THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT's AEMS Podcast
Transcript for Episode 1: Thoughts in the Third Space
Interview Date: 10/12/18
Host: Amina Derbi   Guest: Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss

Amina: Welcome everyone, you are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast of AEMS-PC, the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Policy Center, an education policy think tank at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought.

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) is a center of excellence in educational research and Islamic thought whose main interest is on carrying out evidence-based research in advancing education in Muslim Societies and the dissemination of this research through publication and translation, teaching, policy recommendations, and strategic engagements. The Institute was established as a non-profit 501(c)(3) non-denominational organization in the United States of America in 1981. Our headquarters are in Herndon, Virginia, in the suburbs of Washington DC.

My name is Amina Derbi, I'm the Policy Research Executive Associate at AEMS-PC. We are just one piece of the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program at IIIT. In addition to the think tank, there is an AEMS Research Team, teacher training and talent development department called The Fairfax Institute, a Publications & Translation department, and a Strategic Engagements consulting unit. All of these teams collaborate with the objective of advancing education in Muslim societies so that it is a means for advancing holistic human development. The purpose of our podcast (Third Space Thoughts to Policy) is to hear from experts and stakeholders in the field of education policy reform including policy advisors, governmental officials, academics, teachers, and parents. If you're interested in joining the conversation so we can work towards progress together, please visit our website at iiit.org and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

We're very excited to have Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss on the show with us today who has appeared on Al-Jazeera and was interviewed by Rolling Stone, VICE magazine, and many others. In addition to being a Senior Researcher for the AEMS research team, Dr. Miller-Idriss is Professor of Education and Sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences and Director of the International Training and Education Program in the School of Education at American University. Her research has always focused on post-secondary education settings and the transition to adulthood, especially for vulnerable and at-risk youth.

Previously, in Germany, Miller-Idriss has spent over two decades studying vocational schools and their impact on working class national, global, and extremist identities. Together with a multi-disciplinary team housed at IIIT, she is currently launching research on Muslim youth and socio-emotional literacy in formal and non-formal education contexts in seventeen countries.

Salaam and hello, Dr. Miller-Idriss! Welcome!

Dr. Miller-Idriss: Assalamu alakikum, hi! How are you?

Amina: Good! How are you today?

Dr. Miller-Idriss: I'm great, thanks for having me.

Amina: Oh, well thank you so much for being on the show with us today, we appreciate it so much. A question we've received from others about AEMS is what we mean when we say we identify our research in the "Third Space". Can you elaborate a bit more on that?

Dr. Miller-Idriss: Sure, I'm happy to. I've been working in Global Educational issues for a couple of decades now and one of the things that's clear is that the vast majority of research and interventions that happen globally are in what we call the first and the second spaces where the first space is education reform aimed at creating better economic development in a given country and better economic outcomes for young people so basically education to get a better job, to improve your financial stability over time. And then there's a second set of reforms that are oriented at using education to develop better democratic practices in society, better citizenship practices, sort of education for better citizenship reform and citizenship engagement. And that's what we call the second space. And I think you know, World Bank initiatives that are oriented towards improving GDP, Gross Domestic Product for a country, or foundation-led initiatives or other initiatives to improve civic engagement, those would be the first and the second spaces. And those are of course critical and important and we're not suggesting that we ignore the fact that we need to get jobs and we need to be informed citizens, those are really important. But, when we focus on education only for these kinds of utilitarian outcomes, we argue that we have forgotten that education also has a transformative dimension and that it's not just about creating an accomplished life for a young person but also about helping them achieve a meaningful one. And so, what we call the third space, is this space which includes the first and second spaces of education reform but also reminds teachers and parents and young people that the purpose of education is broader than just any given outcome for your individual life, but that it's also about how to have a more meaningful experience overall.

Amina: That's wonderful, thank you so much for that.

Dr. Miller-Idriss: Sure.

Amina: So, why do you think that while we have a wealth of information and programs on education for employment and citizenship in Muslim societies, we don't have research on the socio-emotional and spiritual aspects of the individual in the "Third Space"?

