Arab Students in American Schools:
What Schools Can Do to Provide a Fair Education

Hani Morgan

As a result of what happened on September 11, Arab American students have been treated with discrimination and have been harassed physically and verbally by other students, and even teachers have participated in unacceptable behavior toward these students by ridiculing their Arabic names or ignoring harassment by other students directed at them (Wingfield, 2006). Even before that fall tragedy, Arab Americans were victimized in America like many other immigrant groups. This poor treatment not only occurred in schools but also in the wider society. In schools, however, it has in part been the result of a curriculum that does not represent Arabs authentically. Researchers often point to older school textbooks that commonly stereotype Arabs as desert nomads by including photos and descriptions of Bedouins who wander in the desert (Barlow, 1994; Griswold, 1975; Morgan, 2008). Bedouin nomads in the Arab world account for less than two percent of the population (Banks, 2009). School textbooks are not the only form of misrepresentation involving people from the Arab world. Students in American schools also form views and develop values from the clichéd depiction of Arabs that they see in the movies and on television, as researchers such as Banks (2009) and Wingfield (2002) have documented.

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By documenting the ways that people from the Arab world are often misrepresented in school materials and the popular media and by offering suggestions and guidelines for teachers, educators can lead students to more accurate perceptions of Arab Americans. Understanding Arab Americans and the Middle East truthfully will not only help to create more positive experiences for Arab American students and to reduce discriminatory acts against them, it will also aid non-Arab students in developing a more authentic view of this very important region of the world and its people.

Misconceptions About the Arabs and the Middle East

The first wave of Arab immigration to America occurred in the late 1800s and consisted of predominantly Orthodox Christians and Catholics from Lebanon and Syria (Wingield, 2006). New surges of immigration from the Arab world occurred in the past fifty years from countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq (Suleiman, 1999). Arabs in America in the twenty-first century tend to be concentrated in five states: California, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York (Al-Hazza and Lucking, 2005).

Al-Hazza and Lucking (2007) explain that many biases and misconceptions exist in America about Arabs, and many Americans mistakenly believe that they are poor and uneducated. The recent immigrants from the Arab world tend to be more educated than those who first came to America (Suleiman, 1999). Al-Hazza and Lucking (2007) cite statistics on college graduates to point out that when compared to all Americans, Arab Americans hold more college degrees and have a higher median annual income. Movie and television portrayals of Arabs promote misconceptions about them. Even children's books can depict Arabs stereotypically.

The Middle East consists of the countries in southwestern Asia, as well as Egypt (David and Ayoubi, 2005). Some countries in the Middle East, such as Iran and Turkey, are non-Arab countries, yet many Americans believe otherwise. The Arab world consists of twenty-two nations that belong to the League of Arab States and claim Arab identity. These countries include the western part of North Africa as well as Somalia and the Sudan (David and Ayoubi, 2005). Banks (2009) defines an Arab person as one "whose mother tongue is Arabic or who descends from such a person" (p. 446). Each region in the Arab world has its own customs, traditions, music, and food.

Some common student misconceptions about Arabs concern their religion. Not all Arabs are Muslim; although 95 percent profess the Muslim faith, there are communities of Arab Jews and millions of Arab Christians (Banks, 2009). David and Ayoubi (2005) report that there are thousands of Jewish Arabs and approximately twelve million Christian Arabs. Furthermore many people are likely to equate Muslims with Arabs, but many Muslims are not Arabs. In fact, most of the Muslims in the world are not Arabs. Approximately 80 percent of the world's Muslims are not Arabs, and the country that has the largest Muslim population is Indonesia (David and Ayoubi, 2005; Al-Hazza and Bucher 2008).

