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The Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC) is a grassroots organization working to empower and organize our community towards justice and self-determination for all. AROC members build community power in the Bay Area by participating in leadership development, political education, and organizing for social change. In 2008, Arab youth—ranging in ages from 14 to 22—came together for an 8-day leadership training program that was made possible through a grant from the Akonadi Foundation. The experience was so empowering that the youth participants decided to continue their work together and to extend that work towards the betterment of not only the Arab community, but for other marginalized groups in the bay area. This decision marked the formation of Arab Youth Organizing (AYO). Developing a strong and organized base of Arab youth paved the way for AROC to deepen relationships with the larger community and to build out its adult membership.

Since its founding, AYO expanded to include weekly leadership development programs for Arab and Muslim youth across the Bay Area, and within the Oakland and San Francisco Unified School Districts. AYO leaders gain the organizing skills to be able to successfully lead campaigns that advance racial and economic justice. Through AYO, Arab youth are able to identify and articulate their concerns, come up with ways to address them, and envision the world they are collectively building alongside other movements for social change.

What follows is a report on AYO’s most recent youth-led survey exploring the representation and experience of Arabs and Muslims in San Francisco Bay Area schools. The report concludes with a series of recommendations to schools and districts based on the results.

In 2012 AYO went through a campaign identification process where they identified key issues that impacted Arab youth in the U.S. They identified that the lack of representation and misinformation about Arabs and Muslims within the education system plays a role in generating orientalist and Islamophobic preconceived notions of our community.

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1 Orientalism, a term coined by the late Edward Said, refers to the representation of Asia, especially the Middle East, through a colonial view using stereotypes.
Two questions helped guide AYO youth to develop the survey that they distributed [to Arab and non-Arab students] throughout San Francisco Bay Area high schools: “How does the current public school curriculum affect how youth perceive Arabs?” and “What is the impact of school curriculum on the Arab community in the San Francisco Bay Area?” This became the lead-off for the youth-led campaign titled Teaching Understanding and Representing Arabs Throughout History (TURATH).

The survey contained 14 questions focusing on students’ knowledge of Arabs, access to Arab narratives in the classroom, and the experience of racism in the schools. The TURATH survey results highlighted what AYO already knew from their personal experiences - there existed a lack of representation of Arabs and Muslims in the school curriculum along with hate and racism being fostered and tolerated by students and faculty.

AYO acted on recommendations found in their TURATH report by deciding to fight for more representation and inclusion through language access. In 2013, AYO launched a campaign with parent leaders and AROC’s adult membership to advocate for Arabic interpreters within the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) in order to support family engagement. Our organizing and advocacy efforts were successful as SFUSD hired two Arabic interpreters shortly after.

Following this successful campaign, AYO learned that SFUSD’s world language pathway program offered over twelve languages in K-12 schools except for Arabic and Vietnamese. AYO and AROC then launched a second campaign with partner organizations Teachers 4 Social Justice and the Vietnamese Youth Development Center (now known as the South East Asian Development Center) to advocate for language pathways in our respective languages. After a year of organizing, the Board of Education passed a resolution in 2015 to implement Arabic and Vietnamese language pathways. The resolution was met with aggressive anti-Arab and Islamophobic attacks from a number of political interest groups. The attacks resulted in the stalling of the Arabic and Vietnamese pathways in addition to the suspension of AROC’s Arab youth programming in SFUSD. After three years of defending our win, the Arabic pathways program was implemented in Redding Elementary, Marina Middle School and Mission High School in 2019, and AROC’s Arab youth programming resumed across the district.
Once Arab youth programming and Arabic language pathways resumed in SFUSD, AYO decided it was time to re-examine the experiences of Arab youth in high schools under the current political climate. At their weekly Friday meetings in the AROC office, AYO leaders shared their experiences with racism and bigotry under the Trump Administration. Although they were coming from different high schools throughout the bay area, they realized how common and how intensifying Islamophobia was inside their schools, within their cities and in the media.

