

THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast
Transcript for Episode 7: Defining Islamic Education and Human Development
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Host: Amina Derbi Guest: Afeefa Syeed

Amina: Welcome everyone. You are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast of AEMS-PC, the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Policy Center, an education policy think tank at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought. The 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 listen to our podcast on Stitcher, Spotify, iTunes, or Apple Podcasts, Messy FM, Google Play or Podcast Mirror. If you like listening to the content you hear, please subscribe and leave a review at the end. That helps other listeners tune in as well. Just a reminder that we are still collecting applications for IIIT’s new Master’s degree program in partnership with American University.

As mentioned last time, 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. The International Training and Educational 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 U.S. capital of Washington D.C.! This is a one-year 30 credit hour program, beginning July 2019. Sign up today!

For more information, please visit IIIT’s website at iiit.org. Just scroll to the bottom where you see announcements and there it’ll be! So again, to apply, just visit our website, and if you know someone who would be interested in applying, please share this with them! Thanks so much! We look forward to receiving your applications. Good luck to all applicants!

Also, IIIT is currently accepting applications for its annual Summer Student Program. This is an intensive, residential program in Islamic Studies and related subjects designed for graduate and exceptional senior undergraduate students. This program will take place from June 10 to June 28 of this year, applicants should apply by March 15, 2019. To apply, fill out your application, attach your resume, transcript, and a 250-word personal statement at iiit.org/registration. And merit-based scholarships are available.

We are thrilled to introduce our next guest: Afeefa Syeed. As a cultural anthropologist, Afeefa Syeed has worked for over 25 years with development agencies, government offices, and various international and community non-profits and program and policy development in areas of religious engagement, social entrepreneurship, women participation and leadership, civic engagement and good governance. Afeefa developed training, materials, and implemented capacity building programs for policy and development professionals, educators, and civil society representatives in faith and identity, marginalized youth, advocacy on women’s rights in religious contexts and on cultural diversity multiculturalism, and inter-faith cooperation. Afeefa founded a community-based school whose core curriculum includes peace education, service in action, and faith-based learning.

The school has been an incubator and a global model for innovative practices and integrative learning and teaching including creating a curriculum to teach religious studies in a holistic manner. She most recently served as Senior Advisor at US Agency for International Development (USAID), has been scholar consultant for the Carter Center, and is currently research associate with Cambridge University's Institute on Religion and International Studies, and Senior Fellow and Advisory Council Member for Institute for Global Engagement Center for Women, Faith, and Leadership. Afeefa is a regular contributor to various media outlets, and participates as an expert to various think-tank and academic sponsored events, programs, and convenings.

Salam Afeefa, and welcome to Third Spaces Thoughts to Policy! How are you doing today?

Afeefa: Walaikum asalam Amina, doing really well thank you!

Amina: Great, we're very excited for the chance to talk to you today! As someone who's familiar with education in an Islamic context, what do you actually think the future of Islamic education is? Could you define what Islamic education means itself – it's a term that has many different layers and meanings denoted to it, so what is your specific perspective on this?

Afeefa: Well that is a complicated question, because it has a lot of terms we are all figuring out, but I think is evolving in the Muslim community, and the other religious-based school communities. I've been talking to Catholic schools, to Jewish schools, about this whole idea about what does it mean to have a faith-based school. You'd think it's pretty straightforward, well Islamic schools teach Islam, Catholic schools teach Catholicism, Christianity, etc. But I think what's interesting is education itself is an innovative space more than ever before, which means we're looking at different ways of teaching, different ways of learning. It's not to say that we've never had this before which is an issue too, that a lot of people think "oh this innovation means this is all new stuff." Actually, a lot of it is looking at traditional models or even in our case, in Islamic education, looking at models of teaching and learning that were happening way before modern education: what were those like, and why did they work in such a way that we were actually education a holistic set of ideas and so on. That's what is an interesting time now, that we're looking at both education space and what it looks like, and the other side of it which is the religious space and what does it mean to teach religion itself.

