

THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast

Transcript for Episode 5: Out of the Box Learning

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Host: Amina Derbi Guest: Rania Rankoussi

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 and understanding together, please visit our website at iiit.org, and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. You can also listen to this podcast on Stitcher, Spotify, iTunes, or Apple Podcasts, Messy FM, and Podcast Mirror. Let’s dive in!

We have a very exciting announcement here at IIIT. American University’s International Training and Education Program has partnered with the International Institute of Islamic Thought to offer a Master’s degree program towards Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS). The International Training and Education Program-Advancing Education in Muslim Societies – so the acronym for that is ITEP-AEMS – is a unique opportunity to earn a Master’s degree in international education and training with focus on Muslim societies from a reputable university like American University in the US capital – Washington DC. This is a one-year, thirty-credit hour program beginning July 2019. Sign up today! For more information, visit IIIT’s website at iiit.org. You can scroll to the bottom where you see announcements, and then there it is!

And I can’t wait to tell you about our next guest, that’s appearing on this episode, Rania Rankoussi. Rania Rankoussi was born in Beirut, Lebanon, in her words, a country of beauty and inspirational multicultural themes. After graduating from the French high school, she had a passion in helping students overcoming their educational barriers, and went to the Lebanese University to pursue a Bachelor of educational sciences. During the years of her studies, she had the opportunity to work as an elementary school teacher, experiencing the various achievements of young children in the world of education and trying to apply the best methods learned. After she got married and left Lebanon to live in the US, she applied for a Master’s degree in gifted education at the University of Virginia and got accepted. The field of gifted education opened up for her a new vision in enriching and shaping the character of children using out-of-the-box teaching principles. She then presented her thesis on gifted children with learning disabilities. By that time, she returned to Syria, her second origin country, to work as an academic coordinator with an international school, in addition to being a national officer of an evaluation educational project at UNICEF, where her team had to evaluate 40 underserved schools, working with teachers and students in underserved suburban areas. She later also started her own business, Bright Signs, which is based on a curriculum that focuses on the kids learning life skills which they don’t learn during regular school hours with the integration of Islamic values and morals. Bright Signs also serves students with learning disabilities such as ADHD, ADD, ED, and autism in helping them cross their social, emotional, and education barriers.

Amina: Welcome Rania, asalamu alaikum! How are you doing today?

Rania: Salam alaikum Amina! It's a pleasure to discuss with you the things you want to discuss with me!

Amina: We're very happy to have you on the show today, so I'll just get started with a few questions that I had. You are currently an educational consultant and are very passionate about holistic education for students. Can you tell us why education is important to you, and why holistic education in particular?

Rania: Sure, first come's to first is education, why education is important, is actually building a human being, in the first place. It is the core of a well-based society – community – and then a family definitely, which is the first pillar of having a healthy society. Also, it is actually so important to be considered to be considered a pillar to success, achievement, prosperity, and actually also, a key way for bridges to other cultures and to make the world connected in harmony. So, regarding holistic education, it is actually, the word is very, very crucial in the process of learning. Holistic is serving the needs; social, emotional, and intellectual, and building a balanced character. And I do actually stress here that a character that is actually well maintained, mentally, socially, economically. In many ways, that will actually preserve his or her identity. Identity crisis nowadays is actually today a big dilemma in our youth, in our kids. Even starting from a younger age, starting from kindergarten.

Being a Muslim in the US, and having this pride to be American definitely, but at the same time how am I going to interpret my Islamic principles throughout my kids and throughout the students that I actually teach. It is what I actually consider a big component in making a holistic education. So, I would rather also encourage all the educators to (and I'm not talking about being a Muslim only, I'm talking about all regions) having this identity shown really clearly with a balanced character, no matter what your background, no matter what your religion is, and to be a balanced personality. Being tolerant to other cultures too is the key of having a holistic education. Accepting one another, accepting other races, accepting other colors, accepting other identities, and actually to envision a future for the students to nourish our societies, our vision on how to build the future. This is an important key role to see our educational future. Because I can sense that our educational future is within a score-wise (?) going high, however, on another sense, we are going very, very low on other levels, unfortunately. We can discuss this throughout the podcast.

Amina: Thank you! So, you created Bright Signs, which is an educational organization for children and it's a business. Can you tell us more about Bright Sign's mission and vision, and what inspired you to create this initiative which you are currently directing?

