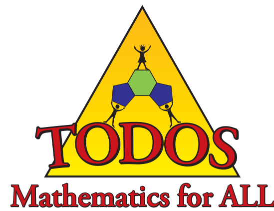

Antiracist Care in a Linguistically Diverse Mathematics Classroom: A Case Study

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Abstract

In a case study of one high school mathematics teacher in a Midwestern public high school, we present findings on the ways in which she draws on her cultural wealth as a Middle Eastern woman to make her teaching both effective and caring across multiple racial-ethnic groups. While many of her students share her ethnic background, her classroom is linguistically and culturally diverse. Her effectiveness is explained not by role model effects alone, but by three specific features of her practice: reflection, responsivity, and a quality we have termed strategic caring.

Discussion And Reflection Enhancement

1. How would you describe a caring secondary mathematics teacher? Think of five action words that exemplify what a math teacher does to care for their students.

2. What are some ways in which secondary math teachers can be anti-racist in their practice, especially in schools where many students face poverty and are learning English as adolescents?

3. In racially and linguistically diverse schools, how are so-called "achievement gaps" in mathematics related or unrelated to the work of teaching?

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Antiracist Care in a Linguistically Diverse Mathematics Classroom: A Case Study

Melody Wilson and Nafissah Alasry

Introduction

Antiracism in Mathematics Education

A major goal of antiracist mathematics education is to eradicate the role mathematics has played in denying educational access to children of color (TODOS, 2020). This can be addressed in a variety of ways, such as opening up universal access to advanced mathematics classes (Berry, 2018; Venzant Chambers, 2009) and attending to the mathematics identities of learners whose racial-ethnic groups have been marginalized in the U.S. educational system (Martin, 2000; Nasir et al., 2008). We characterize Middle Eastern immigrant students as minoritized students of color because of the ways in which they are being affected by xenophobia in schools (DeNicolo et al., 2017) as well as the danger faced by immigrant youth of being low-tracked and academically sidelined (Valenzuela, 1999). As a Muslim woman living in the U.S., Nafissah (this paper's co-author) has only to glance at her Instagram feed to see current news stories such as "'It was hurtful': Prayer space inside West End Islamic Center vandalized" (Montilla, 2022) and "Scarborough's Muslim community unsettled as police search for motive in drive-by shooting injuring five men" (Macdonell et al., 2022).

Many studies on minoritized youth have pointed to the influence of student-teacher racial/ethnic matching in students' educational outcomes (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Gershenson et al., 2018). Moving beyond a simple role model effect, scholars point to the critical consciousness that is often part of the worldview of teachers of color before they ever enter a teacher preparation program (Kohli et al., 2019). Others have shown that teachers of color tend to have higher expectations for students of color than white teachers do (Gershenson et al., 2016). In other words, when seeking to learn antiracist dispositions and practices, educators and researchers have good reason to study the practices of excellent teachers who match their students' racial-ethnic identities. Here, we offer a case study that illustrates how antiracist teaching is practiced in one culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. Our research questions are: (1) How does a Middle Eastern mathematics teacher draw on her own cultural and experiential wealth to practice antiracist teaching in the context of a linguistically diverse high school? (2) Using a portrait of this teacher, what does culturally connected care look like (Howard, 2002; McKinney de Royston et al., 2017) in a mathematics classroom?

Notes from Melody

When I first encounter Nafissah, her students have just left her classroom; she is alone for the ever-so-brief lunchtime break. As soon I enter, she turns and wheels her teacher's chair over to an empty student table, inviting me to sit. Her hazel eyes are luminous, fixed on me as she gives me her full attention. She is wearing a hijab, a long Tommy Hilfiger tunic, and jeans. Today is pep rally day; she simultaneously embodies the modesty valued by her Middle Eastern heritage culture and the stylish flair of a young American woman celebrating with high schoolers.

