

THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast

Transcript for Episode 10: Making Change Through the System Accessible

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Host: Amina Derbi Guest: Abrar Omeish

Amina: Welcome everyone, this is Amina, and you are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast for the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought. 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. You can listen to this podcast on Stitcher, Google Play, Spotify, iTunes or Apple podcasts, and Messy.FM, as well as Podcast Mirror. The observations and conclusions featured in this podcast represent the speakers’ own personal views and experiences, not the organization’s.

Just a reminder to please consider applying for our annual Summer Student Program taking place this summer, the deadline to apply is March 15, and to also consider applying for the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Master’s Degree program in partnership with American University. For more information, please visit iiit.org.

And now we can dive into our next interview with a very special guest.

Abrar Omeish is a Yale graduate who is passionate about public service and community work and has served as a student, advocate, student government official, teacher, and community member. She currently works at a human rights and immigration law firm and substitute teaches in the school system. Omeish was also raised in Girl Scouting and earned the Gold Award. Just a summer ago, she ran for Fairfax County School Board, and she is running again this year. Omeish currently co-chairs the Human Resources Advisory Committee and has been incredibly passionate about equity and, driven by this interest served as the President of the Superintendent’s Advisory Council where the team carefully studied skills for "21st Century Learning" and proposed implementation that contributed to the current FCPS "Portrait of a Graduate." She also served on three School Board committees: advanced academics, where she consistently advocated for additional resources for students who are disadvantaged and whose chances at success are undermined; one on student discipline following the tragic suicide of a fellow classmate and friend, led by his father and sparking necessary conversations; and the Superintendent selection committee, which contributes to the primary official role of the School Board. Omeish was also an intern for FCPS Superintendent’s Office and, separately, led an anti-bullying campaign that amended FCPS policies. She also co-founded a completely youth-led, youth-run non-profit organization which has been running for ten years that serves lower-income youth in twenty centers across the county. For more information about that, you can visit www.giveyouth.org. Since then, she’s worked in several levels of government and policy-making and has been a part of community projects that have been generating real solutions tested on the ground.

[Transition]

Hello, and assalamu alaikum Abrar, how are you doing today?

Abrar: Alhamdulillah, thanks for having me!

Amina: We're so excited to have you on our podcast. So, I'm going to dive into our questions for you. How did you become interested in education policy and what do you hope to accomplish if you are elected?

Abrar: Again, thanks for having me. I'm excited to discuss education with you today. You know, when you think of education policy and education more generally, it's really that window of opportunity for folks to access any level of profession or power, in a way that situates them to have a fair chance at life, ultimately. So, I like to refer to it as the great equalizer. You know we live in a very diverse community. Fairfax County, I mean we speak more than 200 languages, it's really incredible.

Amina: Definitely, it is. Yeah.

Abrar: Yeah, and you think of communities that live in poverty, minorities, immigrants, the whole idea of the "American Dream" that not everyone can attain, but you know, any trace of it that remains is only attainable through education. I mean, it's really that opportunity for folks, no matter what background to ascend, and of course there are many structural issues with how people can get there, but on a baseline if we offer folks education and ensure that they are able to attain it, access it on an equal playing field, then we're starting at least to offer a fair chance for everyone to seek opportunity in everything in the future. So that's where I see the importance of education.

When it comes to education policy, of course, that relates to a number of things. You know, we're talking---when we think of equity we're talking about education, I mentioned access, that's one level, and the other is what you're offering kids in general. So, are you preparing them for the twenty first century? How are we thinking about education in ways that will situate folks to be...not only to learn their math and science, and know how to write and read, but to do so well and to be prepared to be competitive in today's world. So my passion for education actually comes from my passion for equity and fairness and justice that I see education being a means towards.

Amina: Yeah, I'm really glad that you brought up that relationship between education and how it can be a vehicle towards equity and justice, and how those two are closely related. So, why are you running for FCPS School Board and how did your experience running in 2017 help you in this year's campaign?

Abrar: So, you know, thinking about equity was my main motivation. I grew up here, I've lived here my whole life. My dad actually grew up here too, he went to Fairfax County Public Schools, speaking no word of English, and they were able to help him reach the level that he's at today.

Amina: Masha'Allah.

