

THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast

Transcript for Episode 3: Creating Reading Cultures

Interview Date: 10/22/18

Host: Amina Derbi Guest: Saulat Pervez

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.

We’re very excited to have Saulat Pervez on the show with us today, a very important Research Associate for the AEMS Team. Pervez is a writer and educator with a combined experience spanning more than 20 years. She graduated with a Global Affairs MA specializing in Global Education and she is passionate about creating reading cultures locally and globally. Pervez has been published by Oxford University Press, the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, and Critical Muslim. She is also contributing to an article for our upcoming inaugural issue of IIIT’s Journal on Education in Muslim Societies (JEMS). She is a faith columnist at MyCentralJersey.com and contributed to Dawn, the daily English newspaper in Pakistan, for many years. Pervez also taught English literature at a Cambridge school in Pakistan for three years, later transitioning into a Reading Mentor position.

In addition to working on the “Mapping the Terrain” project with others on the Research Team, she is also working on a separate project focusing on literacy, reading success, and reading culture in mid-level private schools in Pakistan. Reading is obviously very important, though some might not see its connection with the “third space” which we talked about in the first two episodes of our podcast. However, some psychologists have noted that reading literary fiction improves empathy in readers because it sharpens our ability to understand others’ emotions.

So salaam and hello, Saulat! Welcome! How are you doing today?

Saulat: I’m good alhamdulillah! Thank you for having me on the show.

Amina: Well thank you so much for being on the show with us today, we appreciate it so much. Could you please tell us a bit more about this specific research project?

Saulat: Ok, so although I grew up in the States, I have had the opportunity to spend more than a decade abroad in Karachi, Pakistan, where I was affiliated with an excellent mid-level, Cambridge private school while I was raising my own children in the same educational environment. I wasn’t trying to do research at the time which enabled me to simply experience life as it was for middle class folks in this city. As a teacher of middle and secondary grades, I was surprised to find that many students were not interested in reading and they were unprepared to apply themselves cognitively as well. And, no matter how many ways I tried to encourage them, I failed. When I

stopped teaching, these were the students who stayed with me and propelled me to research ed-psych theories, to investigate ways in which we can teach thinking from an early age.

As a parent, I had always read to my children and they loved reading! However, when my daughter reached third grade, she came to me and said, “Mama, books are boring!” As disturbing as this revelation was for me, it became an “aha” moment for me as an educator. As I strove to motivate my daughter to enjoy reading again, I began to understand the struggles my students encountered and realized that what helped my daughter can also benefit so many other kids who fall through the cracks.

Amina: Wow, wow. Thank you for that. Something many of our listeners are probably wondering is why you are focusing specifically on literacy, reading success, and reading culture. Can you elaborate more on why you chose to focus on these areas, particularly in mid-level private schools in Pakistan?

Saulat: It’s important to understand that these schools are able to attain grade-level bilingual literacy for their student body. Further, the schools have committed teachers and engaged parents. Students attend school regularly and they have access to books. For instance, the school where I taught had multiple libraries with thousands of books. In other words, the infrastructure is also in place. This is an ideal situation for cultivating school-wide reading culture. However, at some point, many students lose interest in reading. I want to explore why this is the case. This has a cascading effect: since the medium of instruction, i.e., English, is not their mother tongue, it leads to comprehension issues, which leads to obstacles regarding cognitive clarity and the ability to think on a higher level.

The other thing that interests me is that we often distinguish between “readers” and “non-readers.” There are plenty of avid readers in these schools, but I feel these are kids that would read no matter the circumstances. I am interested in finding ways to bring the “non-readers” into the reading camp – someone like my daughter who could’ve easily been labeled as a non-reader despite her strong start in reading. Only then can we begin to develop reading culture.

Amina: That’s really interesting. Something you’ve mentioned before in your findings is the “word gap” between students who speak only urdu at home versus those who speak only English and the impact that has on students being comparable to the word gap experienced by students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Can you explain this idea a bit more to our listeners?