Her energy is palpable; her speaking voice is deep and rapid. "My parents actually came here in the '60s, but I was born here. I always say I'm so blessed because of my background. It's the scariest coincidence that I happen to be, and my family happens to be, from [Yemen,] the country of the majority of our ELL students." Eight years ago, there were just ten Middle Eastern students in the graduating class of Mapleton[1] High School (MHS); today Middle Easterners make up half of the student body. "And it's not gonna stop, because this war is not stopping," Nafissah tells me. I exclaim on what a resource she must be for her school. "I am gold!" she laughs.

[1] "Mapleton" is a pseudonym

A generation ago, Middle Eastern families had built a large community in the neighboring town, an inner-ring suburb of a large Midwestern city. Nafissah grew up there, in a close-knit Yemeni-American enclave (for more context on this community, see Sarroub's 2005 ethnography). Now, refugees from Yemen are settling here in Mapleton, with new families arriving every month.

Notes from Nafissah

My oldest sister married right out of high school. My next-oldest sister was the first to take college classes—but not until she was 24 years old. In those days, if a woman from my community went to college, she was expected to become a teacher or a nurse. But by the time I graduated from high school in 2007, community norms had begun to change. Girls were going to school for different things: accounting, pharmacy—everything. I vividly remember telling my precalculus teacher that I was planning to be a math teacher. I was shocked by her reply: "You're too good to do that. That's such a shame that you'd waste your time doing that, when you know you can be an engineer." There were moments, in college, when I considered becoming an accountant; I knew I could make a lot more money. But ultimately, I stuck to teaching. And there was more to this decision than just cultural expectations.

My fifth-grade teacher influenced the course of my life with one simple act of kindness. Our class was going on a field trip, and I told him I couldn't go. My mother didn't see the point of paying $10 for a field trip; she was born and raised overseas, and $10 was a lot to her. My teacher said, "You're going to come, and I'm going to pay for it." That little $10 gesture was life changing for me—the fact that a complete stranger would care so much. I still think of it all the time.

Today, as a teacher, it brings me joy to know that I'm impacting my students. They have become doctors, lawyers, teachers—and they still stay in touch with me. When I hear from them, I think, "It's not just math I taught you; I taught you life skills." This is why, even if I won the lottery, I would still teach.

Literature Review

Nafissah refers to herself as a "teacher who cares." So, as a backdrop to this study, we first look to the literature on care theory in education. We then supplement this with literature specific to a Middle Eastern immigrant cultural context.

Nel Noddings (1984), who introduced care theory into the field of education, proposed that a person who cares for another desires that person's well-being and acts to promote that well-being. This idea been refined and expanded by scholars who study communities of color and immigrant communities, who recognize that the meaning of care is embedded in local and cultural contexts (Bajaj et al., 2017; Gay, 2018; Howard, 2001, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009; McKinney de Royston et al., 2017; Milner, 2020; Valenzuela, 1999). These scholars have pointed out that care takes on specific contours in communities that have been historically marginalized. Care in these communities is grounded in knowledge of out-of-school life (DeNicolo et al., 2017), and directed at community change (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2020). Shevalier and McKenzie (2012) connect teacher caring with social justice, emphasizing that "all they do as teachers—lesson planning, teaching, classroom management, so forth—is not just nuts-and-bolts of the profession but is truly a manifestation of the care and ethics" (p. 1102) which is the key to securing a just society.

We coin the term *strategic caring* to describe this energetic program of preparing students for future success—in a specific content area, in academics more broadly, and in life. This is the kind of caring described by scholars who have studied culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Howard, 2001; Milner, 2020). It is not just a warm emotion; it is focused toward making learning happen. This driving motivation is connected to issues of power and privilege, as elucidated by Delpit (1988): Caring teachers open up opportunities for their students by pushing them to be literate in the mainstream "culture of power" (p. 4) while also protecting and sustaining pride in the students' home cultures.

