

**THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT’s AEMS Podcast**  
**Transcript for Episode 12: Inclusion, Empathy, and Culturally Responsive Education**  
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**Host: Amina Derbi      Guest: Dr. Debbie Almontaser**

**Amina:** Welcome everyone, you are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast of the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought. We’re very excited to have Dr. Debbie Almontaser on the program with us today.

Dr. Debbie Almontaser is an internationally recognized, award-winning educator, speaker and authority on cross cultural understanding. She is an influential community leader and the Founder and CEO of Bridging Cultures Group, Inc. Dr. Almontaser was the founder and former principal of the Khalil Gibran International Academy in Brooklyn, NY. A twenty-five year veteran of the NYC Public School System, she taught special education, inclusion, trained teachers in literacy, and served as a multicultural specialist and diversity advisor. Currently, she is the Board President of the Muslim Community Network ([www.mcnnny.org](http://www.mcnnny.org)). In 2005, Dr. Almontaser spearheaded the inauguration of Arab Heritage Week in New York City. She also sits on the Public Advocate Tish James’ Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh Task Force to Combat Hate. Dr. Almontaser is a founding board member of The Dialogue Project, Brooklyn Borough President’s New Diversity Task Force and board advisor for the Same Difference Interfaith Alliance. Dr. Almontaser served on the boards of Youth Bridge NY, Women In Islam, Inc., and Saba: The Association of Yemeni Americans. She is a co-founder of Brooklyn Bridges, the September 11th Curriculum Project, We Are All Brooklyn, and Women Against Islamophobia and Racism (WAIR).

Assalamu alaikum Dr. Almontaser. How are you doing today?

**Dr. Almontaser:** Wa alaikum asalaam. I’m doing really well. Thank you so much for having me.

**Amina:** It’s our pleasure, we’re so happy and grateful that you were able to join us today. So, first of all, congratulations on your new book, *Leading While Muslim: The Experiences of American Muslim Principals After 9/11*. Can you please tell our listeners who may not have read it yet what it’s about and what inspired you to write the book?

**Dr. Almontaser:** Absolutely, thank you so much for wanting to share this with your audiences. My book titled, *Leading While Muslim*, is actually research that I had done as a student in a doctoral program where I actually looked at the lived experiences of American Muslim principles working in public education. I wanted to see whether or not the political discourse, the global events, and the media coverage of Islam and Muslims was affecting their leadership and spirituality, and what inspired me to do this was actually my own personal experience as the founding principle of the Khalil Gibran International Academy – the first Arabic dual-language public school in the United States. It was announced in February of 2007 and days afterward, was actually attacked by the Islamophobia industry and presented as a *madrassa*, not a public school that was going to be teaching Arabic as a second language and international curriculum. So sadly, those attacks were started on this school and then eventually on me.

The *New York Post* did an interview with me where they actually distorted my words and took them out-of-context, and published an article that sadly, days after the article, the mayor and the chancellor of the city of New York forced me out of my position, because they caved and pandered to the right-wing Islamophobia industry voices, and also the *New York Post* reporting. So based on that experience, after speaking to a number of fellow academics and educators in the school system, everyone was saying you should look to see what the experiences are of American Muslim school-leaders in public education. I looked to see if there was any data already out there about them, and I found absolutely nothing. There's been a great deal of studies done on American Muslims in Islamic schools but nothing on public and public education. At that point, I realized that I had not only had an obligation but a duty to actually capture the stories of these individuals and help people better understand what the experiences are of American Muslim school-leaders in the United States.

**Amina:** Thank you for sharing that with us. I think it's really noble how you took a personal experience that was so negative and initially damaging, and found the positive out of it and found a way to explore others' situations of what they went through and what we all can collectively learn from that – so hat's off to you for doing that.

**Dr. Almontaser:** Thank you.

**Amina:** You're welcome. So our next question for you is that one chapter in the book is titled "The American Muslim Experience", another one is "Political Climate and Role of Media", and another is "Inferior and Foreign: Being Seen as 'Other' and Unconscious Fear", and one of the chapters is on "Spirituality". So in your opinion, how do the concepts of empathy and sense of belonging play a role in these areas?

**Dr. Almontaser:** Definitely, empathy emerges within the entire book because when you first read the book, it actually tells the story of American Muslims in the Americas. First and foremost, what we have seen over the last thirty years is Islam being portrayed as an immigrant religion versus a fact that Islam has deep roots in the United States. In fact, in North America, before these states became the United States of America. Hearing the stories of people who actually came on ships prior to Columbus and then hearing the stories of enslaved people who were brought here on ships, was really very compelling. When you find out there were 20% of the enslaved people that were brought to the United States were actually Muslim is really astonishing, and people are always shocked to hear that number.