Abrar: Yeah, he chose to raise us here, specifically because of the education system that we have. What inspired me was...so starting early on my parents were of course from a faith background, raising us to always think of what others don't have that we have, maybe, or to be grateful for our blessings. To realize that we have no choice but to live a life of service. So that always oriented my towards the possibility of public life, and public service and politics and all of that, as a means

towards attaining that, or achieving that. When I think of this race particularly, you know I remember when I was younger, my family moved us from Falls Church, you know the Dar-al-Hijrah area, to Fairfax, where we are now in Fairfax. And the reasoning was, well the schools there aren't great. We would have gone to Glen Forest Elementary, and those schools rank lower than other schools in our community, and that was immediately a red flag, remembering "ok, I'm going to leave all my friends behind, why is it that they can't attain that opportunity?"

Amina: Right.

Abrar: And it's simply because their parents can't afford housing in a different area of the county. But I was lucky, whatever, my dad with means I had no control over...so I just happened to be born into a family that had access to that, and a father who was able to offer the resources where we could move to go to a better school, and seeing I had no control, or nothing in my merit or anything qualified me to move away or to go to a better school. It was simply a matter of circumstance and something I was born into. So that immediately became a red flag for me, I became more involved in like, local, you know, boards and with local organizations just to learn more about what's going on. When I was in school I was heavily involved in government, actually. There's something called the Superintendent's Advisory Council that kids are elected to from all different high schools. I ended up becoming the President of that--

Amina: That's amazing, masha'Allah!

Abrar: Yeah, so I know! It's funny, alhamdulillah...I mean I guess as a young woman wearing hijab in high school, I never imagined being able to do that because I remember always viewing high schoolers...I mean elections are popularity contests [in that setting], it's like the high school jocks or whatever the popular kids who go...and that was a particular profile, but anyway, so that, I got more involved in that way. One of the things that really opened my eyes was actually...so when I was at Frost Middle School, I mean I remember being able to identify kids, you know who we all knew were probably going to be someone who struggled with substance abuse by the time we were in high school, just by the way they behaved, who they hung out with. Or the girl who was probably going to become pregnant before she finished college or at some point, maybe even before high school. You know, teen pregnancy isn't a great crisis in Fairfax [County], but it remains something that exists. Or you know, the kid who was going to need that additional support and probably if they didn't get it, they would flunk by the time they reached junior year---

Amina: Right, right...

Abrar: And that was so vivid to me! I knew who those people were, knew their names, I knew where they sat in class, and that's what happened! You know, by the time we reached high school, those were the kids who were barely making it, who had high absence records, or whatever, and so seeing those disparities too and the fact that we—someone—could have intervened in that child's life, and made a big difference.

Amina: Absolutely.

Abrar: You know? And shown them just the basic idea of belief in that child could have completely changed their own perception of themselves and their own expectations for themselves. So that actually led me and a friend who I knew from middle school, that summer of eight grade we were

just you know g-chatting and talking about “what you’re going to do this summer” and we came up with this idea of starting a tutoring center. We wanted it to be free, and again along the lines of equity, because a lot of these kids who we saw, you know some of the reasons why they failed, or weren’t able to attain the level they could have to fulfill their potential was their parents not being able to afford resources because Fairfax County is incredibly expensive, tutoring is expensive.

Amina: It is! Unfortunately, yes, that’s a real reality that many people have to deal with.

Abrar: Exactly! And for me, having been raised in a house where that wasn’t an issue along the lines of---

Amina: Alhamdulillah.

Abrar: Alhamdulillah, not having done anything to earn that or deserve that. You know we started the center with the intention of having a free tutoring program for kids, and we wanted it to not only be free tutoring, but free mentorship. So, we’d pair high school students with elementary school students. That whole element I was mentioning of believing in that kid, the bar for their potential is much higher than they think it is, was kind of my introduction into this field through this organization. It started with that one center, you know I was doing my own thing at my middle school he had a program that was running, we merged, and then from there it expanded to four and then ten and now we have twenty locations that have been running for ten years in the county.

Amina: That’s amazing, masha’Allah!

Abrar: It’s opened my eyes really into the diversity that we have in the community. Diversity in a lot of great ways that we can celebrate but also diversity in ways that mean we have unique challenges, and you know we can face them optimistically but there are gaps and... which schools, for example, have the highest quality or which schools offer certain opportunities that others don’t. Where the advanced academics centers are located, this is an emerging controversial topic in the school system right now. So anyway, my work in that organization really opened my eyes, I ended up serving on different committees...and became more involved in the policy realm. So, this almost became a natural next step for me. I currently co-chair the School Advisory Committee, I also served on three others before that, I worked for the Superintendent, and for my Girl Scout Gold Award I changed the policy in FCPS on bullying—

Amina: Which is a wonderful feat in and of itself.