Rania: Yes, actually, my dream was also...during my studies of having or dealing with the educational field with another perspective which is teach the kids out of the box, was a dream to come true. But in a way or another, I actually found myself teaching the kids with the norms of standardized learning and kind of being in a box, and not out of the box. I was a little bit shocked because it is truly not getting through what I want in building a character, a free character that is free of norms, free of scoring. I want to actually stress on this point because kids nowadays are only structured within a box; their character is within a box, of norms and scoring. If you don't have a good score, you don't go to a good university, unfortunately. And this is what I mentioned before, that we're getting into building a pressured kid just for them to have a high level of achievement but on the other hand, with a stressed and anxious character. Now, kids' anxieties are number one in the US. It's getting more and more unfortunately, heading towards a dead-end, because we're now

hearing more about suicidal attempts among the youth. I'm not talking about being on drugs or having alcoholic problem, but I'm talking about stressful kids and stressful settings, that kids are in and put in, and that they are trying to get out of. They need to achieve, and they cannot because it is too hard for them. Or whether they are with or without special needs, I'm talking about social and emotional problems, plus the utmost fear of having a good grade to go to college or any other barriers of transferring from a grade to another.

So, it is a very big issue that we're facing nowadays, and what I actually found is if we create a setting or learning environment that is free of norms and free of scoring, that would be a lot more of an achievement, and a lot more beneficial in many terms.

I just want to tell you the mission of Bright Signs – it is actually a learning program that combines many components of curriculum that is built on playtime, movement, on having a stress-free environment of learning, with learning definitely, and with instructional-based curriculum but at the same time the kids are learning more freely, more out-of-the-box, and without the norms. Plus, learning the skills of life that they don't actually learn, so when they go out in the real world after high school, they really know how to do, paying taxes, knowing how bank transactions work, knowing how to actually try to sell my resume, sell myself, presentation skills. This is what we don't find nowadays, unfortunately, in high schoolers. We have the SAT, the calc, you have to achieve here, you have to achieve there, and there's nothing to let them learn what's going on in the real world. This was one of the biggest perspectives and objectives of what I wanted to do. Even though it's so simple now, even with the little kids and they're going to grow older, but those are the main principles I want to build in the charactership of each student.

Amina: Wonderful, thank you. So not too long ago, you were working with UNICEF in Syria to provide educational assistance to under-served suburban areas and students. These students included local Syrians as well as Iraqi refugees. Can you elaborate on what that experience was like for you and what you learned while serving UNICEF within that capacity?

Rania: Yes, the evaluation process that we actually worked on in UNICEF was a very important track that we – it had actually two stages, we finished the first one. The second one was unfortunately when the war started in Syria, we couldn't actually achieve it. The first track, the first phase, was actually inquiring on meeting the needs of the students throughout their social, emotional, physical, intellectual needs, and these suburban areas where they were underserved. It was a huge project that involved teachers and administrators, and the families after all that we needed to visit of these students. Because the components of having also a holistic education is to get all the major roles of the society. Having all components of society – parents, teachers, administrators, and students – would build a holistic education in the society. Parents are the keystone for holistic education. We cannot let the parents be outside of this important process.

The project was actually evaluating the psycho-social, socioemotional special needs of gifted learners, socioeconomic status of the kids. We had to know whether the kids were hungry whenever they come to school, and how many of them had meals when would go to their houses and how they would proceed within their studies, and to live a normal day through the school year. It was very surprising and shocking because you could find people having regular housing and family but unfortunately, they come to the school hungry every day, every morning, because they couldn't afford to have a breakfast in the morning. And you can imagine how a little kid, as young as a first grader, can go without a breakfast, and stay there till like 2 o'clock in the afternoon without having a

sandwich. It's horrific. The results were a bit horrific and all the efforts of UNICEF and all the kinds of organizations inside there they actually budgeted, so when you find this kind of a dilemma, you have to fund it and support it, which was excellent, but we couldn't actually (I'm not talking about only being hungry, kids would be traumatized, they need psychological and emotional sessions, counseling sessions, so they can overcome their fears and whatever kind of emotional barriers). It was a huge project that would be involved in all the kind of building this character of this kid and trying to manage to find a solution.

Amina: Well thank you for sharing that with us, that sounds like a very meaningful experience. It sounds like parts of it were very difficult to watch, I'm sure, as they were children. But it's very important work and thank you for sharing that with us today. When drafting education policy in your opinion, what are the most important factors to keep in mind in order for it to be fair to student with different learning capabilities?

Rania: It is a great question, because we do have in our world the different learning capabilities in every classroom, in every society and this is what we dream of having in our school system. They actually do have it and we are proud of that. The thing is that I do have a very crucial point to mention, regarding implementing differentiated curriculum. Not all the kids are only advancing or not advancing in many areas, so what we tend to have is a pool of students that are in a classroom that would be much higher advancing than the other kids; in this way, we manage to get the gifted curriculum and let them compact their higher abilities within a special compacted curriculum. And this is good, and those would be not more than 10% in all the school system. But we do have other kids who are regular kids and are very smart and are not high achievers. Those kids are sometimes, I don't want to say underserved, but the system is not really meeting their needs. Some of them are very well-known in having a good writing journal or a good writing paragraph in third grade but on the other hand, he cannot achieve at all in math, so we consider him weak. Sometimes when you say points of weaknesses and points of strengths, and guess what, he would be left alone. Believe it or not. And the parents would struggle with them for having a special tutoring program, which will cost them a lot.