Bennett (2007) explains that Arab Americans are likely to be viewed as a single group when in fact they come from different countries and have varied views and interests. Although there is diversity among Arabs, they are often united with a common perspective as a result of cultural and linguistic similarities (Bennett, 2007). Arab American cultural values offer generous hospitality towards guests, modesty, and respect for family (Banks, 2009). They are known for valuing the needs of the family over the individual.

them to reflect on the literature they read in elementary school, they remembered many favorite European American, Hispanic American, and African American children's stories but no stories that reflected their own Middle Eastern culture. (p. 210)

When these Arab American children were asked how they felt about not reading books about their cultural background, some responded that this gap led non-Arab children to not know who Ar-
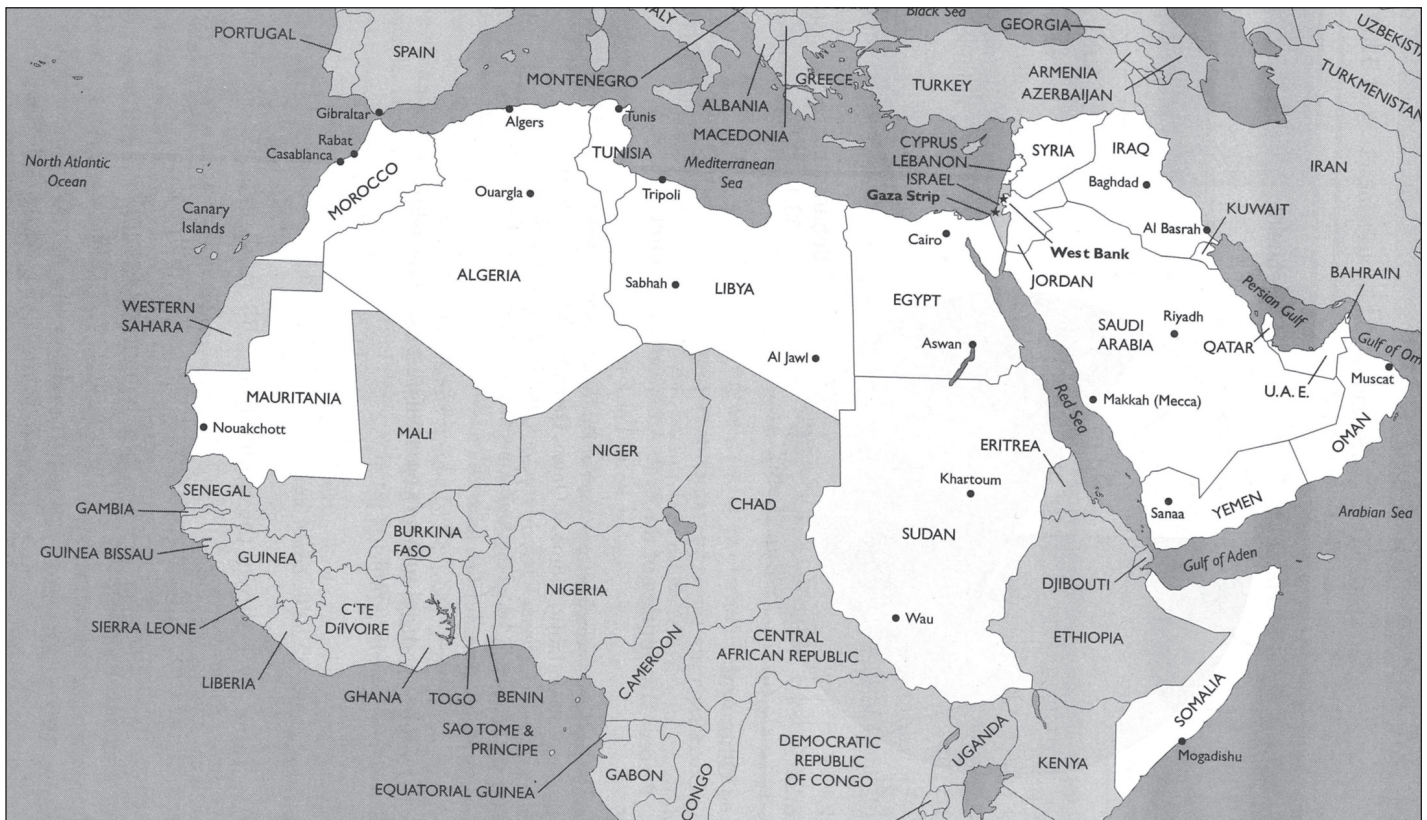
The Arab World. Reprinted from Arab American Encyclopedia.[1]