Abrar: Alhamdulillah, yeah. You know, and I think one of the things we take for granted is, I was thinking back to my high school mind when that happened, and it was really about identifying an issue that everyone cares about and acting on it, and having folks who believe in that young person who’s just in high school but showing them how they can really make a difference, and you know kind of showing them the ropes.

Amina: It’s also a conscious decision to prioritize empathy when making policy.

Abrar: Absolutely, that’s actually one of the things I see being a challenge in our education system, moral education, character education. How are we building and preparing our kids not only to have

the skills...I'm not trying to prepare the robot that's going to sit in front of the computer and know how to do A, B, C, you know?

Amina: Yeah, yeah.

Abrar: But we want to prepare exceptional human beings. And of course, I'd be remiss not to mention the context that we are in right now and what's going on in Virginia politics, you know the stories that have come out—

Amina: Yes.

Abrar: If we prepare our children, and educate them properly, then there's an element of teaching that...I actually always like to think actually of the Arabic phrase, *tarbiyyah wa ta'leem*, like why is the Ministry called not only teaching, right, it's teaching and nurturing, is generally the way we generally think of education in certain contexts, in my own Islamic context, it's not just about teaching it's also about nurturing a character—developing a human being. And so, you mention empathy, that's one of the things that can be taught actually, and there's curriculum out there for how that can be, you know, facilitated at an early age for kids to learn about. So, anyway, just because you mention that it's definitely one of the things I'm excited about bringing, potentially, to the School Board. It's certainly aligned with, you know, my motivation for doing this in the first place.

Amina: That's a great segue into our next question for you. What are your thoughts on how policy can play a role for education to be a means for advancing holistic human development? Which you know would include having a conscientious awareness of empathy and how to, you know, apply that with one's peers?

Abrar: Yeah, thank you for that question. I mentioned how education policy can affect of course access and then also what the curriculum is. When we think about what that curriculum is, developing character in human beings, more holistically, civic engagement is a part of that, so setting the tone of what does civic study look like? I mean right now, at least in Fairfax County, there's the eighth-grade requirement that instead of taking history, we take civics and we memorize all these things about the Constitution and whatever, but I would argue that the role of policy can impact the way we teach civics such that it comes to life...things like field trips and guest speakers. That's all a product of the policy set forth and the curriculum that's determined for the study of civics. And then of course that affects the child or the individual's perception of their entitlement to institutions of power. So, when you think of...ok so in Fairfax County we have a significant immigrant population. It's an incredible thing, it's brought a lot of great ideas and opportunities to Fairfax. How we teach civics, how we teach empathy, can impact how that young immigrant thinks about their role in society. So, are they subject to institutions of power? Are they part of the conversation with institutions of power? Or are they entitled to a seat in the institution of power? That all can be shaped, and the perception around that is ultimately crafted through the policy we come up with on this topic. And that's incredibly important because how minorities, how immigrants, how anyone in this country feels in relation to systems of power, ultimately impacts their trajectory in terms of how they access that power or utilize that power.

In my short political life, I've definitely experienced differences in seeing which communities feel that entitlement and which communities don't even realize that that exists for them to access.

Amina: I see, I see.

Abrar: And policy can really shape the direction of how that curriculum is taught. And so that's the concrete of policy, and of course, policy can look like a lot of different things, and can also be how that's implemented and how that process of arriving at policy comes to be. So for example, when I think about public service, I see that the way we arrive at policy can set a precedent or an example for what the role of a public servant is. Is the role of a public servant one where you sit at your desk and whatever the constituency, groups that come to you, with whatever ideas are, then that's what you implement? Or, is that role of the public servant one that's active, that actually goes and seeks out these ideas? And I find that to be incredibly important in determining the relationship of power with communities. Does the public servant serve as a platform for everyone to come put their ideas, and bring their ideas, or you know, someone who goes out and seeks those ideas, or are they more someone who people feel, you know, is inaccessible? Is that person at such a high level of discourse, intellectually inaccessible in a way that they're not accountable because people don't even necessarily know how to hold them accountable? What is that public servant doing in their role to make sure that people feel like they understand the issues enough and feel the entitlement enough to hold them accountable, and have that kind of conversation? Because change is ultimately not going to come from that one person, and that one seat, but it's going to come from that conversation.

Amina: Right, it's a collaborative effort.