Reflection is also central to the ethic of care in teaching. For Shevalier & McKenzie (2012), reflection distinguishes those teachers who care *for* students from those who merely "care about" students. This kind of reflection constantly asks, "Is our response adequate? Could we have put what we said better? Has our act helped or hindered?" (p. 1093). While reflection may

overlap with (and is essential to) strategic caring, we note it separately because of its internal nature.

Given Nafissah's Middle Eastern cultural heritage, we draw additional theory from Franceshelli's (2016) study on Middle Eastern childrearing practices in the UK. In the families she studied, Franceschelli observed a mingling of seemingly opposite ways of caring. On one hand, parenting in these families was characterized by a strictness which was exercised with the children's future good in mind (much like the strategic caring described above). But this was combined with what Franceschelli terms *responsivity*. Responsivity is characterized by "reciprocal understanding, empathy, mutual support and communication" (p. 190) between parents and children. This relational dynamic is what transformed parental strictness, allowing it to be received by children as care. It should be noted that both Franceschelli's study and the current study focus on Muslim immigrant communities in largely non-Muslim countries, not Muslim families living in their countries of origin. The dynamics of living in a country where these families' way of life is accepted with ambivalence, at best, complicates childrearing practices; the "strictness" we observe may be read (at least in part) as a cultural survival mechanism, rather than being indigenous to Middle Eastern cultures themselves.

Methods

Data Collection

After meeting through a school ethnography project at MHS where teachers, staff, and students were observed and interviewed about the school's relationship with its Yemeni-American families (Bellino et al., 2020), Melody collected data from Nafissah over the course of two semesters in 2020. The data consisted of three class observations which were documented in detailed field notes, two formal interviews which were transcribed, and informal text messaging and email correspondence.

Coding and Data Analysis

Because of the time-intensive nature of Nafissah's job as a classroom teacher, Melody undertook the task of coding the data, coached by two university professors. Using NVivo software and constant comparison, codes were applied to sections of text ranging from a few words to a paragraph. Following Charmaz (2006), all codes consisted of gerund phrases, each naming the action or process described in a section of text. Since Nafissah is the main participant in this study, all codes referred to her actions. The two interview transcripts (approximately 16,000 words) and Melody's field notes (approximately 8,500 words) yielded a total of 616 coding references, which were then organized (and re-organized, as coding progressed) into categories. Nearly every sub-category contained data from all five data sources.

The analysis process consisted of iteratively grouping the codes into face-value categories and then matching these categories to theoretical constructs in the existing literature. Categories were combined and recombined until their hierarchical structure was logically robust and well-connected to preexisting theory. Our data fell into three overarching categories of teacher action: responsivity, reflection, and strategic caring (as defined in the literature review section, above). No unit of data was assigned to more than one category—although, as we will show, these three types of teacher action are intertwined.

Author Collaboration

It was midway through the process of data analysis and writing that we decided to co-author this paper, moving away from a traditional researcher-participant model toward a collaborative model of research praxis. This move was inspired by Irvine's (2003) injunction to include teachers as co-researchers into their own practice, as well as the current researcher-practitioner partnerships of Vossoughi, Escudé, and colleagues (Vossoughi et al., 2021; Vossoughi & Escudé, 2016). Our own model for collaborative research is still developing. At first our collaboration resembled traditional member checking, but over the course of several revisions, Nafissah's ownership of the project has grown. For example, in the final version of the paper we have written more in Nafissah's voice and included contextual information based on her own reading of media accounts of anti-Islamic violence in the U.S. and Canada.

Results

The number of coding references for each category were: responsivity (95 references); reflection (168 references); strategic caring (353 references). In each code category, we found certain examples of teacher action that stemmed

from Nafissah's cultural knowledge. We also found other examples that needed no insider knowledge but represented her broadly humanizing approach to teaching.