Arabs in the School Curriculum

Bias against Arabs in school resources begins early when children are in elementary school. Many researchers specializing in children's literature such as Tunnel and Jacobs (2008) and Russell (2009) discuss that children's books have historically left out the experiences of many ethnic minority groups or depicted these populations in negative ways. Although children's books today are much improved over those written before the 1970s, stereotypical books sometimes continue to be published. Russell (2009) points out the importance of culturally authentic children's literature that includes and portrays minority groups well - because these books provide minority students with positive role models that lead them to develop cultural pride.

Research on authentic children's books focusing on Arabs indicates that few of these books are in circulation in comparison to other ethnic minority groups. For example, Al-Hazza and Bucher (2008) write:

Recently, we interviewed a group of Arab American teenagers who were born in the Middle East but attended elementary school in the United States. When we asked

abs were until September 11, and then after that horrific date, the children said lack of knowledge of Arabs led non-Arab students to think that all Arabs are terrorists. This example is consistent with research on accurate children's books because many researchers such as Russell (2009), for example, argue that realistic children's books aid mainstream students by reducing misunderstandings they have toward minority groups. Al-Hazza and Bucher (2008) discuss that a scarcity of accurate children's books on Arabs will make it more difficult for Arab students to build a sense of cultural identity and self-esteem and mention that this void can be harmful because self-esteem and cultural identity help students perform to their academic potential and take on more responsibilities.

In addition, Norton (2009) refers to research indicating that many children's books are likely to portray Arabs stereotypically. Norton discusses Iskander's (1997) research that found stereotypes and inaccurate information about Arabs in picture books, including names that do not reflect knowledge of Arabic, behavior portraying characters as cruel, and characters that appear similar to one another. Norton also discusses Kissen's (1991) study on children's literature portraying Arabs and notes that the 1991 study is also critical of the

way children's literature depicts Arabs and describes how this research found that some Arab groups were shown as lazy or violent.

Bias against Arab students in the school curriculum can persist when they enter middle school and high school. For example, although David and Ayoubi (2005) found that school materials used recently for students at these levels are improved and not likely to contain "outright biased misinformation," they also found that some material covering too many topics at once about Arabs, Arab Americans, and Islam is inaccurate. David and Ayoubi use a few terms to describe the erroneous information including "conflation" and "essentializing." Conflation occurs when terms that are considered distinct by Arab scholars are used interchangeably by textbook authors. "The most common example has been the conflation of the region known as the Middle East with the Arab world, or as the home of the Arab people" (David and Ayoubi, 2005, p. 14). Essentializing occurs when Arabs are perceived as one group without confirming the diversity within the group. Although today's school curriculum is much improved in the way it represents Arabs over previous years, Wingfield (2006) writes that it needs to be transformed to be "fully inclusive" of Arab Americans.

Textbook authors may at times have plausible reasons for offering an imbalanced perspective; they have limited book space and often cannot include important topics about a group (Sadker and Sadker, 2001). Another motive explaining why only one point of view may be offered has to do with the fear authors may have toward expressing a controversial perspective or offending parents, teachers, and school board members (Sadker and Sadker, 2001).

Arabs in Movies, Cinema, and Popular Culture

Wingfield (2002) argues that the most harmful stereotypes from popular culture are those that portray Arabs as terrorists, and he refers to Shaheen's (2001) study which found more than 900 Hollywood films, including *Raiders of the Lost Ark, Back to the Future,* and *Patriot Games,* to be offensive to Arab Americans. In addition, Wingfield (2002) found that very few films portray Arabs positively and that even leading television shows contribute to harmful stereotypes.