Abrar: Exactly! And it's healthier that way and actually more productive because you have a swath of ideas that come to the table as opposed to the one person who thinks they know everything. So again, just to answer your question on policy, you know I see it not only in the actual content of policy but in how that process is facilitated, and the what the public servant's role in shaping what that looks like is. Honestly, I draw from, this is funny, but I draw from the example of Umar bin Khattab, *radhi Allahu 'anhu*.

Amina: *Radhi Allahu 'anhu*.

Abrar: In how he, one person being hungry in his jurisdiction was his failure, and how easily he took accountability. I mean if people came and told him "you are a bad ruler", he would take that to heart and would take that very seriously. In thinking about the role of the public servant in policy, how that's shaped, how, what accountability looks like, their humility in response to that, or lack of humility, is a part of setting that example.

Amina: I really appreciate that you brought up the importance of accountability, and how that fits in with being in touch with your community's needs. Which is, you know, a great way for us to transition into our next question that we have for you which is how do you evaluate a community's needs and take those needs and manifest them into your platform? You sort of hinted at this before in the interview, but I would love for you to elaborate if you could for us please.

Abrar: Absolutely! One of the things I've actually been cautioning myself not to do is get caught in this idea that, alright, you're in your seat and there are all these groups, and you have to answer to these groups, and their generally loud, they're empowered enough to actually have a presence and they can advocate, and you just have to appease these groups, come up with policies about what they are saying, and the that's it. I never want to lose sight of the fact that there are people who don't even know that there's some entity to even begin thinking about organizing and to have a

voice and to then come show up. There are different elements to it. Part of it is of course working with the advocacy groups that currently exist, that's a reality. We have for example in education, we have Special Needs PTA or the PTA more broadly, Parent-Teacher Association. We have the NAACP that advocates for minorities, people of color. You have all sorts of groups. You have groups that are advocating for later school start times, you have groups that advocate for healthier food, the advocacy group for the creative and performing arts to make sure that funding is never cut. All sorts of groups on all sorts of issues. And so those are ones that have that conversation, they propose policy, they tend to be highly educated or at least understand the structure of how things work enough to be at your desk and to show up. Then there are those groups who, like I mentioned, really have no clue, or don't even feel entitled enough to this society or to what institutions are available to them, to know to do that. For those honestly, we have to be creative. What some of the things I've been thinking about and have been trying to do, of course there's the typical campaign grassroots knock on doors, talk to people. That's very important. We have to also meet them where they're at. So one of the things I've been doing is going to local community centers that are in various neighborhoods, that allows...people aren't going there to meet you, they're going there to do whatever they're doing, and then they happen to meet you and they can talk to you about the issue that's on their mind or something that concerns them.

One of the structures I'm trying to put in place, and I'm hoping we can have enough volunteer capacity to do this, is looking at the map of Fairfax County, and looking at the various localities and trying to identify maybe a captain for every maximum hundred homes and that person would be responsible for supervising, making sure things are taken care of, bringing up any issues that anyone has, and there would be some kind of report back mechanism that way, so x person in the county, their child is struggling with substance abuse. Alright, what does that look like? What is their experience been? How have they been underserved by their school system? How have they been served well? And how can we improve the policy on this to do a better job?

That story could have sat there and never been heard. That family may never have realized they could come up to the school board, or again, never felt the enlightenment to come up and advocate or hold the school board accountable, but that story could be heard if there was some sort of active report mechanism. And honestly, I find that this comes back to the sincerity of the public servant. If the public servant is genuinely invested in improving people's lives and being accountable, and I honestly see this as an integrity question too, I see the *amana* really of the role is to make sure that everyone's needs are tended to, and that's why I mentioned the example of Umar, *radhi Allahu 'anhu* where one person being hungry was his failure, right?

Amina: For those who don't know, *amana* is a trust, something that's entrusted to you.

Abrar: Thank you, yeah. [laughter from both] So, that's a potential feedback mechanism I'm toying with, I'm trying to figure out how it's going to work, but I hope will be an area that will allow us to have a lot of these ideas and generate policy proposals through it. So, you know, there are many ways. And of course, there are also the contributions I have to come up with and I have to come with and that's why I'm running. I mean, many ideas I have that I could talk forever about that I hope to implement, but of course, always checking them back with stakeholders, making sure that there are no blind spots and all that. But trying to move away from traditional report mechanisms to ones that are more progressive, if you will. But again, more active about that public service.