AYO leaders then reviewed the TURATH report from 2012 and concluded that the results were still major issues of concern. By comparing the 2012 findings with their personal experiences in 2019, AYO also recognized the role that the political climate plays in their everyday lives. Their analysis revealed to them how the hate rhetoric and policy decisions of the Trump Administration fueled the spike in anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hate violence that hasn’t been seen since 9/11. Since Arab youth are often witnesses to these encounters with hate, AYO Leaders were decisive in developing a new campaign in support of Arab youth and the larger Arab community. Building off the success of the first TURATH report, the TURATH II survey would help AYO identify the scope and scale of problems and determine the solutions for change.

TURATH II objectives included:

- Gathering updated data related to Arab youth experience given the rise of white supremacy, xenophobia and racism fostered by the Trump Administration
- Raising awareness about the Arab and Muslim youth experiences
- Identifying recommended solutions to the impact of these conditions

AYO compared the political climate in 2012 to that of 2019 and recognized the role the political landscape plays in their everyday lived experience. They witnessed a spike in hate violence against Arabs and Muslims with Trump in office not seen since 9/11.
Methodology

AYO understood that they are the experts of their own experiences and they needed to push for the changes they believed would make schools a safer place for them and their peers. AYO studied the TURATH survey questions and results from 2012 and used them to create new survey questions to document their experiences of bigotry by classmates, teachers and staff. They created two separate surveys—one for students and another for staff.

Questions were developed in facilitated groups after discussing their experiences, assumptions, and curiosities. They also looked at relevant questions from the 2012 TURATH survey. They narrowed these down to 19 questions for students and 14 for staff. Questions were in multiple choice, short answer and ‘yes or no’ formats.

The survey questions for students focused on what Arab representation looked like in the classroom, where they learned and what they knew about Arabs and Muslims, and what their experiences were with anti-Arab & anti-Muslim discrimination. Students were asked to identify their background including school, gender, grade, and ethnicity.

Similarly, the surveys distributed to teachers and faculty were made up of questions related to representation of Arabs and Muslims in the classroom, confidence in teaching about our communities, and witnessing discrimination. Teachers and faculty were also asked questions about their demographic backgrounds.

Between April and May 2019, AYO collected 310 student surveys and 33 staff surveys from 13 high schools across the Bay Area! Physical surveys were distributed through AYO youth to students and staff on their campus. Surveys were also shared online through a google form. AYO Leaders entered survey responses from the physical copies into the google forms.

In addition to surveys, AROC facilitated four youth listening sessions at different school sites. Listening session questions similarly explored experiences of racism, bigotry, inclusion, and representation in schools and beyond. Results from the listening sessions were synthesized into key themes.
Students Survey Questions & Responses

AYO In Their Own Words

Below are quotes from Arab youth gathered during our listening sessions.

“I have been defending my people and culture since I started school. I find that I always have to fact check my teachers, especially my history teachers.”

“I have been made fun of for being Arab and Muslim. I have been called a terrorist, a camel rider, and oppressed.”

“I had a teacher call Arab women oppressed because they cover their hair and that Arab men are rapist. I had my counselor switch me out of her class.”

“Students would drop pencils near us and yell “boom its a bomb!”

“My history teacher repeatedly asked if he could call me “Middle East” because my name is too hard to pronounce.”

“Teachers expect me to comment when they teach about Arabs and Muslims.”

“I am always dismissed as the angry Middle Eastern kid who is overly emotional when it comes to discussing issues that relate to me.”

“When the New Zealand shooting happened, my family was scared to go to the masjid. We were worried racists would target mosques.”

“One time a person chased me and my friends down in the Tenderloin screaming racist things at us, we were all wearing hijab.”
“I think having Arabic at Mission and Redding does make a difference, I remember going to meetings with the principal, we saw our mom’s work hard and now my brother is a part of the program.”

“I think representation is really important. It sucks to not see ourselves in history books. We get a few pages while other communities get whole sections. When they do show our history, it’s not right. We’re misrepresented.”