**Amina:** Absolutely.

**Dr. Almontaser:** And shocked to hear that many of them actually fought in all the various wars that have existed within these United States. So just from that perspective, you are like, "wow, I didn't know that the community has been here this long," in addition, empathy also emerges. I'm the first to study American Muslims school leaders in public education. Because there was no literature for me to build my own foundational literature review, I had to look at other communities. Among the various ethnic and racial and religious backgrounds that I looked at, the two that had the most commonalities with Muslims in America were actually Catholics and Jews. What they experienced when they first migrated to this country: the discrimination, the prejudice, the backlash and the

marginalization. As I read through the literature review of these communities, I was just astonished to read what happened to them then is happening now to American Muslims. What I personally got out of that was hope, because today, Catholics and Jews are very well integrated and civically engaged in American society. It gave me hope that the American Muslim community will certainly get there and be able to feel that sense of hope and see it in our lifetime.

As you hear the stories of each of the fourteen people, the data in the book covers the entire collection of data that was done on the fourteen people, but within the book there are only four case studies that really highlight the experiences of school leaders. The reason I only went with four is because if I would've added all fourteen, I would have an 800 page book, which is not what I wanted it to be. I wanted it to be short, I wanted it to be provocative for people to read it. When I say provocative, provocative that they read the experiences of these four case studies, they read the data, and then they are ignited to actually take a proactive stand in standing in solidarity with American Muslims in public education. When I say a stand, the audience that I really want to target for my book is not the American Muslim community because they already know what it feels like to be Muslim because they experience it every day. I wanted the mainstream American society to actually pick up this book and read it and feel a sense of social responsibility to stand up for their Muslim brothers and sisters, and to actually be a part of advocacy work to make sure there are more American Muslim school leaders that are going into public education and advocating on their behalf on issues that are no brainers.

You had mentioned a couple of the chapters; there were findings in the book, what I wanted to do that I mentioned earlier was to look at their lived experiences to see if the political discourse, the global events, and media coverage were affecting their spirituality and leadership. What I looked at was all the things that I believed were causing some of these things. The political climate was something that emerged from the conversation that they all were engaging in during their interviews. What I used as a conceptual framework was the political spectacle which is a theory developed by Murray Edelman. He talks about how everything that surfaces into the media is a political spectacle and even not surfacing in the political media but even within a family or a community and you see the drama. There's always two sides to everything – that's political spectacle. I looked at their experiences from that lens of political spectacle to see what things were happening to them. Some of them have had awful things happen to them, others have not. But they have all experienced a sense of unconscious fear, where they are always fearing losing their jobs because of their identity and also because of this unconscious fear, continually being politically correct to make sure they are not seen or observed as un-American or have an Islamic leaning that people should be afraid of.

It was really fascinating to see how all of this played out. Within this study, something that people are also very surprised is that I originally found twenty people, but only fourteen agreed to participate; the other six were too afraid that their experiences were so unique that their superintendents and their districts would identify them. And the fourteen that were in the book are six African-Americans, who are three women and three men, and then I had Arab Americans from various countries. It was four women and two men. I had someone from Tanzania who was from a Pakistani/Indian background, and then someone from Pakistan who was also a part of the study. To see the diversity of school leadership is really astonishing. When I talk about their lives and their experiences, people are surprised to hear of African-American Muslims, and I'm like, yes they're

here, they exist, they've been here, and they're contributing to American society in ways that we have not paid homage to their experiences.

**Amina:** Thank you very much for highlighting that. So the reason I asked you specifically about the concepts of empathy and sense of belonging, as some of our listeners are familiar with, here at IIT or the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Program we have a project called "Mapping the Terrain" where IIT is utilizing its contacts in its global offices around the world to collect data to see to what extent the constructs of empathy, forgiveness, moral reasoning, community mindedness, and also sense of belonging are present in schools in "Muslim societies." For IIT, we've noticed that there is a lot of research on education reform for Muslim societies in what we call the first space, which focuses more on education with utilitarian purposes. For example, getting a job after graduation. There is some research on the second space, which focuses more on education reform for civic education – focusing more about civic duty and how to participate civically. But there is a lack of research in what we refer to as the third space, which includes the first and second spaces but includes the socio-emotional aspects of the individual – those softer areas that aren't necessarily focused on in education reform research [in Muslim societies] but we argue are very important for overall wellbeing for students and societies as a whole.