Another potentially silly idea I thought about was having some kind of visible or audible thing related to my vehicle and making rounds...so whatever time is designated to drive around neighborhoods, and that would obviously be based on some kind of schedule where people would know if I was passing by. I got this idea from this silly, it's very funny, in certain countries you have these little markets, or moving markets, or like the ice cream truck. It comes around with a certain song, people here it and they know it's there. If they want it, they'll come out of their house. Something like that, but related to public service where someone can come report a complaint or come and just talk to the public servant—

Amina: That's actually very creative...and so the gap that you mentioned earlier, where not everyone knows who to reach out to, to have, to voice their concerns, and you know, have action spring forth from that. So, going to them in such a manner, I think, is very interesting.

Abrar: Yeah, exactly. And that's why I was mentioning it's tied ultimately to the sincerity of the person, because if we really mean to do a good job, we're not going to do that by hosting a town hall and advertising it to people who would have known about it anyway. We're going to do that by meeting people where they're at. Especially, I mentioned equity, in communities where people are working three, four, five jobs, to barely put food on the table, in a county that's incredibly expensive and is hard to afford a life in. And yeah, I think all ideas are welcome of course. My information is readily available, I try to be accessible in that way to think of even better ways of reaching people. Office hours is another example, right, having that weekly opportunity for anyone to come by. Anyway, the conversation can go on forever, but, I'm trying to think of these creative ways of doing that.

Amina: Yeah, well it's clear to see that community mindedness, and empathy, and sincerity, and integrity are things that you hold dear, and that you would like to—

Abrar: I'd like to think. [laughter from both]

Amina: (Continues) And you know, would like to implement in policy-making strategies moving forward. So, I've been able to get parts and pieces of this, you know, throughout the course of this interview, and I think our listeners have as well...the importance of your faith and how that influences how you view the importance of serving the public as a public servant and in your daily life. So, I just wanted to ask you a bit, how you fit into your campaign and visions for the future, your education in Islamic knowledge?

Abrar: Absolutely, I don't think I'd be where I am without that. And I will say, two things. One is, before I got into this, which is, you know, things like we are witnesses for God of justice on this earth and how can one exist seeing injustices without acting and going to the fullest levels that they can, taking advantage of the opportunities they have. I was blessed with parents who facilitated everything I wanted for me, and then an opportunity to go to a school like Yale, I studied political science and then I come back...how am I going to leverage that? What are the things that that allows me to access that others may not be able to access? Just thinking of the ways that Allah SWT's blessings don't come out of nowhere or just because, right? How do we, how do I maximize those opportunities in ways that serve the community and that answer again to being that witness. Ultimately, we will have to answer one day for what we were given, for what we saw, and what we did. So this was one of those very obvious trajectories in my mind that leads to a life of public service, within politics. Again, and again, I come back to wow, I'm really grateful to have a core

moral guideline or core moral framework because this game is messy, and can turn into...it's very easy to turn into...to be self-centered, to have an ego, to waver on integrity when it comes to the decisions one makes politically and strategically. Ultimately, everyone is vying for power here, right? Everyone's trying to access the seat, their motivations could be different, of course being optimistic, everyone wants to serve, but it's very easy to forget why—

Amina: You are serving in the first place.

Abrar: Exactly. In the lead up to the actual service, is the campaign, which you know, can last a year, can last longer. And that's the chaotic part where people are willing to do things they may not have ever imagined themselves doing, and it ultimately comes back to that Islamic core for me. To think, you know, at the end of the day, if no one is watching me, Allah SWT is watching me, right? If I was to die tomorrow, would I be proud of these decisions? If I was to die tomorrow, I wouldn't care what power I'd ascend to, right? It would be a matter of how I served, who I served, what I exerted from an effort perspective, and then, you know, Allah SWT accounts for the rest.

It also helps me in thinking that results are not in our control, ultimately our effort and Allah SWT is the one who determines the outcomes. So, I will work my hardest in this political campaign, but I can never resort to the nasty, you know, anything that would violate an Islamic principle, which is ultimately, integrity-based principle, because if I think of blessing, right? If I want *barakah* in my work, how would I have that blessing if I violated Allah SWT's principle? And if He's the one in control of the outcomes, then I would never have to violate His rules to get to my conclusion, the outcome, which would be to say, win the election, right? So if I lose the election, because I didn't engage in a nasty, you know, strategy or tactic, then ultimately it wasn't meant for me to get that, and that's where centering Allah SWT in this, is critical. And I'm not saying this on a superficial level where you know we just have to follow rules and guidelines and whatever, and it's like you follow them and you end up in heaven, if you don't you end up...it really, I mean, whatever rules exist are set forth for these environments where conditions are not normal such that it's very clear what's right an wrong. In this chaotic state of mind, things are very fast-paced, there's always things happening, especially with the cases we heard recently, right?