One of the most shocking and racist experiences that I had to overcome and learn from was from junior year in high school. My classmates and I were discussing the FBI watchlist, and suddenly my science teacher approached our lab table and asked me, “Are you on the list?” I stood there speechless. I said no. Then she laughed and walked away. I left that day questioning whether or not I look like a terrorist. These types of racist interactions made me resort to attempting to assimilate to white culture. I altered my image by straightening my curls. I didn’t want to be identified as a terrorist.

Hedaia
My classmates and I were discussing the FBI watchlist, and suddenly my science teacher approached our lab table and asked me, “Are you on the list?”
The Questionnaire

We started our questionnaire by asking ‘What are the first two things that come to mind when you hear the words Arab and Muslim?’ The information graphic below illustrates what we learned.
AYO youth leaders also decided to separate the 1st survey question responses by demographics. This is what we found.

Non Arab/Muslim/South Asian/Middle Eastern Responses

Arab/Muslim/South Asian/Middle Eastern Responses
Section I: Knowledge on Arabs

Section I highlights where students receive the majority of their information on Arabs and Muslims.

Students were asked two questions about where they receive information on Arabs and Muslims. The first question asked about their specific experiences at school with 43.2% responding that they learned about the Arab & Muslim community through ‘Teachers and Curriculum.’ The second question asked how they generally get their information regardless if it is inside or outside of school. When combining responses for the Internet (39%) and Television (27.1%), a 66.1% majority get their information from media while only 2.3% stated they get information from schools!

Where do you learn about Arabs and Muslims while in school?

- Teachers & Curriculum: 43.9%
- Friends: 39.0%
- Media: 4.9%
- Myself: 1.5%
- None: 10.8%
When students were asked, ‘How much time have you spent this year learning about Arab history and or culture?’, 61.5% of students claimed ‘No Time’ was spent in the classroom.

How much time have you spent this year learning about Arab history and/or culture?

- No Time: 61.5%
- One Unit: 13.9%
- One Class: 16.2%
- Multiple Units: 8.4%
When we asked students if they had an Arab or Muslim speaker in the class only 23% said yes and over 75% said no or that they didn’t know.

Have you ever had an Arab or Muslim speaker in your class?

- Yes: 23.6%
- No: 57.7%
- I Don’t Know: 18.7%
I have experienced discrimination at school for being Arab since elementary school. Once when a classmate found out my sister and I were Palestinian, he began harassing us by making claims that our country doesn’t exist and that we were killers. A month later, my mom took it up with the teacher who barely acknowledged it. Support from faculty is nearly nonexistent. There is also the example of the time my friend heard someone call me a terrorist and we told the principal. That boy was about to get suspended but his mom flaunted her money and threatened him so administration ignored my complaints. Racism at school once got to the point where I felt physically unsafe. Once a bunch of boys I barely knew harassed me for months threatening to hurt me. My experience as a student include dealing with microaggressions with a few very racist outbursts.

Khalid

Once when a classmate found out my sister and I were Palestinian, he began harassing us by making claims that our country doesn’t exist and that we were killers.
Section II: Discrimination and Racism

We asked students about discrimination on campus to highlight whether or not this is happening in the classroom and if anyone is doing anything about it.

Have you seen any discrimination against Arabs or Muslims take place on campus?

- I Don’t Know: 3%
- Yes: 27%
- No: 70%
The findings demonstrated that both students and faculty have participated in forms of discrimination against Arab and Muslim students. We also asked students if they have ever directly participated in discrimination. 3.5% claimed they have. Close to 95% said they have not. This leads us to wonder whether students are unable to recognize or admit that they are participating in acts of discrimination since 41.9% of Teacher/Faculty responded yes to hearing racial slurs towards Arab & Muslim students, which contradicts the low 3.5% of students who had self-reported (see page 16). Those who recognized that they may have participated in acts of discrimination were asked to share examples of what that looked like. One student stated they used the term “suicide bomber” to describe Arab students. Another indicated that they make fun of young girls who wear the hijab.
Teacher Survey Questions & Responses

The surveys distributed to teachers asked them questions related to witnessing discrimination against their Arab and Muslim students as well as if they felt confident enough to teach about the Arab and Muslim community.