I'm going to dive into the next question for you. You've had many accomplishments over the years and have contributed very much in the spaces of education and cross-cultural understanding, as well as so many other areas. One of these feats includes being the founder and former principal of Khalil Gibran International Academy, as you mentioned earlier in this interview. The stated mission of the Academy, which is a New York City public school, is to develop, maintain, and graduate life-long learners who have a deep understanding of different cultural perspectives, a love of learning and a desire for excellence with integrity". According to the Academy, the school "promotes holistic student development, encouraging its scholars in their social, emotional, physical and intellectual growth. Can you tell us a bit more about how social and emotional growth are supported by the school?

**Dr. Almontaser:** Sure, it's important to note that I'm not with the school any longer - I haven't been there for quite a long time. But I can tell you, as its founder and developing it from a seed idea and hearing the description that you've read, those were really critical for us as a founding principle, for me, that every child walked in through the door was holistically seen as a human being, and all of his and her socioemotional needs need to be met in order for them to succeed and prosper in their education. That for me, came from years of working in the school system and seeing the struggles that Arab and Muslim students, and students of color have experienced, across the school system. As someone who worked tirelessly, and one of the co-founders of the Muslim Holidays Coalition in New York City, which after 15 years of advocacy work, we were able to get the Muslim holidays on the school calendar. For me, as a principle then, it was based on my lifelong advocacy work to make sure that every child felt the sense of inclusion and recognition for who they are and where they come from. When we are able to do that for every child and give them that kind of recognition, they are able to learn no matter where they come from and no matter what their religion is.

That was really critical for me to establish. Here we are now in 2019, the struggle for inclusion and recognition continues. I've spent the last year and a half working with advocates and the New York City Council to advocate funding for halal and kosher food in the school system. Today in the New

York City schools, we believe that one and every six children in the New York City public school system is Muslim. No child should spend the entire day hungry because they have to choose their faith over their education. That was what I really wanted to see happen for every child as the principal of Khalil Gibran International Academy and even within the larger community. It was supposed to be an institution that was supposed to be a community center that was going to provide education and cultural opportunities for all of its neighbors to learn about the rich history and culture of the Arab peoples. What's interesting is when the school opened, 70% of our student body was actually African American and Latino versus the number of Arabic-speaking students and their families who chose the school.

**Amina:** That's so interesting, why do you think those students or the parents of those students from those communities chose your school?

**Dr. Almontaser:** The reason they chose it was because they saw the possibilities of it providing their children with the opportunity to become equally proficient in Arabic to able to compete for international careers. It was the first school of its kind. They saw the UN affiliation, the international baccalaureate affiliation; these are the things that made it appealing to parents. It was from grade six to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. They were thinking, my child is going to get this. They are going to learn Arabic in seven years here, and they are going to do something powerful with their lives. That's what they saw, and they saw the potential that the school had to provide their children. That was really one thing, they were enrolling. They were disregarding what they were hearing in the media – they were really fascinated.

**Amina:** Wonderful. Some would say that you are the “go to person” on cultural and religious diversity issues for Borough President Eric Adams, the Mayor's office of Immigrant Affairs, New York Police Department and New York City Council members. What would you say has been the most challenging issue to provide advice on and why?

**Dr. Almontaser:** I think that thing that's been the most challenging to provide advice is really helping them thoroughly understand how Muslims observe. For example, everyone now in New York City, we're so grateful they know what Ramadan is and how we fast from sunrise to sunset. The small things of explaining what you can do and can't do during fasting and for people, sometimes it's really difficult for them to accept the fact that, yes, you can't have even water. Helping them being much more culturally sensitive to the fact of what Ramadan is, how we observe it, and approaching that conversation in a dignified and respectful way that you're not sounding ignorant or offensive is something I've worked very hard on. In addition to that, around healthcare issues, and the communication issues between male and females who are observant – whether you shake hands or you don't shake hands, what should you do when you are meeting someone for the first time. My thing has been, do not put your hand out, if they put their hand out then you shake their hand. But you wait for their queue, so that way you're not offending anybody. Along the lines of the basic things of communication but also understanding the vast diversity of the Muslim community; that's something many of our elected officials have no idea.

This came to a boiling point with the Muslim ban. They had no idea who was from the six Muslim countries, and they assumed that everybody in the United States was basically being banned, and we

had to say well no not exactly, these are the countries, these are the people from those countries, and this is how you should be working with them. Sadly, we even had members of the American Muslim community who are also doing immediate organizing around the Muslim ban without even checking in or bringing to the table the very directly impacted countries, individuals from those countries to speak for themselves, and also to lead the advocacy on the behalf of their communities. That was something that we worked on through conversations on a variety of things to help people understand that we need to better understand the diversity within these communities.