Things are popping up and people are reacting and responding impulsively and not necessarily using their best judgement. That spiritual pause, especially, I mean the five prayers, is an example of this, of just needing to sit down, clear your mind, recognize that, I can't do this, I need Allah SWT to do this. My success, if I succeed in this, is in no way coming from me because there's so many variables and my judgement, anyone's judgement under these circumstances, is so impaired, because of you know, emotion, because of pressure, because of one's own self, and I guess, our fight or flight instincts where you're defensive or want to preserve your ego, whatever, that it ultimately ends up being a full reliance on Allah SWT to, I don't know...bless or you know, put light in your path or something to allow you to think and see clearly. And that's really the role, I see, my own spirituality playing in this whole thing. Other than being a motivation, like pre-campaign, what is the spiritual orientation, then during the campaign, I've been realizing how grounding and critical it is to turn back to Him...and I reflect a lot on some of the thoughts I used to have, of you know, well some people you know, they connect spiritually and they don't necessarily need the prayers, for example. I think the physicality of it, the regularity, the fact that it's obligatory so many times in the day is the minimum to stay afloat. You know, to be able to even think clearly. So, it's given me a deeper appreciation for the reasoning behind why we have these things in place and how important it is to really see our humility in all of it and recognize that it comes from Allah SWT.

I've been interacting with so many candidates, and everyone has an ego of some sort, it's just a matter of how big, and what shape or color it is, right? [Laughter from both] I mean, you can literally destroy the purpose of why you enter, or blind you so much that you don't even have a purpose when you enter. I mean, this is so hard. Campaigning just gets to a point where the sacrifices to family, to yourself, literally you know, not being able to eat healthy food, a proper meal, just because you're running [around]. You know, I have meetings sometimes as early as 7 am and meetings as late as 11:30 pm. I mean, it's gotten to a level where I don't see why a person would stick this out unless they had a real motivation, and it's interesting to see that for many people, their self is enough of a motivation. But again, to always ground it back in spirituality and remember why we're doing this is so critical. And that clarity, without that clarity, I don't think there's a point to anyone doing this.

Amina: Well thank you very much for sharing that with us. Going back to the topic of education, our last topic for you is what do you think about education reform and how significant is education reform to your campaign?

Abrar: You know, when you look at different models around the world, of how children are taught, or even movements internally, like Montessori or just different approaches to how we educate our children, there's something called targeted universalism. It's an approach, generally, in any policy conversation, it doesn't have to be education related, but I really think we need to be thinking through this lens in education, and this relates back to the equity question because it's the idea that if you cater the person with the most needs, so think of you know, minority, immigrant, special needs person who is low-income and lives in an abusive home...you know, think of all the most, the worst case scenario for any individual, and you ensure that that child would succeed in the structure that you've set up. Then, effectively, you have set up a structure that can serve any individual who has any challenge.

Amina: Everyone.

Abrar: Exactly. So it's zoning in on that grassroots example to set up a structure that's effective for everyone on a microlevel, and I see that being a beginning point for the conversation on education. There are attempts like the flipped classrooms, for example, and more recess time, that's another advocacy group that we have. Things like that that move us towards different conversations.

Amina: We had, earlier on our podcast, Rania Rankoussi, who talks about the importance of playtime. So, it's interesting that you mention that. No, please, sorry to cut you off, please do continue.

Abrar: Absolutely! No, not at all. You bring up the point that there are critical...I don't even want to use the word skillsets since that's so quantitative, critical developmental points, that are not necessarily being emphasized or taught and that we overlook. Right now, you can get a perfectly good education and come out having, as we said earlier, no empathy, no purpose in your life, no sense of direction. And those are things that have to be nurtured and have to be incorporated into the curriculum. Social skills, emotional intelligence. There's a whole list of items that exist that fall under that, the ability to speak for oneself, self-advocacy. The ability, you know, to disagree with someone respectfully in an age of blocking people on Facebook when you disagree with them. These are the endemic challenges that we're facing when we look at our leaders. In being forward thinking, and talking about education reform, these are all elements that have to be incorporated

when you think of the child holistically, how do we prepare them for the future, not just in a capitalistic mindset, where we're going to prepare them with x skills so they can go to x college and then graduate and do x job that they're going to make x salary, and whatever, make it one day on Wall Street or whatever the career path would be.