**Have you ever discriminated against Arabs or Muslims on campus?**

- None: 1.7%
- Yes: 3.5%
- No: 94.8%

**Have you heard any slurs against Arabs or Muslims by your students?**

- Not Sure: 9.7%
- Yes: 41.9%
- No: 48.4%
About 42% of teachers stated they have witnessed discrimination. Nearly 30% of teachers surveyed don’t feel comfortable or lack confidence when it comes to teaching about Arabs or Muslims in their classroom. While it was encouraging to see that 70% of the teachers felt confident teaching about Arab & Muslims in their classrooms, we grappled with what it means to have only 2.3% of students identify that school is their source for learning as opposed to the higher percentage of students who chose the internet (39%) and television (27.1%). Were these percentages a reflection of inadequate school curriculum design, an indicator of teachers having confidence but lacking the cultural competency to teach the curriculum, or an affirmation of the political climate that has successfully used the media to demonize the community? Future surveys and focus groups will be needed to answer these questions.

As an Arab student I have felt discriminated against multiple times. In seventh grade we learned about Islam. There were many occasions where students would drop pencils and yell “there’s a bomb” and other occasions where they would say “Allahu Akbar” in an islamophobic way. Now as a high school student, there are still people who yell “Allahu Akbar” around me. I speak out and many other students join me. These other students make me feel supported on campus, unlike the educators.

There were many occasions where students would drop pencils and yell “there’s a bomb” and other occasions where they would say “Allahu Akbar” in an islamophobic way.

Neda
Do you feel uncomfortable or lack confidence in teaching about Arabs or Muslims in your classroom?

- **No**: 71.9%
- **Yes**: 28.1%

**Schools AYO Surveyed**

What school do you attend?

- Arroyo High School
- San Leandro High School
- George Washington High School
- Lincoln High School
- Galileo Academy
- Lowell High School
- Balboa High School
- Carlmont High School
- McClymonds High School
- Raoul Wallenberg High School
- None
- Fremont High School
- Mission High School

*TURATH 2020 Report*
AYO Recommendations

After analyzing the results of the TURATH II survey, conducting interviews with stakeholders, and holding listening sessions with Arab youth, AYO drew up this list of recommendations for schools and districts that would better the experiences of Arab and Muslim students. In part these recommendations are based on an understanding of the history and impact of the Ethnic Studies movement and its implementation in San Francisco Unified School District, as well as the success of the Arabic language pathway in SFUSD.

District Wide Reforms

- Support Ethnic Studies programs and include curriculum on Arab American studies as part of Ethnic Studies.

- Increase Arab teachers and staff across the district.

- Establish Arabic language programs, and support existing programs as a form of institutional support for Arab families.

- Accommodate major Muslim holidays and allow absences for students who observe them.

- Have Arab-led professional development for staff and teachers.

- Partner with community-based organizations that serve the Arab and Muslim communities.

- Increase resources for mental health, including funding, programming and staffing.

- Support efforts to collect more demographic data on Arabs. Currently there is no demographic selection designating Arab on any school forms when choosing race or ethnicity, so there is little to no way for many districts to track the population of Arabs in the schools.
School-wide Recommendations

• Organize school assemblies that address experiences of Arabs and Muslims with racism and discrimination.

• Conduct “Break the Walls” community sessions that bring different students together to share experiences and connections

• Support Arab youth-led video and writing projects that reflect their experiences as Arab Americans.

• Stock school libraries with books (from recommended list) on Arab American experience

• Establish and support Arab-led youth programs during school days

• Create space for young women’s programs for Arab girls

• Educate teachers and staff to be able to address significant social or political issues that arise impacting the Arab or Muslim community

These recommendations are made in an effort to address the immediate needs of Arab students, and provide avenues for schools and districts to strengthen their abilities to play a transformative and empowering role in the lives of marginalized young people. History has demonstrated that through community led efforts to advocate for change, society as a whole expands its horizons, and in turn, makes room for more human potential. We encourage advocates, organizers, stake-holders, and the community to consider what would be made possible if every student was able to experience education as a vehicle that enabled them to live towards their fullest potential, and to consider the implementation of these recommendations as one step towards that future.

“For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”

— Paulo Freire