Educators need to be concerned about the negative image of Arabs shown in the media. Banks (2009) writes that stories depicting minority groups as evil that are seen or heard during the early childhood years are dangerous. The popular media has a great deal of impact on children and has often portrayed many ethnic and racial minority groups as evildoers (Gollnick and Chinn, 2009). Previously American Indians, Germans, Japanese, and Russians were most likely to be portrayed negatively, but today, the Arab is most at risk for inaccurate and negative portrayal. If schools or adults do little or nothing to counteract the prejudicial attitudes that the media often expresses, children will likely grow up having detrimental attitudes towards the groups that are portrayed as villains (Gollnick and Chinn, 2009).

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Unfortunately even films made for children sometimes depict Arabs offensively. Perhaps the best example is *Aladdin*. Wingfield (2002) reports that although this charming Disney film is popular and even includes Arab heroes, when analyzed carefully, it seems to have offensive elements for Arab viewers. The hero and heroine in the film, Aladdin and Jasmine, have light skin, Anglo features, and an Anglo accent, but the villains have darker skin and Arabic accents. A song at the beginning of the film was extremely disturbing to Arab Americans because it suggested that Arabs live in a barbaric place. Arab Americans objected to Disney, and as a result, a change was made to some of the lines in the lyrics of the song. Although it represented an improvement, the lyrics still contain parts that are stereotypical and offensive. Another Disney film that has been criticized for portraying Arab characters negatively is *The Father of the Bride II* (Banks, 2009). Arabs are also frequently depicted as villains in television cartoons that are shown on Saturday mornings as well as in comic books (Wingfield, 2002), advertising, and works of fiction (Banks, 2009). In addition, Banks (2009) reports that even news reporting has reinforced stereotypes of Arabs.

Strategies for Teaching About Arabs

Because many possibilities exist outside of the educational setting that are likely to lead to misunderstandings about Arabs, it is crucial for schools to proactively counteract the negative image of Arabs. Teachers and school districts must be aware that some school material is stereotypical and avoid that material or use it in a way for students to recognize its lack of authenticity.

Elementary school teachers can take advantage of authentic children's books and use these resources in language arts, reading, or social studies classes. Although fewer accurate children's books are available on Arabs than those representing other groups, these resources are extremely valuable. Children will likely prefer a children's book over the average school textbook because they often have colorful illustrations and are more exciting to read. These books can be used during read-alouds or for silent reading. Teachers can also assign group projects or do activities based on a children's book.

Finding and Selecting Children's Books on Arabs

For more titles of authentic children's books reflecting Arabs and Arab Americans, educators can also visit *Celebrating Cultural Diversity Through Children's Literature (http://www.multiculturalchildrenslit. com).* This Web site offers links to children's books on many cultural groups and includes one for the Middle East. Although the site lists other excellent children's books on Arabs, educators need to select these titles on Arabs and other minority cultures very carefully. An excellent guide to help educators choose culturally authentic children's books is *10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism,* which is recommended by the California State Department of Education (1998). Adapted from original literature published by the Council on Interracial Books for Children, this guide is available

at *http://www.sandi.net/depts/instructional_materials/10ways.pdf.*

Educators can also look at book reviews to help them select realistic children's books, and these basic guidelines to judge authenticity in children's books on Arabs:

• Authors who write about their own group are more likely to publish an authentic book. If they are "outsiders," they need to have extensive knowledge of the group portrayed.

• The book should present accurate facts about Arabs.

• Arab characters should not have to rely on people from the majority culture in order to be successful.

• The characters should reflect the full complexity of men's and women's roles.

• The social issues of Arabs need to be described authentically and honestly.

• The illustrations should portray accurate cultural settings and lifestyles.

• Illustrations should show physical differences between Arabs. Characters should not appear identical to each other.

