

Arab Stereotypes and American Educators

by Marvin Wingfield and Bushra Karaman

When American children hear the word "Arab," what is the first thing that often comes to mind? It might well be the Arabian Nights fantasy imagery in the Disney film "Aladdin," a film which has been very popular in theaters and on video and is sometimes shown in school classrooms.

Yet Arab Americans have problems with this film. Although in many ways it is charming, artistically impressive and one of the few American films to feature an Arab hero or heroine, a closer look reveals some disturbing features.

The film's light-skinned lead characters, Aladdin and Jasmine, have Anglicized features and Anglo American accents. This is in contrast to the other characters who are dark-skinned, swarthy and villainous - cruel palace guards or greedy merchants with "Arabic" accents and grotesque facial features. The film's opening song sets the tone:

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.

Thus the film immediately characterizes the Arab world as alien, exotic and "other." Arab Americans see this film as perpetuating the tired stereotype of the Arab world as a place of deserts and camels, of arbitrary cruelty and barbarism.

Therefore, Arab Americans raised a cry of protest regarding "Aladdin." The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) challenged Disney and persuaded the studio to change a phrase in the lyrics for the video version of the film to say: "It's flat and immense, and the heat is intense. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home." While this is an improvement, problems remain.

Former ADC President Candace Lightner, founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, comments, "I was angry and embarrassed when I listened to the 'Aladdin' lyrics while watching the movie. I could only hope that the audience was not paying close attention and would not take home with them a poor image of the Arab world." She adds, "I only wish Disney had consulted us first before they developed a movie reaching millions of people based on our culture. This is why there is an ADC."

Grassroots protest has also been successful in combatting the troubling elements of this film. In Illinois a 10-year old Arab American girl persuaded a music teacher leading the school chorus to discard the offensive "Aladdin" lyrics - although she had to explain three times why the lyrics were offensive before the teacher "got it."

Arabs In Popular Culture

Disney is by no means the only offender. Popular culture aimed at children is replete with negative images of Arab women as belly dancers and harem girls, and Arab men as violent terrorists, oil "sheiks" and marauding tribesmen who kidnap blond Western women.

Arabs are frequently cast as villains in Saturday morning TV cartoons - Fox Children Network's "Batman," for example. This cartoon portrayed fanatic, dark-complexioned Arabs armed with sabers and rifles as allies of an "alien" plotting to take over the Earth.

A few years ago, Spencer Gift stores sold "Arab" Halloween masks with grotesque physical features, along with their usual array of goblin, demon and vampire masks. The chain stocked no other ethnic masks.

Comic books frequently have Arab villains as a gratuitous element in their story line such as: Tarzan battles with an Arab chieftain who kidnaps Jane; Superman foils Arab terrorists hijacking a U.S. nuclear carrier or the Fantastic Four combat a hideous oil sheik supervillain. But, as Lebanese American media analyst Jack Shaheen comments, "There is never an Arab hero for kids to cheer." (Shaheen, 1980.)

Negative portraits of Arabs are found in numerous popular films, such as True Lies, Back to the Future and Raiders of the Lost Ark.

Numerous computer games on the market feature cartoon Arab villains. Children rack up high scores and win the games by "killing Arabs."

Ethnic stereotypes are especially harmful in the absence of positive ethnic images. Shaheen observes that in the media Arabs are “hardly ever seen as ordinary people, practicing law, driving taxis, singing lullabies or healing the sick.” (Shaheen, 1988.)

Arab Stereotypes Among Educators

Popular films and television imprint young children with numerous negative images of Arabs, and American educators do not do enough to correct this bias. Many do not even perceive anti-Arab racism as a problem. Educators who have not yet been alerted to this issue and are unaware of the potential harm being done are themselves part of the problem.

Despite the multicultural philosophy that currently prevails in American education, ADC has found many teachers and the public at large not yet sufficiently sensitized to the problem of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stereotyping. While multicultural articles, books and curriculum teaching units may deal with the heritage of African American, Hispanic, Native American and Asian/Pacific American cultures, it is not unusual for them to ignore Arabs and the Middle East. One educator in Fairfax County, Virginia, commented that “The kids from the Middle East are the lost sheep in the school system. They fall through the cracks in our categories.”

The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and the Middle East Outreach Council (MEOC) have researched history and geography textbooks, and found “an over portrayal of deserts, camels and nomads” in the chapters on the Middle East. Even some well-intentioned teachers use the Bedouin image as somehow typifying “Arab culture.” In fact, only about 2% of Arabs are traditional Bedouin, and today there are probably more Arab engineers and computer operators than desert dwellers.

American textbooks are often Eurocentric, while Arab points of view regarding such issues as the nationalization of resources or the Arab-Israeli conflict are presented inadequately or not at all. The MESA/MEOC study concludes that “the presentation of Islam is so problematic that it is perhaps time for educators at the college and university level to send a red alert to their colleagues at the pre-collegiate level. Crude errors and distortions abound.” (Barlow, 1994.) Some textbooks link Islam to violence and intolerance, ignoring its commonalities with Christianity and Judaism. While from a contemporary ecumenical or interfaith perspective, Yahweh, God the Father, and Allah (the generic word for God in Arabic) can be regarded as one God, textbooks sometimes discuss Allah as if the word referred to an alien god remote from Jewish and Christian tradition.

Effects of Stereotyping on Arab American Children

What does it feel like for Arab American children to grow up surrounded by a culture that does not recognize their ethnic identity in a positive way? They may find that the messages about the Arab world in school conflict with the values and traditions passed on at home. The images of Arabs which are conveyed in the classroom may have nothing in common with their relatives and experiences at home, with their friends in the neighborhood, at their church/mosque or elsewhere. They also find their peers to be influenced by negative and inaccurate images and preconceptions about the Arab heritage. Obviously these circumstances will lead to hurtful experiences.