Saulat: In the US, the dwindling interest in reading and the resulting challenges associated with “reading to learn” have been linked with lower socio-economic status. It is often called the “fourth grade slump.” But with mid-level private schools in Karachi, which only middle-class families can afford, this is not the case. However, a lot of the “fourth grade slump” research has been done in a monolingual environment, with students whose native language is English.

For instance, Drs. Betty Hart and Todd Risley at the University of Kansas have shown that a four-year-old American child born in a professional family will have heard 45 million words, a child from a working-class family 26 million, and a welfare child only 13 million, and yet each will start school at the same time, leading to a pronounced divide in learning.

Hypothetically speaking, when you adapt the above research to a bilingual city like Karachi where private education is pretentiously in English, then you can imagine a similar rift among children of families where both parents are able to speak in English to their children, only one parent speaks English, or neither parents can carry a fluent conversation in English. Hence, when these children begin school together, their familiarity with the English language varies a lot and so even though we do not have the problem of socio-economic issues, multilingualism poses different challenges and must be tackled accordingly.

Amina: That's really fascinating. You mention the need for fostering critical thinking. Can you tell us about how you endeavored to incorporate this important skill as an educator?

Saulat: When I first started teaching, my students were used to what I call "modified rote learning," where they were given all necessary information and they knew that if they mastered it, they would do well on their assessments. This is what Freire calls the "banking model." I wanted them to think instead, what Freire calls the "problem posing model." I wasn't aware of Freire at the time, but I wanted to make sure my classes were very interactive. Too often, due to the focus on language, books are taught in a very robotic way in Karachi. A teacher would talk about the title and author and then delve into the book, discuss qualities of the characters, and then when the book comes to an end, so do the lessons. I wanted the text to become a springboard for all sorts of discussions. I achieved this through encouraging my students to constantly make connections, to appreciate the writer's craft, and to reach the message the author was ultimately conveying. In other words, I tried to get my students to go from the body of the text to its soul.

Amina: That's really powerful. What do you think is the most important take-away you have at this point from your research journey so far?

Saulat: We often talk about the lack of reading culture in the Muslim world. We also constantly hear about education being pegged as the solution to the various problems of the Muslim world. Likewise, any time I talk to academics about the importance of cultivating thinking skills through English literature, I get push-back on the colonial and Western agenda. Everyone has these big ideas of what's right and what should be done, but not how to do it. Without discounting the significance of keeping all of these things in mind, I want to take both an academic as well as a practitioner approach to this conundrum. And I think the fact that I have first-hand experience of the current middle-class school environment in Karachi – as a teacher as well as a parent – my approach is grounded in the local context, what would be beneficial not only in some imagined future, but also here and now. I also believe that what we learn in Karachi will be applicable to other similar urban settings, both in the Muslim world and beyond.

Amina: Definitely, definitely. Well, thank you again for being on the show with us today Saulat. It's been a joy and pleasure, we're very fortunate to have you with us and we look forward to staying up to date on all of your findings!

Saulat: Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Amina: So, in case you were wondering, Paulo Freire who was alive from 1921-1997, was the author of the best-selling book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as well as *Pedagogy in Process*. He's famous for his advocacy of critical pedagogy and was actually Latin America's foremost educationalist. He was a thinker and writer whose work and ideas actually continue to exert enormous influence in education

throughout the world today. Some of his writings including *Education for Critical Conscientiousness* as well as *Pedagogy of the Heart* are available at the IIIT library. In the words of Federico Mayor Zaragoza who was UNESCO Director General from 1987-1999, “Paolo Freire demonstrated more than anyone that education was the foundation of all freedoms. That it alone can give people mastery over their destiny.”

Thank you all for listening. 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. Ahmed Al-Alwani, another exemplary member of our research team and Vice President of IIIT. 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.

As always, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!