Amina: That's why IIT, has emphasized the need to focus its research on what we call the "third space" in education reform. There's a lot of research, our research at IIT mainly looks at Muslim societies, and that can include, you know, "Muslim-majority countries" but also pocket "Muslim societies" within non-Muslim majority countries as well and just taking a look at how education is working there. So in the "first space" of education, that type of research, it focuses primarily on education as a means for utilitarian purposes, like getting a job after graduation, paying your bills, which is important, we're not denying that.

Abrar: Sure.

Amina: There's a lot of research in that area, plenty of research in that area. The "second space" of education research reform, or education reform research, looks at you know, what we call the second space and that's civic education, civic engagement education, so looking at the role of the person participating as a good citizen, how do they vote, how do they advocate for their rights, and how are they in touch with their community from a civic standpoint. But then the third space, and there's a large gap of research here on the third space, which focuses more on the socio-emotional aspects of the individual and how does education cater to that? Like, what, how is it a means for transformation, for human development, and some of the core areas we're looking at are empathy, community mindedness, forgiveness, and it's just...interesting that you mention that, because absolutely! Education can definitely be used as a—it's a vehicle for transformation and it can be so much more than just people doing well on their exams and getting a good job—

Abrar: Exactly.

Amina: (Continues) Or even just knowing when to vote. It can also be a means for opening up one's mind, one's heart, and connecting better with your community around you, your local community but also your global community as well.

Abrar: Absolutely, which is ultimately a far more valuable metric than any exam or whatever can measure. The quality of that human being, of their character, that in situations of tough decisions that they decide to stick with integrity. That they decide to make those moral choices because they can relate to other human beings and understand the consequences of their actions. I'm thinking very specifically about our current political reality when we think of how we raise children to be far from that, this is really the starting point as you mention in that third space in education. So, I definitely do see room for educational reform. In Fairfax County we have this proposed idea, they call it the "Portrait of the Graduate", where a child's success—and it's a starting point, I think we can still work a lot more on developing that third space aspect of it—but, you know, where the child is a global thinker, is the child able to communicate effectively? Another example of this is also the IB diploma, the International Baccalaureate program, that has these core skills that I was a part of that.

Amina: Right! Oh, wonderful. [Laughter from both]

Abrar: Yeah, you know, where it's open-mindedness, critical thinking, one of the required courses is Theory of Knowledge, where you really question why you believe what you believe, and the ultimate objective is to see that every other person with their different views can be right. So anyway, yeah, we're moving in that direction I think as a world, as a global...the global thought space on education is moving in that direction, it's just a matter of getting our communities there, which will take many years.

Amina: Of course, of course, nothing happens overnight.

Abrar: Yeah, we have a lot of work to do, and we have to fight to get it there, so. Because we want to see, this is the future of our children, this is our community and what we're going to turn it to be. I mean, whatever these kids are going to be educated through, you know, whatever system or curriculum they're going to be educated under is ultimately going result in who they're going to be. Give it ten-fifteen years, you're going to have another generation. It's critically important and I'm going to do what I can to get us there.

Amina: Well we appreciate that so much and we appreciate you taking the time to speak with us today on our podcast, thank you so much, Abrar.

Abrar: Thank you for having me. If you don't mind, if I can add just two things.

Amina: Please, yeah, of course.

Abrar: One is, when thinking about "third space", nurturing children in the third space mind, it's not just about how they end up behaving, it's about where that comes from. So in a lot of social justice circles I've been a part of and the discourse online, college campus groups and whatever. A lot of that work is driven by anger.

Amina: I've noticed this as well.

Abrar: Right, and it could be righteous anger. I mean there's a lot of things to be very upset about—

Amina: Fair point, yes.

Abrar: (Continues) In current world affairs, but in trying to think in a more prophetic way, I see the importance of nurturing that level of compassion, where someone saying or doing something that's repulsive isn't necessarily triggering your impulse to react through that anger in a way that may not have reasoned or full judgement. Instead, from a place of compassion, to almost feel, I don't want to say pity that person, but to really see where they're coming from and their potential ignorance or misunderstanding, whether it's hate or whatever it is, to understand, wow, this person is a product of unfortunate circumstances. How can I engage with them and humble myself to engage with them in a way that actually leads to a productive outcome? In a debate context for example, you have one person...or actually not necessarily in a debate, in a personal encounter. This happens all the time, micro-aggressions for example. When someone says something that has an assumption or implies a slight towards a group. This is always the case. "Oh you have such good English," or, "oh you..." whatever, right? We face these things all the time.