• Derogatory words such as "savage" or "backward" to describe Arab characters indicate bias. Books with such stereotypical elements should not be used.

• Children's books published before the 1970s are much less likely to reflect the perspectives of minority groups such as Arabs.

• Writing used to express the Arabic language should not be any writing made to look exotic. It should be the actual writing Arabs use.

One of the leading organizations fighting discrimination against Arabs is the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC). It was formed in 1980 by James Abourezk, the first Arab American senator, to fight racism and stereotypes against Arabs in the media and the educational system (Banks, 2009). This organization has a Web site that includes articles and lesson plans for teachers to provide ways to reduce discrimination against Arabs in schools and to provide accurate information about their culture. This excellent resource for teachers is available at *http://www.adc.org.*

Another strategy teachers can use to counteract the damaging negativity in the media and biased school resources is to assign students activities based on investigating Arab contributions in America and the world. Teachers can explain that at one point in history, while Europe was in the Dark Ages, the areas in the Arab world had the most advanced culture. During the years between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, many Arabs made contributions in mathematics, medicine, architecture, astronomy, and geography. An Arab

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Authentic Books for Use in the Classroom

Al-Hazza and Bucher (2008) suggest the use of these books for teaching about Arab people.

Fiction

Ages 4-8
Heide, F. P., and Gilliand, J. H. (1990). *The Day of Ahmed's Secret*. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard.
Shefelman, J. (1992). *A Peddler's Dream*. Austin, TX: Houghton Mifflin.

Ages 9-12
Stolz, J. (2004). *The Shadows of Ghadames*. New York: Delacorte.

Nonfiction

Ages 4-8
Stamaty, M.A. (2004). *Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq*. New York: Knopf.
Wolf, B. (2003). *Coming to America: A Muslim Family's Story*. New York: Lee and Low.

Ages 9-12
Winter, J. (2005). *Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

For the entire list see Al-Hazza and Bucher's article.

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from Syria, Ibn al-Nafis, is credited with first describing the fundamental principles of pulmonary circulation. Areas in the Arab world today were also much more advanced than many areas of Europe in ancient times, and these places were where the first great civilizations of the world originated. Examples of great ancient civilizations which are today located in the Arab world include Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt.

Arabs have also made many significant contributions in various areas of American life. For example, Ralph Nader accomplished a great deal in the area of consumer advocacy (Banks, 2009). Other important accomplishments by Arab Americans noted by Banks include those of Dr. Michael DeBakey, a pioneer in the heart bypass operation, and George Mitchell, a peace negotiator and Senate majority leader. In addition to talking about these Arab Americans, teachers can organize lesson plans whose goal is to identify modern famous personalities of Arab descent. Students often do not realize that many famous people, including Casey Kasem, Gloria Estefan, and Doug Flutie, are of Arab descent and have contributed greatly to American society.

For students at the high school level, teachers can create lesson plans that focus on racial and ethnic stereotyping and include the Arabs as a group to be investigated. This type of lesson would not only help mainstream students understand and interact better with those coming from a Middle Eastern background, it would also lead to better cross-cultural relations with students from many other groups.

Educators have traditionally ignored Muslim holidays during Christian and Jewish religious celebrations. Very often they have activities during Christmas and Hanukkah but offer nothing to which Muslim students can relate. Schools should consider integrating Ramadan and the Orthodox Christian holidays, which many people from the Middle East celebrate, into the yearly calendar especially in areas where large numbers of Muslims and Orthodox Christians live. Teachers should speak out on such inequalities.

One of the most effective strategies for schools and teachers in fighting discrimination against people of Arab ancestry is to create relationships with members of the Arab American communities. Arab American parents can be invited to offer presentations on Middle Eastern history, food, music, and language. This inclusion will help lead students to understand that Arabs are more similar to other groups and not like the negative characters portrayed in the popular media. Parents can also offer their insights about curricular materials that may be offensive or inaccurate.

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