

THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast

Transcript for Episode 2: Mapping the Terrain

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Host: Amina Derbi Guest: Dr. Ilham Nasser

Amina: Welcome everyone, this is Amina, and 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 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. Let’s dive in.

So last time we had the pleasure of having Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss with us who was able to talk to us about the third space and what that means exactly. We also discussed why we don’t have research on socio-emotional and spiritual aspects of the individual in that space and how this discussion is relevant not just to Muslim societies but globally as youth around the world grapple with anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation. We also heard a little bit more about IIIT’s work and how the AEMS program is working towards transformative education, advancing holistic human development and overall wellness.

So well-being has been defined by many as the most important aspect of life, broadly defined, it encompasses health, faith, socio-emotional and psychological aspects of the person. The AEMS research initiative is interested in the holistic approach to education, setting well-being as a long-term goal aligned with this approach. We define well-being as having effective social and emotional functioning, positive effect, and the perceived ability to self-regulate and feel a sense of fulfillment. It is to pursue virtue, meaning, and purpose, and doing good, and making a difference. We’d also like to highlight that in last time’s episode, Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss talked about self-efficacy, and we define that, and many others do, as the belief that one has in his or her own ability to organize and execute certain behaviors that are necessary in completing a given task successfully.

[transition]

We’re so delighted to have Dr. Ilham Nasser on the show with us today who has previously presented her research on “Strengthening Families to Nurture Values and Spirituality: Evidence, Challenges and Opportunities” at the Geneva Consortium in July 2018. In addition to being a Senior Researcher for the AEMS research team, Dr. Nasser is Chair of the Peace Education Special Interest Group at the American Education Research Association (AERA), a Professorial Lecturer at American University, and has spent over twenty five years in teacher training and research in different educational settings in the United States, Africa, and the Middle East. Dr. Nasser recently served as a panelist at American University’s Global Education Forum, and was an associate professor in Early Childhood Education at George Mason University for many years.

Her research in the past includes studies and publications on the topic of global teachers’ professional development and more specifically, teacher preparation and professional development

in social and political contexts and ways these influence children's outcomes. Previously, she led the modernization of the curriculum for kindergarten in Iraq and the design and development of the first national curriculum for kindergarten in Palestine.

Hello and salaam, Dr. Nasser! How are you doing today?

Dr. Nasser: I'm good thank you, and thank you for the opportunity to talk to you and to talk to your audience as well.

Amina: Well thank you so much for being on the show with us today, we appreciate it so much. A question some of our listeners have about AEMS is what "Mapping the Terrain" entails. Could you please explain for us how that fits in within the larger AEMS program?

Dr. Nasser: So we have identified the research, the empirical research of AEMS, which is an important part of Advancing Education in Muslim Societies, we have actually framed it in the third space. And what the third space means is that we are putting emphasis on the socio-emotional learning aspects of students whether they are in k-12 or in higher education. So in order for us to really come up with a research agenda in the third space it requires from us to start somewhere, and Mapping the Terrain is where we start because we are trying to build the foundation for our research as well as identify where the gaps are, identify the strengths, identify promising practices, but most importantly also, identify what people think, students, parents, teachers, think about these topics that we are calling socio-emotional learning and we are framing them in the third space. So when we started looking at the third space and tried to translate it into empirical research you cannot just go with such a broad term. You have to translate it in a way that you can build constructs and measure them.

Amina: Right.

Dr. Nasser: (Continues) Because these constructs should be measurable in order for you to survey people and to have a quantitative study going on, which means that you are surveying as many people as possible to have some kind of common grounds for the mapping exercise. To do that, we went into the UNESCO concept of "learning to be". And learning to be is all about taking into consideration the holistic approach to learning, so it's not just the academics and the education for employment, the first space, and it's not only education for civic education and democracy, but it's also for this whole person. That becomes critical because you know there is lots of support for socio-emotional learning and its impact on academics. So, in the research we know that this works well, and that this shows evidence and promise in some international settings. I don't see why not in Muslim majority societies as well. And from that we went into further more specific constructs that will be our mapping exercise.

Amina: Ok, that's terrific. That's very useful for our audience, thank you. Something that's drawn our listeners attention on social media are our posts regarding four constructs of mapping the terrain: empathy, forgiveness, moral reasoning, and community mindedness. Can you please define what we mean by those terms to our audience and tell us why those were the constructs chosen?

Dr. Nasser: You know, Amina, you have to start somewhere. [laughter from both] And you have to start somewhere where it's really not necessarily that we are diagnosing a problem and we are trying to give medicine, or remedies to a sick body, and on the contrary, we are also trying to identify strengths. And in order to do that, you want to select topics that are close in the area and related in the area of learning to be, because the learning to be in the literature is actually a concept that has been researched, and empathy comes up as one of those constructs that have an impact on others.

Amina: I see.

Dr. Nasser: (Continues) To develop a human being that is caring. So define empathy as the ability and willingness to care, feel, and take the perspective of others. If you go out and look at the literature, you'll find other definitions. But we chose a definition that is simple, that applies to Muslim majority contexts, and also aligns with the work that IIT has been doing for thirty something years. You know, what does it take for us to be good Muslims, good human beings, and good citizens, it's really empathy, is a big piece of that. And it can act as a moderator in a way, it can act as a way to lead people to become more forgiving for example, which is our second construct. And we define it as the willingness, because there is some choice there, we choose to be empathetic, sometimes, we choose to be forgiving, sometimes, it depends on the situation, but the willingness to let go of the need for revenge for someone who has wronged you or committed a perceived injustice against you or others. And from my own research on forgiveness, and maybe that's why this construct is important not just from the Islamic perspective, but we also have expertise on the team on these different constructs. So, forgiveness is something that I've studied in Arab societies, and I noticed that the intentionality piece. If someone you know wronged you or harmed you intentionally, people are less likely to forgive. But what we are doing in the Mapping the Terrain study, we are looking at attitudes and people's perceptions of whether they will forgive or not based on hypothetical scenarios.