Dr. Miller-Idriss: I think that it's not just a problem in Muslim societies, I think this is a problem globally, that we have been very focused on outcomes, on what we call inputs and outcomes in the educational sort of parlance, right? So what are we going to put into education systems in order to improve certain outcomes. How many kids graduate, how many kids go to college, what are their relative test scores, how are we going to measure this kind of quantitatively in terms of educational improvement? Literacy scores, quantitative literacy scores, and of course those are important, but focusing on those exclusively has led to let's say unmet potential, where young people and their communities have not been thriving. And then, even in

more so called thriving societies, let's say where the economy is stronger in the United States of Europe, you have astronomical rates of anxiety among young people.

Amina: Right, absolutely.

Dr. Miller-Idriss: (continues) High levels of depression, we have what people call an empathy gap, growing polarization, young people who spend more time alone than has previously been the case for other generations, fixed on their screens, interacting mostly through text, not knowing how to communicate. So, what we are trying to do in Muslim societies I actually think has tremendous relevance globally to young people, but we just haven't…I think it's a growing realization that we need to focus on these areas of socio-emotional learning, but we're playing catch-up. After all these years of pushing kids to achieve, achieve, we as adults are realizing, 'oh maybe we should have been, you know, a little more attentive to what some people think of as softer kinds of skills like focusing on how we get along with other people, [laughter from both], or how we communicate, developing empathy. So we're focusing on empathy, forgiveness, moral reasoning, community mindedness, sense of belonging, and self-efficacy. Those are the first six constructs we call them that we are measuring globally through quantitative survey, but that we also hope to develop curricular initiatives, teacher training initiatives, what would it look like to build a curriculum around forgiveness? What would it look like to build a curriculum that actually helped young people strengthen empathy for others? How do we help them grapple with moral dilemmas that they're going to encounter throughout their lives? And our argument is that you can do that and simultaneously teach academic skills but you don't have to teach those academic skills in a vacuum totally absent from values or from discussions of ethics or morality or what it means to be a good person. And I think that's what the third space is arguing, that the third space is a place where we can integrate those other [skills], yes you can get those job skills but you don't have to set your ethical reasoning off to the side while you learn your economically oriented skills. These things have to be integrated.

Amina: Absolutely, absolutely. I truly appreciate how you highlighted how intertwined this all is and also how it's not just important for Muslim societies but that this is a global issue that everyone should be paying attention to.

Dr. Miller-Idriss: Absolutely

Amina: So, Dr. Miller-Idriss, in your research, you've come across how values impact the choices that youth make. What do you think we can learn from that?

Dr. Miller-Idriss: So until I came and joined this team as an advisor and Senior Researcher, I've spent most of my career studying young people who develop exclusionary frames for thinking about their lives like through right-wing extremism, through nationalist expressions, mostly in Germany, and so I'd written two book about that and mostly studying why and how young people develop exclusionary ways of thinking about others that are racist or Islamophobic, or anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, and what schools can do about it. So I've been thinking about these issues for a long time and one of the things I came to realize through years of interviews with young people who enter those worlds is that they are not entering them exclusively for ideology,

right? It's not just because they believe that we should live in an immigrant-free world and society, it's because they are attracted to these groups because they offer them a way to enact meaning, a place to have a sense of belonging, calls for brotherhood, a sense of a greater purpose. A lot of what they are doing involves kind of their own "moral world" and how their trying to enact ideals around what's fair, what is accountable. How do you have accountability, right? So these are also very moral kinds of claims, but then those moral claims or those values-based claims get enacted through exclusionary frame that promotes their own identity or their own sense of belonging over others. And so one of the things I realized is that, when we approach, let's say combatting far-right engagement or combatting racist engagement amongst young people, only with logical and rational and ideological arguments, like I've seen teachers say things like, 'well, what we really need to do is provide them with accurate information about immigrants so they understand that migrants are not trying to fleece the social welfare system,' ok, that's important, right, but that's not in my experience the best primary driver to these groups. That radicalization may happen later, they might get ideologically radicalized, but they were attracted to them as a place to belong, as a place to find meaning, a place to see themselves as part of something bigger than themselves.