Responsivity

Fifteen percent of the data segments were coded as responsivity. Approximately the same proportion of coding references in the interview data and the observation data were assigned to this category, meaning that Nafissah both *described* having this kind of relationship with her students and was also *observed* enacting it. One example of responsivity was her regular requests for students' written feedback in the form of essay questions:

> My fourth hour, their last [essay assignment] was up to a month ago: What did you want us to do more of? And they said a lot more partner work, a lot more group work. And so when I started implementing [that] they said, 'You really did listen to us!' (Interview, 03/04/2020)

Nafissah's knowledge of Middle Eastern culture enabled her to be uniquely responsive to other student needs. Not only did she offer after-school tutoring; she also understood what her Middle Eastern girls might need from her so that they would be allowed to stay for tutoring:

> I say, 'I need you to stay after.' 'No, I can't stay, my parents won't—' 'I know. Don't be embarrassed, I was there. Let me call. When I talk to them, they're going to feel a lot more comfortable.' (Interview, 03/04/2020)

Other teachers at MHS did not appear to understand the need for this kind of parental contact. Although Nafissah empathized with these teachers, she also noted that they were missing important cultural knowledge:

> It's almost like if I was a different teacher and I wasn't who I am, and you said, 'I can't stay after, my parents won't let me.' I'm like, 'What do you mean you can't stay after? You're literally staying for tutoring, I don't understand, you're lying.' That would be my reaction. (Interview, 03/04/2020)

Reflection

Twenty seven percent of the data segments were coded as reflection. Some of this reflection would be familiar to math teachers in any community. For example, during the pandemic when teaching virtually, Nafissah thought constantly about the best way to do formative assessment. Her typical in-person method was to circulate around the room, listen to students' conversations, and look at their mini white boards in preparation for the brief whole-class discussions that were peppered throughout the hour. Now, she had to choose between having students upload handwritten work (which would have to be graded) and assigning auto-graded online work through an application such as IXL (https://www.ixl.com/math). While she felt that handwritten work would give her better information about student understanding, she was becoming overwhelmed:

> I could just assign two [Math IXL] lessons every week. [The software] checks it for them, submits the grade, and I'd be done. But then there's this heavy conscience that I have that I'm like, 'No.' It's just not who I am as a person. So, if that online work is not going to match [my learning goals], I'm going to have to give them a [hand-written] worksheet that's going to match a lot better. But guess what that means? I'm going to have to go through the worksheet and grade it. (Interview, 10/19/2020)

This example shows how reflection becomes intertwined with strategic caring—the energetic determination to make learning happen which she exhibited here by choosing to assign handwritten work.

In other moments of reflection, Nafissah drew on her heritage as a daughter of Arabic-speaking immigrants. This was especially true with her "bridge" Geometry class, which was made up of students who had finished MHS's intensive English language program but had not yet scored a 4 on the WIDA English language exam (Wisconsin Center for Education Research, n.d.):

> Every sentence I speak comes with thought before it. My mind works double when I'm teaching [multilingual students] because when I say something, the minute I say a word that they don't know, I have to go back and say a different sentence to help them better understand it. … But it's only because *I've trained my mind over the years*. … I've trained my mind with my father to say things like, 'Oh Dad, this is what that means. Oh, detergent—Dad, it's the soap for the clothes.' (Interview, 03/04/2020, emphasis added)

This example shows how Nafissah reflects about being an English learner, both in the moment of teaching and outside of the classroom. She constantly trains her mind (outside of the classroom) to think about what she is saying (inside the classroom) from the perspective of someone who is learning English.

Strategic Caring

Perhaps the most startling result was the strong focus on strategic caring evident across our data set (57% of all coding references). Within the strategic caring category, our four largest sub-categories were: scaffolding mathematical learning (22%), equipping students for success (21%), energetic caring (10%), and parent-like caring (4%). One example of equipping students for success was a workaround that Nafissah implemented for calculator use during virtual learning:

> Like when they said, somebody had mentioned how hard it was to use a calculator [included in the software] on the test. So two weeks ago I implemented: 'They're for a dollar, I want you to get those basic calculators.' And how I can get students to do things is I keep track of everything. So that following Wednesday I said, "Okay so hold up your calculator"—[I'm] scanning—mark down who doesn't have it. … And then I'll send him a text message reminder, 'You know you're still going to have to try to go and get it. If you can't, tell me, I'll get one for you.' [Out of] 180 students, I think 178 of mine have calculators, because they have to put it on their screen every time. (Interview, 10/19/2020)

Note the combination of demand ("You know you're still going to have to try to go and get it") and support ("If you can't, tell me, I'll get one for you") that Nafissah used to make sure her students had working equipment to use.