For example, someone took your car and drove it without your permission. It can be a cousin, it can be a neighbor, it can be a sibling...and if that happens we ask people, 'ok, so will you forgive if your car broke or if that person took your car and didn't return it?' and so forth. So, we are trying to give people scenarios where they can decide for themselves: is this intentional? Did it cause any harm to me or loved ones? In my own research I also found that if the harm in forgiveness is done to someone who is close to you, family member, friend, close friend, we are less likely to forgive.

Amina: I see, I see.

Dr. Nasser: These are very complicated, rich constructs, but what's nice about them is that they are measurable, they are constructs that relate to the work of IIT, and they are rooted in Islamic teaching. Take for example community connectedness, this is about the collective, it's about us seeing ourselves as interconnected to others and acting to benefit our inclusive whole. So, it can be your family, it can be your community, it can be your city, it also can be your world. The whole world. And that approach is about: how can we stay connected to the community in a way that is meaningful? Because it's not enough to be part but it's to also have a sense of belonging which is also one of our mediating, we call them variables, because we know that if we feel, we know from the literature and we hope our study will confirm that, that if you have a good sense of belonging, you'll be more empathetic, more forgiving, and more connected with your community.

Amina: Which makes sense.

Dr. Nasser: Makes a lot of sense, but you know, in our work, what's unique about our project is that we're not just intuitive, we rely heavily on what's been done in empirical studies.

Amina: Absolutely. It's very data-driven.

Dr. Nasser: Exactly, and our unique contribution to the Muslim community and scholars around the world is that we are actually bringing evidence from the field. We are including fourteen different countries so far, we might have more. And they all are surveying the same type of constructs, those four, same type of survey in different languages, and we are actually, you know, hoping that the results will give us more empirical evidence to say, we're not just intuitive about it as Muslims, but we're also...we can say it numbers and statistics and in our data that will tell us something about the story, so we can tell it to the rest of the world. And I think that link is missing. We don't have enough publications and research done in English at least on these topics in Muslim societies, in Muslim communities, not necessarily Muslim-majority societies. One of our countries is Hong Kong, and there's a small Muslim [society/community], maybe four or five percent, but there's an interest among the Muslim society, among the community there in the research. So, we're happy to do that as long as it will give us some empirical evidence and data we can share with the world, we can translate it into policy recommendations, I guess that's your work, and maybe also to interventions that are sound, and meaningful, and relevant, and they're not just imported from USAID or the West or the European Union.

Amina: Right, right. I think it's also very important that you highlighted that we're using a survey type system so that our findings are data-driven.

Dr. Nasser: Correct, and that's important. That's key, because I think that's what's different about what we're doing. And it's a huge investment in not only the research but also in people that work with us around the world.

Amina: Absolutely, absolutely. So in your recent appearance at American University's Global Education Forum and at other events, and actually even earlier on our podcast today, you mention the importance of what UNESCO calls "learning to be", where education is not only about knowledge and skills but also about being a human being. Why do you think that is important to focus on for Muslim societies right now?

Dr. Nasser: Very good question, Amina. Thank you! Let's start by identifying where this concept of learning to be, what it's all about. UNESCO is one of the first to initiate or write a report on what are the four pillars of education. Those four pillars are learning to know, which is really the knowledge, you knowing your math, you knowing literacy, novels, Shakespeare, all of that, that's the learning to know. The learning to do is about skills. So you learn that at school but you can also learn that somewhere else, in college, from your family, from others in your environment. You learn how to ride a bike, and then you learn how to read in English, and then you learn how to read in Arabic, and then you learn the Quran or you learn other sources of knowledge. So that's also about the learning to do things, and the learning to know. So both of them are on the knowledge and skills level. The third component or pillar of education is the learning to live with others. And the learning to live with others is all about the second space, which we call, because it's all about civic education: being a good neighbor, being a good community member, being a good citizen...voting, and you know, engaging yourself in a democracy. But the learning to be, which is the fourth one, and it's actually the least researched, interestingly, is about the whole person. Because it's not enough that you have the knowledge and skills, and the right attitude, but you also have to have that whole notion of me as a whole person, of me as someone who is seeking...we assume that all human being are seeking to become better people intuitively, innately, but things happen, life conditions, wars, conflicts and you know life events happen that can become an obstacle for that. Our objective, the main thing is really the wellbeing of people. So the learning to be is one way that takes us there through a model that we put together, a conceptional model for Mapping the Terrain, we are assuming that our work and our aim for the wellbeing of humans whether they're students, parents, teachers, or university students, to get there you have to invest in the person, from all different aspects. Since the investment is there already in the learning to know and learning to do and maybe more on the learning to live with others, we feel there is a gap in the learning to be. And that's where we would like to put forth our effort and to show some empirical evidence on that, and also with the aim, AEMS is not only about research. AEMS is also about advocacy and about spreading the word and creating a process that allows for transformation of education systems and people in it. So, we're hoping that what we bring to the table will help in that transformation, Advancing Education in Muslim Societies.

Amina: Yes, that's certainly is the goal we have in mind. Well thanks again so much Dr. Nasser for being on the show with us today.

Dr. Nasser: Thank you.

Amina: You're truly a gem for us, and I can't thank you enough.

Dr. Nasser: Thank you for your time.

Amina: That was truly valuable, Dr. Nasser. 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 IIT on Twitter (@iitfriends) and Instagram (@iit_insta). You won't want to miss our next episode featuring a special guest. 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.

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