And so, one of the arguments I've made in that research is that we have to understand extremist thinking as emotionally-rooted and not only ideologically-rooted. And I think that's true for foreign fighters who get recruited to go fight overseas as well out of Europe that we see they are attracted to the appeal to be part of something and so we as educators, I think, have to be thinking about strategies to offer that place of meaning in schools or in communities. And so that's where I think these, my, two worlds intersect. That's one of the reasons I wanted the construct "sense of belonging" to be a part of the research and I'm excited to see what the data produces out of these countries that we are surveying now, because we are getting data from 15-17 year olds around the world in terms of how they feel about a sense of belonging and whether that effects their sense of empathy, and their sense of moral reasoning, and their ability to forgive others who they feel have wronged them. How does that relate? And how does self-efficacy relate? Do they feel that if they want to do something they can enact that choice? Do they feel they have power over their lives in some way, that they have choices? Those things I think will really help us understand how these kinds of spaces where young people need more meaning in their lives can be facilitated through schools or not, or what kinds of curricular and pedagogical activities might help. So that's where, you know, on one hand it may look like 'oh, I've been doing all this work on the far-right and now I'm going to look at empathy in Muslim youth', I see them as all very, very intersected, and very much intertwined.

Amina: Absolutely, absolutely. Well thank you again so much. We're so lucky those two worlds were able to intersect and to have you here today.

Dr. Miller-Idriss: Thank you, Amina. I feel lucky to be here, I mean it's been a very meaningful year for me to be involved with this project, and with this team, in part also because I feel like one of the things that I'd like to see this work contribute to is a way of shaping how social-emotional learning and this increasing emphasis on social-emotional learning coming out of UNESCO coming out of OECD, coming out of these kinds of main-stream institutions in the U.S. and Europe, how those kinds of constructs and ideas can also be shaped from within the Muslim community and I think that so often, reform ideas have been kind of unidirectional for

Muslim communities when we have these external approaches coming in, and one of the things that's really powerful about this is that we have very locally-rooted, locally-grounded constructs that we developed here in our team in Herndon, but that we also sort of had vetted by Islamic studies scholars around the world, by theologians, by people who work in Islamic schools, by people who are Muslim who work in local Muslim communities to say does this sense of thinking about sense of belonging work. How is it talked about in the Quran? How about forgiveness, how does that come in with empathy so that we can start to think about an integrated way that these constructs are not just external globally recognized and valid, and tested, and all of the things you need it to be for a survey, but also makes sense in a local community. So, I'll give you one example which is we originally had another construct which was self-worth.

So we had this idea that let's see if kids think not only that they can do something if they want to enact it but they also are themselves, have a sense of value for themselves. But when we looked at constructs for that idea, they were all very oriented towards individualistic...the ones we could find, 'I believe I can achieve something, when I get a good grade, I feel good about myself, or when I achieve something I feel good about myself,' they weren't measures that reflected what we felt maybe how someone growing up in a very collectivistic community might feel their self-worth rooted in other issues, about their family or about their local community, or being part of something that wasn't only about themselves as an individual, and so we dropped it eventually.

We thought, we're just going to have to come back to this because we need to be able to find a way that these measures are valid and reliable and tested in all the ways social science says they have to be and make the data meaningful when we report it out, but that also reflect how local communities will be thinking about and will capture the way that people think about these ideas, and so we could do that for forgiveness and for empathy, and for sense of belonging, and for all these other constructs, but for self-worth, we couldn't find those measures, and I think one of the things that this team can really contribute, coming out of IIIT and the AEMS team is a way of challenging some of those constructs that are brought into predominantly Muslim societies to measure things that don't reflect how local communities think, or engage, or live their lives. And so one of the things that has been really valuable for me being a part of this is thinking about going back and forth between different worlds as we engage with folks at UNESCO on this or in OECD or present in main-stream conferences, how can you challenge social scientists to think about constructs in ways that better reflect the realities of young people's lives, wherever they are in the world, and that should be something that all social scientists take seriously and that can come from within this Muslim community of researchers.

