

Speaking Up and Speaking Out

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AUTHOR'S DISCLAIMER:

I omit the names of countries and cities in this piece to focus on the familiarity of shared experiences, and therefore, understand them in the context of community.

MY BORDERS ARE NOT STRAIGHT LINES

In alignment with the Peace Learning Center's Growing up in exile is a badge I wear with pride, launching me into uncharted pathways that shaped my personal and professional life. While I continue to not have access to my parents' hometown, one of the largest and oldest cities in the Mediterranean region, my community-in-exile became expansive. I was five years old when I woke up one day in a different country, then crossed continents and moved through two more countries that same year. With a brutal regime installed by a western power to dispose of a people, safety became a rare commodity that was more urgent than food or water. One of the earliest skills I had to master was learning to discriminate, and to be swift to judge. After all, discerning which strangers are the "good guys" and which are the "bad guys" can mean the difference between life and death. What I admired about my parents the most is that despite moving through five countries in three years, losing many family members and friends, and being financially ruined, they were adamant about our confidence knowing that we belong to millions of people around the world and throughout history who resisted tyranny and oppression. We were not alone and we were not special. We are as strong as the community we belong to.

For the exiled, community took the place of a hometown, grandparents, a neighborhood park, a school cafeteria, and a classroom. My early reading practice was using literature of resistance, our games were real-life scenarios of injustices set in different countries, and our bedtime stories were about dignity, agency, and accountability. The accumulated knowledge that I carried into my first official classroom got me into a lot of trouble. I was a nine-year-old who was placed arbitrarily into fifth grade in a small but intensely diverse town. Children in my class were from ten or more different countries stretching from Thailand to Mauritania. This only confirmed my parents' claim that we belonged to a global and historic community of those who were displaced and those who resisted. Consequently, I never felt like a minority even when I was minoritized and bluntly marginalized. From my vantage point, being in-community transcended labels and check-boxes; I could do in-community what was not feasible to achieve alone.

Fast forward to my senior year of high school, it had been the longest I lived in any one city.

However, due to our legal, yet illegitimate status, we were not allowed to attend college nor obtain a work permit. One by one I would witness people I knew leave, not anywhere familiar, but to any country that would allow them to work and/or study. For many, every move meant rebuilding life again, and for that reason, learning to find community made the journey meaningful. I moved to the U.S. at the age of seventeen and started my own journey learning English at an East-Coast state

university. It was the first time in my life that I heard my experience described as “complicated.” I was only “complicated” to those who wanted my borders straight and my boxes neatly checked. Community-in-exile did not teach me to dissect myself into ethnicity, race, culture, religion, place of birth, and place of residence in order to be understood. I was whole. However, only those who dared to engage with me knew that, especially considering that it is impossible to grasp such knowledge from a textbook or an observation. There is so much lost by relying on someone to tell you about people they do not know.

As we moved countries, we moved systems. The political climate in each country dictated what students must learn in order to uphold what is of value to the state. Hence, much of social studies under dictatorships was propaganda, asserting power and maintaining the status quo. I recall my parents and older siblings regularly going through my social studies content, sifting through disinformation. While many locals are socialized to not question schools and curriculum, my community-in-exile did not accept propaganda for knowledge. Keep in mind that dictatorships make no claim for freedom, liberty, dignity, or individual rights. Therefore, when I started my own family in the U.S., worrying about unreliable and biased education was the last thing on my mind. If the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are what distinguished America around the world, it can be reasonable to expect that every child graduating after twelve years of schooling will know precisely

what it means to be an American and belong to a democratic society.

Engaging with the public school system started with one request from a world history teacher asking my husband and I to present “ourselves” to tenth graders who were studying the chapter on Islam. At the time, I was working in media post-production preparing to

continue my graduate studies in film. As more requests began to flow in, it became apparent that there was high demand with limited supply. I started inviting teachers to meet with me one-on-one so that I could learn from them how to be better equipped to meet their needs. Based on students' questions in the classroom, I also inquired about the content of textbooks being used and the teachers' previous knowledge about my faith-based community. Meanwhile, I connected with a few other professionals who had also been taking requests from various school districts. We compared notes and agreed that we needed to share resources for a more effective engagement with teachers, given that their requests exceeded our free-time capacity. While it was not our goal to be the representatives of our entire faith group locally or worldwide, we wanted to create a community-based network with one goal in mind: to never turn away a teacher.

It serves education well to connect teachers who are seeking information and support to the plurality of stories within our community. Their requests were diverse as well, some wanted their students to meet a young Muslim student their age, others wanted their students to hear a refugee tell their own story, some asked for video or book recommendations, and some requested help with creating class activities and worksheets. Teachers often cited that their primary reason for engaging with our community was to enrich their students' learning by providing them the opportunity to interact with those who differ in their beliefs, worldview, and life journey. We developed a model to train community members to meet teachers' demands, keeping in mind the risk teachers take by bringing outsiders into their classrooms. Accordingly, we developed a 7-step certification that honored the teachers' trust in our team and allowed for a more meaningful, yet systemic community engagement. Over the course of two years, our team expanded to twenty-two certified individuals and four advisors/scholars who would review content and evaluate applicants. After I joined the human relations and equity commission

of one of the largest school districts in the nation as a community liaison, the lead officer noted to the rest of the team that the district should use such a certification process for all guest speakers visiting schools in the district. While this testimony was flattering, it was a confirmation that we can do in-community what we cannot do alone.

My experience through this community-based nonprofit created new uncharted pathways to consult for a couple of textbook publishers, conduct teachers' training for several districts, and work with a few local teacher education departments. Listening to social studies teachers was critical for the success of our engagement since teachers did not only explain what they were looking for but also generously evaluated what we offered and provided thoughtful feedback. Today, as a doctoral student, I build on such engagement. I seek to ground my work in evidence-based scholarship to create a more comprehensive approach to support social studies teachers. My research aims to fill a gap between what social studies teachers are expected to impart to their students and what they gained in their own education and training. Communities, as co-producers of knowledge, offer teachers an authentic curriculum that centers dialogue and values differences to provide their students with education fit for the twenty-first century.

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