

5 Reasons to Teach *This Is Where I Need To Be*

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1 It sheds light on a growing demographic that has been frequently misrepresented in post 9/11 America.

Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States and Muslim students are increasingly visible in classrooms. Muslim children come in all colors, races, ethnicities, and nationalities; some are religious while others are not. Yet, widespread Islamophobia in the wake of 9/11 makes many Muslim youth feel marginalized from the mainstream.

This Is Where I Need To Be personalizes the experience of being Muslim and shows the diversity of its representation among youth from a cross-section of New York City's ethnic communities. It allows youth to speak for themselves and to represent their religiosity in discourse that is unfiltered by the news media, movies, and prejudices inherited from history and contemporary political propaganda. At the same time, it demonstrates that just as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class can be anchors of identity, religion too can be a salient marker of identity for children and young adults.

2 It promotes tolerance in multicultural classrooms.

Despite the season of hope heralded by the election of Barack Obama, there are still entrenched suspicions and profound misconceptions about Islam and Muslim culture. It is important to seize the momentum of a new era of tolerance as an unparalleled opportunity to correct the enduring fears and misperceptions that feed into Islamophobia.

Educators need to recognize that Muslim youth are a growing segment of the public school enrollment in the United States. Children of immigrants who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s are now adults, and they are starting families—the second generation. These American Muslims and their children—the emerging third generation—are more connected to American culture, society and values than their immigrant parents and grandparents. Educators thus are in a privileged position to weave American Muslim youth into the fabric of their multicultural classrooms.

This book gives needed attention to the fact that Muslims are very much a part of the fabric of American religious diversity. It is a contribution toward dispelling many of the essentializing stereotypes that continue to cast Islam as one of the most misunderstood world religions in modern history.

3 It reflects the diversity and varied experiences of Muslim youth in the United States.

The Muslim community in New York City is a microcosm of the diversity of the Muslim population throughout the United States. Virtually every variety of immigrant group is represented be it South Asian, Arab, African, Southeast Asian or Eastern European, not to mention indigenous American Muslims of African American, Latino and white European ancestry.

The stories in *This Is Where I Need To Be* grow from the experiences and perspectives of youth in public high schools. These are the lives of youth who represent a cross-section of the diversity of American Muslims in the United States. The stories reflect the variety of urban school environments in the U.S.: large and small, selective and regular, and all very diverse. Thus, any student who reads these stories, whether Muslim or not, will recognize something familiar while at the same time discovering something new.

4 It offers multidisciplinary teaching opportunities for the busy instructor.

This guide provides ready-made and adaptable lesson plans that are augmented with supplementary resources. It is a valuable didactic device that is intended to open opportunities and possibilities for all readers, young and old, and from all backgrounds to critically explore, discover, and interpret what is particular, universal and ordinary, and extraordinary in the lives, feelings, attitudes, experiences, aspirations and frustrations of Muslim American youth. It will help reduce any apprehensions that the average teacher may have in tackling content, themes or topics about which they may have little or incomplete knowledge.

Even though the book represents a specific literary genre—oral history—the curriculum guide provides a rich variety of content, ideas, activities, and supplementary resources that makes the book suitable not only for language arts, but also for arts and humanities, social studies, and American history.

5 It invites students to engage with oral history.

Reading oral history and doing oral history are transformative experiences. Oral history can stimulate critical reflection and curiosity and even lead to a profound understanding of people, places, times and events that conventional historiography usually trivializes.

Oral history creates narratives that recount ordinary lives of people who would otherwise never make it into history books, let alone have the opportunity to speak for themselves. It gives the reader an intimate connection to someone they might otherwise never get to know: the person they silently sit next to on a subway train or nonchalantly pass in the school hallway. In the words of Studs Terkel, oral history allows "people to talk to one another no matter what their difference of opinion might be." *

* From *Hope Dies Last: Making a Difference in an Indifferent World* (Granta Books, 2005) by Studs Terkel. Also excerpted in *The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World* (Seven Stories Press, 2008) by Bob Abernethy, William Bole and Tom Brokaw.