So generally speaking, if you have a religious school, you're teaching religion. That's another piece to it. Both the future and present are connected in this, in terms of what the terms look like and what does it look like in practice. And that's really the exciting part, moving away from theory and from this textbook understanding of terms and these practices, and looking at it, here's a school, how are we doing this here, and how can we create a space that's an incubation for innovation, and how can we take that around and pull that out, and to say that this is something that can work in these parameters. Timing wise, this is a pretty neat time to think about Islamic education.

Amina: So, in relation to the vast experience you have in this field, what do you think are the main problems surrounding Muslim countries and education systems currently?

Afeefa: Well, I would say having had the opportunity to work in so many different contexts, both on the policy side, in ministries of education for example, as well as the practical side of school management and so on. I do think that many times our policy folks and our governments and that side of things are a little bit trapped in thinking that we need to first of all go pick up a model and

implement it. I was in many countries where they would say “We want the American model of education!” So what does that mean? That means these textbooks, we want it to look American; they have a sense of what they want, but generally what they want is something imported or something in a box. You just open up this box and you have this whole education system ready to go.

You can say that’s kind of a positive because they want to look for something different. But then of course then the trap can be “what does that mean?” If you’re so limited in saying that it’s something we just need to cut and paste, and bring over, that can be problematic. That is one concern I have of policymakers wanting to do that. The other thing that I think is of concern presently and again, I’ve worked both on the *madrasa* level of religious education and also with people that are doing teacher training in different ministries; I think the other concern is, especially if we’re looking at Islamic education piece of it. It is kind of the same as cookie-cutter, but it’s also, well we don’t want to teach this, this, and this. It’s a very negative attitude of education, especially the Islamic part of it. We don’t want our kids to be x-y-z, or extremism, calling it very specific things, calling it radical-this or radical-that. What happens with that I think is that you get in a mindset of a negative identity of what you are trying to build, in this case education. Then you’re not really looking at it in a positive way – what do we want from our children to get out of education.

Amina: What can the role of NGOs include in terms of educational policy? Can NGOs create a lasting impact on a country’s education policy?

Afeefa: Well, if you look at NGOs as being civil-society actors, generally they are organizations that have come together for a shared cause, or for something that’s looking to better the society as a whole. So, NGOs and civil society actors really need to look at what’s the gap and how we can fill it. Many times, we’ve got competing NGOs. This whole NGO space is really interesting; I’ve also worked on the funding side – looking at who we would fund in a pool of NGOs? So when NGOs are working in education spaces, what is their MO, why are they existing at all? If it is to do some of this other stuff, replicate or duplicate, or continuing the status quo, that’s fine, and some people do want that, but it doesn’t really forward anything in the country as far as -- especially in education. You’re not looking at anything that is innovative or different, and so on. I do think that NGOs as a whole, or as a space, need to think about what are we doing that is important, or value-added, not for the sake of existing as an NGO. Some people perpetuate themselves as an organization, just because, that’s a concern. That’s partly what it is.

At the same time, what I am really interested in seeing is a partnership and sometimes we call it public-private partnership where you bring an NGO or a civil society actor and work with policy folks, and also work with entrepreneurs or business folks and create a space where you’re looking at what do we do differently, and also base it on scholarship and research. So, many times, we’ve done convenings where we’ve brought researchers into the room with practitioners and by practitioners I mean education folks who are in the field themselves, bring them together with research people, and bring in a policy person on top of that, either a funder or a business person who would be in that mix as well, and really look at it holistically. Say “what can we do to not just effect change in a policy environment, but also how would it be sustainable? What does the research to show for that?” So that’s my interest in civil society spaces; how do we expand the breath of it, but also go deeper than just this superficial teacher training her and there. Also to spend time figuring out the things that are not working, but then not get stuck there as well.

Amina: I'm really glad you mentioned public-private partnerships; in order to have a holistic approach, the various actors at the table needed to be seated there included members of the private sector, as well as public sector, and people who are on the ground who are doing actual educating. Thank you for that. So what is human development in your words, and do you have examples of how education and human development are intrinsically intertwined?