What are we really doing towards these different learning abilities in kids? Are we really serving them well? This is my question and my concern. Are we providing them emotional support? Throughout my thesis, I actually did a thesis around gifted learners with learning disabilities, and those kinds of gifted learners are so exceptional and so smart and highly achievers and with high potential in their own ways, but on another hand, emotionally destroyed. Are we really serving them? This is where the question should be in terms of educational policy. Are we really serving and meeting the emotional needs of the kids that are highly achieving and not high achievers, and kids that are regular kids, who are normal, and when you see them, you tend to fall in love with them, but at the same time, they are destroyed from inside. It's really a crucial point to actually meet these kinds of disabilities – but I don't want to say disabilities, I want to put it in another way, kind of a low self-esteem. You can find a lot of gifted learners that have low self-esteem and need a lot of support. This kind of a tricky area needs a lot of attention. So, this is what I can say regarding the different learning potentials. Because learning happens to be a combination of many factors and it's like a body system so if one system is not working, it would be ruining the body, so it is really crucial, regarding this exact point.

Amina: Thank you. So, our last question for you today is in your review, Rania, what role should empathy have in education, and how can it be used to transform student experiences inside and outside of the classroom?

Rania: It is a wonderful question. Empathy – we have to be aware, that having a non-structured, indoors and outdoors activity is very important and plays a big role in actually building character. If you go outside of the US, you'll see a lot of learning experiences throughout many school systems. I can give you an example of Finland. I'm not saying this to be fond of Finland, but I'm just giving it as an example, to learn and to have a lesson learned. You can find that they can give throughout the day, almost an hour and a half of playing outdoors. I'm not saying this is the solution, but it is an initiative that would play a great role in letting the kids release their anxious part of themselves and release their anxieties and stress. In this way they can achieve better. Our meeting here is doing empathy and meeting the emotional need. That is causing many dilemmas in the school system. The thing is even in Japan, what I saw while I was doing my studies, was that when I took a look at what they do before they start their day is that they let the kids try to organize themselves and brush their teeth and do the regular daily skills in school, not at home. And this is how they start because they feel the belonging, and this is also a huge area where most school systems do not integrate, because they need only structures or only numbers or only curriculum. And that is what is ruining our kids' characters, unfortunately. Please don't get me wrong that I actually want to shade the area we want to achieve, structurally, no, no, no. But let's put it this way: we need to actually add up on something that is crucial to let the kids understand that they are a human being after all.

If I feel belonging or that this is my home, and I feel comfortable because this is where we are always repeating. Kids are not comfortable at school, unfortunately. I want to give you an example. My kids are in high school, one of my kids is in high school, and they only have fifteen minutes to get outside the door of the classroom and throughout the day of 9 to 3:30, and they only get fifteen minutes of recess within the building. I can't imagine at all and won't imagine, it's not understandable how they can achieve. They're always bored, they're always on their tablets where they need to study now a days, the teachers are giving them study hall for only one hour within 120 minutes of the session. The rest of the time, the kids are on their tablets, achieving and achieving, doing the problems and whatever, math, calc, science, etc. what kind of learner are we really willing to see? What is this learner? What do we want to do, [create] robots?

I'm sorry, I would like to deal with reality, I don't want theories. I'm not there. This is why I actually try to at least do something and try to see that within my program, that I can do range of activities. Even my first-grader, she goes fifteen minutes in the morning and fifteen minutes in the afternoon. How can a first-grader, that is seven years old, can live in such an environment? And after all you only have science, math, and English. What would that give me when I'm eighteen years old? So, we're missing life skills and movement of the body, the life of the body, and of being a human being after all. This is where we are at unfortunately and I'm really concerned in this. This is it, this is mainly it.

Amina: Thank you! I can tell you're very passionate about what you're saying and I'm sure listeners can as well. It's a very important topic. I appreciate you sharing that with us today, and I just want to say thank you again for speaking with us. I'm sure we all learned something valuable from what you shared with us today. I look forward to keeping in touch and hearing about the great work that you are doing for Bright Signs or any other organization in the future.

Rania: Great, Amina. Thank you so much. I'm the one who needs to thank you for having me. It's a pleasure, it's really a pleasure.

[transition]

Amina: 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. If you liked what you heard today, please be sure to subscribe and leave a review. That helps other listeners find this content as well! 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 for listening and, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!