In an example of strategic caring that drew on her heritage culture, she served her Middle Eastern girls in a particular way:

> And a lot of my students, my female students, will say, 'It makes me so happy to see you with your hijab, with your head scarf, and you're a teacher. And it gives me hope that—I'm from a culture that almost says, 'No, you're going to be okay as a housewife and you'll be fine.' … And they'll always say, 'You're a role model to me because you look just like me and you did something.' So I'll talk a lot about college and what I did and what I went through and how it benefited me. (Interview, 3/04/2020)

Note the nuanced way in which Nafissah expresses love for her heritage culture, while also pushing back against a static or essentialized view of the culture as it is sometimes expressed (see Paris & Alim, 2014). Nafissah is constantly navigating between differing cultural and generational norms, both for the sake of her students and in order to construct her own identity. She is American-born but raised in a Yemeni family and community; she is a living bridge between worlds.

Concluding Thoughts

From Nafissah

I draw on the strengths of my culture in the way that I teach. My culture has formed my approach to things: being considerate of each other's differences, building a family-like environment, emphasizing the importance of trust and respect. My culture is centered around a feeling of caring for others like family, and that's what I try to build on.

I have a strong reason for staying in the Mapleton district: to be a voice for our Middle Eastern students, as well as all of our other students of color. This is social justice work: building an environment in your classroom where students can say, "Hey, I didn't understand what you said, and I'm not embarrassed to say it out loud." Where kids are not going to make fun of each other because they pronounced a word wrong. I was where those students are, and I have found my voice. And now I am working to help them find theirs.

From Melody

In 2019-2020, Nafissah's "bridge" class took a pre/post-test in Geometry—a test given school-wide to all Geometry students. After seeing the scores, other teachers were mystified as to how Nafissah's students had done so well in such a vocabulary-intensive subject. I was not surprised at all, after attending her classes. I saw every student speaking and writing about mathematics. And over the course of a few years, enrollment in Precalculus at MHS has jumped from 60 to 80 students, 30 of whom are classified by the school as ELLs. In concrete, everyday ways, Nafissah is eradicating the role

mathematics has played in denying educational access to children of color. In doing so, she is challenging multiple stereotypes imposed from various directions: long-standing (and virtually universal) stereotypes about girls' ability in mathematics, nationwide stereotypes of multilingual students as "slow" or "behind" (see Gitlin et al., 2003; Venzant Chambers, 2009) and more current and specific stereotypes about Muslim immigrants as dangerous or anti-American (Bajaj et al., 2016).

For generations, scholars of color have urged mainstream educators and educational researchers to start listening to teachers of color (Brown, 2014; Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2020). As a white teacher and researcher, I can testify that there is no substitute for this. And I thank those teachers for their continued grace toward those who want to learn—the grace that Nafissah has extended to me in welcoming me into her classroom.

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Discussion And Reflection Enhancement DARE Post-Reading Questions

1. What surprised you about the ways in which this teacher focuses her energy and attention?
2. What positive aspects of her practice are facilitated by this teacher's identity as a Middle Eastern woman of color?
3. What can teachers of other racial-ethnic and gender identities learn from this teacher?
4. Name one way in which you incorporate or plan to incorporate reflection into your teaching practice.
5. Name one way in which you incorporate or plan to incorporate responsivity into your teaching practice.
6. Name one way in which you incorporate or plan to incorporate strategic caring into your teaching practice.