Afeefa: This is an interesting conversation to have about human development as a framework because, we can ask anybody, in your words, "what does that mean for you?" Sometimes we get stuck in jargon or lingo, and we're not quite sure what we're each saying, because we're all using the same words but not really talking about what it is.

Amina: Meaning the same thing too sometimes.

Afeefa: Yeah, exactly. I think that's an important conversation to have, just the words we use and assuming that everybody knows what they're about, or that they have the same meanings for everybody. That's a side conversation but I think of it when I hear some of these conversations. In terms of human development, I think what we're looking at especially from an education perspective is the holistic development of a person. When we say human, obviously that means a person, but what we're thinking through is well, in education, in the context of education, in a school for example; really what we are thinking is eight hours a day for example with a child, what are all the different facets that child needs to further themselves? What is the role of the school in that space. When we say holistic, holistic really does mean what is the socioemotional, physical wellbeing of the child, mental wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing. We sort of put all of those pieces together to look at what holistic means. And you really can't have one separated out from the others.

We also understand clearly that in the context of education, holistic approach to education means that the actual knowledge, which is the facts and figures, sticks far more, sticks longer and deeper, when you have all of this other support systems going on. You can learn math, history, science, and so on. Anyone can sit there and read a book about it. But when you do that in a space that's looking at the child holistically, then that child's retention of that information is much more clear and sticks to them; they internalize it more. For me, what's important about this model of the holistic development is how we teach. What we've done in many places that has worked well is that we're not just doing math, science, English, language, and so on in separated buckets and segregated spaces. It's called integrative or interdisciplinary learning and that's really critical.

It means you are looking at human development of a person within the context of learning as a connected web. You're learning about something at the same time. Learning or teaching about plants for example, as scientific phenomenon, learning about planting, but you're also learning at the same time for example, what are the plants that are around the school? That gives you a connection to the place. We call that place-based learning. Knowing that that tree has been here for 100 years, and then you get into history. What has that tree seen over 100 years around this building? That leads to social connections and so on as you're learning about the space around that tree or plant. Perhaps you're reading poetry or literature about trees and plants, and that gets connected into that as well.

Amina: I see. So, you have many different layers that overlap.

Afeefa: Exactly. Of course you're doing math, you're gonna be learning different aspects of plants and how they multiply and so on and so forth. So if you think of it as web like that, then the child or student isn't getting just a one page in a textbook about plants. But you're actually getting it connected in a way that when you walk outside, you can have an appreciation for plants. Not just because they've learned about it but because somehow, they're connected to it. So, we add a dimension to that and say something to the effect that – there's a hadith for example that says, a young plant kind of moves in the wind and bends, and then bends back. You can bring that up in this context, and decipher it, depending on age, some children will say, "that means a person is like a plant," which means that you bend because things are moving around you, but you come back again because you're strong. They're starting to interpret even hadith or spiritual understanding in a way that now connects to their actual understanding of what a plant is physically. That's kind of an example of interconnectedness of teaching but then you can imagine that. Another aspect of it is that how do we take care of plants? Why would we take care of the trees around us?

Amina: Right, responsibility.

Afeefa: Right! And what do trees do for us? And how do we give them back? For example, we've been in a situation where we've all gone and hugged trees. And I've talked to them about it; when you hug a tree, you actually feel the vibration of the tree. It's not hugging you back but you can feel it. That gets into the spiritual dimension – your connection with creation. You've just laid out a whole lesson plan or unit on plants, that goes into all those different aspects I've talked about with the social, the emotional, physical, and so on. Now you've done a lesson that not just gives them the information but gives them something to do with that in their own lives, maybe as a five-year-old as a ten-year-old or as a fourteen-year-old. Moving forward, they can take that lesson and use it in so many other contexts.

Amina: Absolutely, yeah for sure!

[transition]

Amina: That concludes the first half of our interview with Afeefa Syeed today. To catch the second half, please tune in to Episode 8! To stay up-to-date on everything happening in Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, please follow IIIT on Twitter (@IIITfriends) and Instagram (@iiit_insta). 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!