**Amina:** I think it's great that you highlighted that the Muslim community is not monolithic, and that there is diversity within that community, in terms of ethnicity, country of origin, or heritage, but also in terms of views on religious interpretation, and level of being "practicing" and what that means to different people. I'm glad you highlighted that because that's important. And so, our next question for you...you are also co-founder of the September 11th Curriculum Project. What is the purpose of this project, what has it accomplished so far in classrooms, and what does it seek to achieve moving forward?

**Dr. Almontaser:** This project emerged in the aftermath of September 11, here in NYC. The school system was not doing a good job in providing teachers curriculum and materials to help them teach about 9/11 and the impact it had on various communities. What we did at that point, was a group of educators came together and put together this robust, resource of sources of materials as resources for teachers across the city. We provided monthly teach-ins where we invited teachers to come for this. We had speakers who we contacted and had them go to schools. It served a really important purpose in the first couple of years after 9/11 for public school teachers because of that void. Since those days, we've been able to do a lot of policy work in New York City to get the school system to be more deliberate and reflective incorporating curriculum and materials about all of these different ethnic and racial group settings in New York City. What has materialized from that advocacy is that now in New York City we've adopted culturally responsive education, which is getting teachers and school leaders to create curriculum within their schools that are reflective of the varied children in their classrooms. What has come out of all of that advocacy and also desegregating our school systems is this diversity and advisory group that I was invited by the school system to sit on with a number of other activists, organizers, academics, and educators to help the school system to be cognizant of all of these issues. So today, we're very fortunate to have culturally responsive education as one of our pillars to help teachers incorporate diversity in their classrooms and across schools in New York City to make sure that every child is seen and heard and valued and celebrated for where they come from and what they have to offer.

**Amina:** I see. This might seem like an obvious question, but it may be good to explain this more if you could for us. Why is culturally responsive education so important?

**Dr. Almontaser:** It's very important to incorporate culturally responsive education across the board because in order for a child to be able to sit in a classroom and to succeed in his or her education, a teacher needs to be able to connect with that child, not just from an academic stance, but socially and emotionally. Once you get to know your child from a social and emotional aspect, you get to learn of the beautiful culture that this child is coming from. When we're able to honor every child for the culture, religion, where they come from, and see them holistically as part of a school community is when they will really feel a sense of success. The purpose for pushing culturally

responsive education was we had a lot of students who felt that they had to suspend multiple identities at the door and confine to one identity. What we were saying is no – you don't have to live this way. You should be entering that door in your fullness. Your teachers, your principal, your peers should be able to know who you are. Because of the push for culturally responsive education, we believe that it'll help mitigate bullying and bigotry that exist. It is such a rare opportunity to be sitting in a classroom where there are five, six faith traditions. Having the children share about what they do for their holidays will help demystify for their peers what they actually do on their holidays. It'll counter the negative things they hear about Islam and Muslims in the media.

**Amina:** Absolutely! Well thank you very much again Dr. Almontaser for taking the time to join us on the podcast today. We really appreciate your insights, and I'm sure our listeners benefited tremendously from what you shared. We look forward to being kept up-to-date on all your future endeavors.

**Dr. Almontaser:** Thank you so much! I really appreciated being on your show today! Thank you. I want to wish you and all your listeners an Eid Mubarak! Eid is coming around the corner.

**Amina:** Thank you, that's lovely. We wish the same to you as well.

**Dr. Almontaser:** Thank you! So we will be celebrating it with our children in the public school system here. This is our third year to have Eid on the school calendar, so we're really happy.

**Amina:** That's amazing, congratulations!

To all our listeners as a reminder, you can listen to this podcast on Stitcher, Google Play, Spotify, iTunes, or Apple Podcasts, and Messy.FM, as well as Podcast Mirror. Also, as always the observations and conclusions featured in this podcast represent the speaker's own personal views and experiences, not the organization's.

As mentioned last time, IIIT is currently accepted applications for its Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Master's degree program in partnership with American University. The International Training and Education Program – Advancing Education in Muslim Societies – also known as 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. This program can be completed in one year and it is thirty credits! For more information or if you are interested in applying, please visit [www.iiit.org](http://www.iiit.org), then you can scroll to the bottom and you'll find the announcement.

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, 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@iiit.org](mailto:amina@iiit.org). As always, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!