Dr. Shaheen remembers being taught in his Lebanese American home to be proud of his family's Arab heritage. But at school, he remembers teasing, taunts and epithets: "camel jockeys," "desert niggers," "greasy Lebs."

Shaheen reports that his children were deeply upset when eight students in the annual Halloween parade at their school dressed up as "Arabs," "with accessories such as big noses, oil cans or money bags to complete the costume." Later, at the school's ethnic festival, "our children were hesitant to wear ethnic costumes," he said. (Shaheen, 1980.)

Others report similar incidents. Carol Haddad, a second-generation American of Lebanese and Syrian ancestry, describes her experience at age ten: "Each time I left the security of my family house, I experienced the oppression of being darker and different." Her family was stared at on the street, and Irish and German American children in her neighborhood mocked her family for "eating leaves" when they served grape leaves stuffed with lamb, rice and spices. During an argument, a boy in her neighborhood called her a "nigger." (Haddad, 1994.)

An ADC staffer recalls that, when she was growing up, her class was taught about Jewish culture. "We danced the hora and I came home singing Jewish songs." But there was no equivalent teaching about Arab culture. "My father was so mad!"

Like other ethnics, Arab Americans frequently encounter negative stereotypes disguised in the form of "humor." When they object, they are told that the derogatory comments were "not meant to be taken seriously." Today there should be greater public awareness and acknowledgment that not taking the identity of others seriously is just another form of racism.

More dangerous were the numerous incidents of anti-Arab hostility during the Gulf war with Iraq when schools and communities were swept by patriotic

fervor. The flags, banners, yellow ribbons, patriotic songs and speakers from the military undermined teachers' efforts to encourage critical thinking about news reports and official statements. There was little chance of understanding Arab society or the humanity of the Iraqi people. Arab American students often felt intimidated and silenced, although the presence of students of Arab origin in classes served to heighten teachers' sensitivity to the human dimension of the conflict. (Knowles, 1993; Merryfield, 1993.)

In Dearborn, Michigan, a proposal was brought before the Wolverine A basketball conference to disband all sports competition for the year. Some schools did not want to play with the team from Fordson High School, where half of the students and most of the basketball team were Arab. Students from Fordson were told, "Go back to Saudi Arabia. You're not wanted here." A bomb threat was reported at the school. Students also reported fights with students from other schools during the previous year. (McCabe, 1991.)

Often as they mature, Arab American young people consciously reclaim their ethnic identity. Lisa Suhair Majaj, a Palestinian American doctoral student, at the University of Michigan, observes that "Once I claimed a past, spoke my history, and told my name, the walls of incomprehension and hostility rose, brick by brick: unfunny ethnic jokes, jibes about terrorists and kalashnikovs, about veiled women and camels; or worse, the awkward silences, the hasty shifts to other subjects. Searching for images of my Arab self in American culture I found only unrecognizable stereotypes. In the face of such incomprehension I could say nothing." (Majaj, 1994.)

Effects on Some Arab American Students and Some Classroom Solutions

What effect does this stereotyping have on the increasing numbers of Arab American students in U.S. schools? What can classroom teachers do about these problems? The following suggestions may help educators correct the bias.

It is recognized that the more positive a student's self-concept, the higher his or her achievement level will be. Teachers use various techniques to make students feel worthy and important. But when Arab students see negative and erroneous portrayals of Arabs in films and on television, they begin to feel inferior and ashamed, or perhaps belligerent and aggressive.

Students suffer as a result of this. And learning suffers. Caught in this spiral, Arab American students may begin to believe that they, as a people, are inferior. They may stop trying to do their best and become convinced that they can never amount to anything. For many it becomes a self-fulfilling

prophecy. As educators we must break this cycle by finding ways to intervene effectively.

In Dearborn, Michigan the schools' bilingual programs use Arab language and literature to make students from homes in which Arabic is spoken feel more culturally comfortable. Special programs, however, are not enough. It is important for mainstream teachers to consciously rid themselves of negative and ill-informed media images of Arabs (and other ethnic groups). It is also important for them to learn about their students' histories and cultures and to be prepared to teach about them in their classes.

The historic achievements of Arab culture are rarely discussed in American schools or are perhaps limited to 6th and 10th grade world history courses. In the culturally sensitive classroom, there is no good reason why a historical and cultural dimension cannot be provided for classes in mathematics, for example. Math teachers can explain the cultural origins or development of "Arabic numerals," the decimal system, geometry and al-jabr (algebra) in ancient Greece, India and the medieval Arab world. Science teachers can present the history of astronomy in ancient Babylon, Hellenic culture, and medieval Arab civilization as the precursor of modern science. Music classes can teach about Arabic music. Home economics classes can teach about Arab cuisine and its cultural meanings.

The Arabic language, a major world language, is spoken by some 200 million people. The Middle East is a region of vital political, economic and strategic importance for the United States. Yet the Arabic language is taught in only a handful of U.S. schools. Even in Dearborn, where 30% of the students are Arab, Arabic is offered only in the high schools of East Dearborn attended by the Arab students. It is not offered in West Dearborn schools with a higher proportion of non-Arabs.

In schools with minority populations, teachers should make a particular effort to abandon political and cultural biases and build on students' personal histories and existing knowledge bases, rather than ignoring them or minimizing their importance. Dearborn schools have made an attempt to build on the existing strengths of the students, including their Arabic language skills.

Only when educators regard Arab students as having a rich and living culture, separate and distinct from the popular media images, can we have a proud new Arab American generation. And only then can we begin to liberate other American young people from the negative and distorted stereotypes of Arabs.

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