biases at the intersections of Islam and LGBTQ+ identities (questions 3, 4, 6, and 7), we suggest:

- Diri-Rieder, Y., Sellman, J., Nusair, I., Ayoub, D. (2018). Developing U.S. educators' understandings of nationality, religion, and sexuality in the Middle East. *Great Lakes Equity Center.* Retrieved from https://greatlakesequity.org/resource/developing-us-educators-understandings-nationality-religion-and-sexuality-middle-east

- Habib, S. (2017). Queer Muslim women from the south: "We exist and we are fierce." *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/profile/samra-habib

- Moore, S. & Hussain, S. (2015). Two views of Fadi Zaghmout's debut novel *The Bride of Amman. ArabLit.* Retrieved from https://arablit.org/2015/08/02/two-views-of-fadi-zaghmouts-debut-novel-the-bride-of-amman/

- MyKali webzine. Retrieved from http://mykali.weebly.com/

- Pensot, E. (2015). "Just me and Allah:" Photographer seeks to capture diversity of Islam. *PBS New Hour.* Retrieved from https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/just-allah-photographer-captures-diversity-islam

Through the responses to these questions and the analyses of the responses, educators can identify their own implicit and explicit biases and understandings of sexuality, religion, and nationality. Once educators identify these perspectives, they can examine where these biases come from and identify the influences that shaped their attitudes toward these topics. After identifying these biases and reflecting on the forces that may have shaped them, educators will be better able to understand how their biases might be impacting students in their classrooms including those who are at the diverse intersections of sexuality, religion and nationality. Reflecting on concrete examples about students' safety and engagement makes them better prepared to facilitate conversations about these topics in their classrooms. Furthermore, educators will be better equipped to intervene and resolve conflicts or incidents of bullying that take place in ways that are responsive to students' safety and engagement. In these ways, educators can improve the culture of their classrooms and schools, particularly for LGBTQ+ and Muslim students.

STUDENTS

Although educators play a significant role in developing school culture, so too do students. Like educators, they must reflect on their experiences and biases to contribute to school culture in positive ways. Teachers can guide them in such reflection with the following tool. Give this survey to students in the classroom. Make an anonymous summary of the students' response and then return the tool to students. While summarizing, teachers can prepare themselves for the discussion of the topics. For example, if sexuality, religion, and nationality emerge as themes in students' responses, teachers can be ready to engage students in such discussions, rather than being derailed by what can be very contentious topics.

1. What does safety look like in school and in classrooms?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

2. What are some ways that make you feel safe/unsafe and engaged/disengaged in classrooms?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

3. What are some ways that teachers, administrators, and counselors can improve safety and engagement in school?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

4. How are your understandings of safety and engagement similar or different to those in the school?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

5. What do you do when you see a teacher or students bullying someone else?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

STUDENTS (Continued)

6. What are some issues that hinder your ability to report bullying at the school?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

7. What can the school do to support you in reporting bullying?

Answers:

School Examples/Notes:

Once educators are prepared, they should facilitate a discussion based on the anonymous summary. This ensures students' safety but also that their voices are included in the creation of their own classroom values. Such a discussion lays the foundation for further curricular efforts.

Such curricular efforts might include teaching literature in ways that might make schools open spaces for all students to feel safe, included, and engaged in the classroom. By engaging students with literature that speaks to the intersections of sexuality, religion, and national origin, students might be able to find avenues to feel safe and engaged by seeing themselves represented in the curriculum. Such efforts, however, can be risky. Below are some suggestions for mitigating risks.

- Prior to teaching about these topics, educators must first engage in examining their own biases about sexuality, religion, and immigration. (The first section entitled "Educators" is designed to do this work.)

- Educators may engage in reflexivity, individually as well as with other experienced colleagues. This can be done through utilizing educational resources, like the materials referenced above.

- Educators should examine the ways their biases are shaping their choices about the materials they use in the classroom.

- Use literature and other materials on sexuality, religion, and national origin, within the paradigms of students' safety and engagement, to create shared understandings with students in the classroom.

    o Educators can focus on learning about the diversity of cultures within the United States. Starting with an understanding that there are many U.S. cultures rather than one can help all students learn about one another. Educators can see their students with an understanding that diversity is inherent in their students' backgrounds. This helps educators learn about their students. Then, educators can include resources for their students that show diversity within their own cultures. Educators should consult with students, without pointing students out, about the appropriateness of these materials for students who might be at intersections of diversity.

    o Educators can introduce sexuality, religion, and nation of origin as also diverse within each culture. Because educators build an understanding that diversity is inherent within all culture, they can provide resources to students in ways that show such diversity.

If the centrality is on sexuality in relation to Middle Eastern immigrants and Middle Eastern Americans, educators can provide resources that show such diversity in literature, histories, and religions as well as contemporary examples of such diversity. Also, they can focus on the diversity of cultures of the United States.

- Choose and include resources for students to learn about the diversity within their own cultures – not only LGBTQ+ students, Muslim students, or immigrant students or those whose parents are immigrants.

- Choose and include resources that highlight the diversity of histories as well as present day of ways to be LGBTQ+, immigrant, and Muslim or other marginalized religions.

Including materials in the classroom that reflect students in the classroom promotes student engagement. By providing resources with diverse perspectives, students are able to see, relate to, and learn about the diversity within one another's cultures.

Overarching Recommendations

Do's for teachers, counselors, and school leaders

- Examine your implicit and explicit biases regarding issues related to sexuality, religion, and immigration or national origin. Examine where your biases come from and start learning about the cultures of your students and the diversity within their cultures.

- Provide students, specifically students who are marginalized at the intersections of sexuality, religion, and nationality, with resources to understand and negotiate these intersections better.

- Always bring diverse and multiple perspectives on any issue you foreground in the classroom and school.

- Create activities that help students and parents share how their experiences growing up in the United States might be different than growing up in countries where the parents are from. Make sure to inform parents that the activity is informational and optional.

- Engage in conversations throughout the school year; provide diverse representations of students' identities in curricular materials. Start with the least controversial topics and move on to more sensitive ones. Accordingly, introduce topics that are more neutral first and move slowly, building toward more complicated topics through classroom discussions and student-parent activities.

- Understand the school and the community you are in. Find other teachers and personnel who are committed to students' safety and engagement. Find other schools who share similar demographics to your community and school. Find a mentor to reach out to when complex issues arise in your classroom.

<u>Don'ts</u> for teachers, counselors, and school leaders

- Don't assume anything about your students – learn about them.

- Don't call on or ask students who are at any intersection of a marginalized identity to speak to that identity in the classroom without consulting them first.

- Don't use a political event you saw in the media and call on student to talk about it without consulting students first.

- Don't use stereotypical or stereotyping materials.

- Don't just use materials that are too specific without providing other viewpoints.

- Don't start with sexuality, religion, and national origin too soon; but make sure you do not neglect it or introduce it too late, either. Listen to your students to get a sense of the right timing.

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