The traditional or expected, I guess, social justice response is to call them out for it, and then to not want to explain because, you know, “go educate yourself”, “it’s not my role to teach you”, but maybe in thinking of a more compassionate response, that requires that humility, right, that would ultimately be nurtured in a child, is one of understanding. “Well yeah, maybe that’s true but I just want to point something out. There are a lot of us here actually, and I was actually born here and…” to explain it differently, in a way that connects with the person, because ultimately, what’s the goal?

If the goal is to accomplish better understanding, a society where we have more ease when it comes to these differences and conversations amongst different individuals, people who come from such diverse backgrounds, we don’t want to censor the conversation. We don’t want to facilitate a scenario where folks can no longer have that discourse. But when we encourage children to talk about it, and talk about it respectfully, and seek understanding when talking about it, by coming from a compassionate place, then we’ll facilitate more dialogue, and that’s always more productive for kids. So, I wanted to put that in there because I really see it to be a missed opportunity in so many of these spaces that are well-meaning, but perhaps misdirected. Finally, the ultimate motivation in all of this that I want to leave listeners with is to think of that child is vulnerable in so many ways, by the mere fact that they’re a child, but, that grew up in a home with less privilege, less opportunity and resources and that bright-eyed, kind of looking into the future, and has so much potential for what that can be, that nothing stands in that child’s way of being the next President of the United States, the next Secretary General of the U.N., the next ruler of whatever, the next CEO of some amazing tech company that comes up with incredible innovations that makes people’s lives better across the world, or the head of that next NGO that’s going to come up with incredible breakthroughs and solve world hunger or poverty or some kind of issue. How can we facilitate opportunity and resources in such a way that that same child has an equal opportunity and that the playing field is leveled against that one child whose family is incredibly wealthy, and has lived in a mansion, and has servants in the house, has been hand-held all the way through and has a private counselor and private tutor? How can we make sure that those two children have a fair shot at life? And that’s essentially what education offers, or the promise of education and what it can offer. And it’s our job, and our task, really, to ensure that is the case and that’s actualized, and you know, that’s the task of public education. It’s certainly nothing easy, it’s nothing close to easy, but—

Amina: Definitely very challenging, yeah.

Abrar: It’s very promising, yeah.

[transition]

Amina: But as you said, it’s very promising, and just as there’s a lot of potential in individual children within education systems, there’s a lot of potential in education systems themselves.

Abrar: Exactly.

Amina: And we look forward to seeing what our future public servants will do to capitalize on that and cultivate that, and see how best to bring out the great qualities in children, whether it’s in Fairfax County Public Schools or you know, in other counties or different states, it’s definitely…the onus isn’t on any one person, and it’s definitely a collaborative effort.

Abrar: Absolutely, it's a conversation that public servants, or what some may call politicians, right, are one fact, one variable, one element in the whole conversation. And if they ever view themselves to be more or above the rest of it, then they failed from like day one. Because those stakeholders, those advocacy groups that hold them accountable, that pressure them, that's all needed. I mean a lot of politicians are uncomfortable with advocacy groups, lobbyist groups, because they apply a lot of pressure, hold them accountable, make them look bad whatever, but that's actually exactly what we need because they're going to continue to push us where we can go, the furthest we can go in bringing it to a better outcome, and are ultimately going to be our eyes and ears on the ground when we're not there too. So, it really is a conversation amongst all the stakeholders, and I hope for that, you know, underprivileged person who never imagined their entitlement in society could ultimately become one of those stakeholders.

Amina: Thank you.

Abrar: Yeah, thank you.

Amina: Well I feel like we've thanked you so many times throughout this interview, but we can't thank you enough! [Laughter from both]

Abrar: Thank you so much. This was really my pleasure and honor to have this conversation and I encourage people to be in touch.

Amina: Absolutely. We'll be sure to follow everything that you're up to and staying up to date on the campaign and we wish you much success with all your endeavors.

Abrar: Thank you! Thank you so much.

[transition]

Amina: Thank you all for listening. To stay up to date on everything happening with the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, please follow IIT on Twitter (@iitfriends) and on Instagram (@iit_insta). You won't want to miss our next episode. More details are 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@iit.org. As always, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!