Amina: Right, I'm really glad that you highlighted that because that is a debate in international development, that sometimes some issues with programs in the past is that they sort of came from above and they didn't really investigate the local customs and mindset of people there so those institutions didn't have much "stickiness".

Dr. Miller-Idriss: Exactly!

Amina: And they weren't integrated or truly adopted by the societies because they didn't really have a valid basis according to that society.

Dr. Miller-Idriss: Exactly, and I think that it goes both ways. So on the one hand, it's finding ways to better integrate educational reform initiatives into local communities globally by making those constructs more meaningful and more rooted, and on the other hand, it's bottom-up challenging of those constructs, and of those educational reform approaches, so I think my hope is that it sort of a cycle. That it's not just that we're going to develop education reform initiatives that are for local communities world-wide, but that what we learn from that and this process will help all young people world-wide. A couple of times that I have presented on this on the last few months there's been someone in the audience from an American college, in one case a President, in one case a college Chaplain who said you know we need this for all of our students on our campus. Can you come talk to us? They need to be thinking about empathy, forgiveness, and moral reasoning, and sense of belonging and our students are experiencing astronomically high levels of anxiety and mental health problems, depression and isolation, and we need to think about how all educational institutions can better create these meaningful lives and not just push kids towards accomplished life without knowing why.

Amina: Absolutely, yes, yes.

Dr. Miller-Idriss: What are all those degrees for?

Amina: What's the point of it all?

Dr. Miller-Idriss: Exactly, what's the point of it all? And why are you doing this if in the end you feel isolated and depressed and anxious because you're just achieving, achieving, achieving, and then you reached this pinnacle of what? This thing you've been striving for all your life and you don't know what for, right?

Amina: What does it all mean?

Dr. Miller-Idriss: Exactly, what does it all mean? Our goal here is to focus on how can we both create pathways for secure employment and engage democratic citizenship and communications skills and all those things that are needed, but also remind young people that there's a greater purpose and there's a more holistic purpose to education, and if we can do that for Muslim societies, and take what we've learned and bring that back to all young people's lives, I think that's a kind of dialogue that will be powerful across the board and so it's both ways. It's making sure things are more locally-rooted and more locally grounded but then it's also saying, 'hey, we've learned something from these young people's lives and research for everybody', and I think anyone working with young people today understands immediately what I mean when I say that young people are in crisis.

Amina: Yeah, this is true. Many people are talking about this right now.

Dr. Miller-Idriss: As a college professor, I mean, I've been teaching for almost twenty years, I've never had this kind of, this amount of student anxiety, of mental health struggles, of students missing class, of having to take time off, of having to take leaves of absences, right? They're just struggling, and on top of that, we have a whole nation here that's struggling with polarization, with anger, with the way that things devolve in social media spaces. And if you're not interacting

human to human, as young people are increasingly, that gets much worse. So we all need strategies to find ways to have them whether that's mindfulness or teaching empathy or anti-bullying campaigns, or whatever, I mean I think there's lots of campaigns going on and a lot of ways where people recognize the needs for that, but we don't have a sense of how to do it systematically and how to do it within schools for all young people. So, that's the hope here that this isn't just a project for Muslim societies, but this is for all young people.

Amina: You're absolutely correct. And thank you again so much.

Dr. Miller-Idriss: Thank you for having me.

Amina: That was really insightful, Dr. Miller-Idriss. Thank you again for your time today. To stay up to date on everything happening with the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, please follow IIIT on Twitter (@iiitfriends) and Instagram (@iiit_insta). You won't want to miss our next episode featuring Dr. Ilham Nasser, another exemplary member of our research team. More details coming soon.

If you have any questions for us, or would like to join the conversation, please reach out to me. My email is amina@iiit.org.

Thank you all so much for listening, and we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!