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EDUC 800
Final Paper – Topic Rationale

Why Is What We Perceive As Different Often Looked At In a Negative Light? Perceptions of Muslims and Arabs after 9/11

Background

I have been living in Virginia for nearly six years, previously coming from New Jersey. In April 1998, two state troopers shot three black men on the New Jersey Turnpike and my home state was thrust into the national spotlight for racial profiling. The case, in which the charges against the troopers were later dismissed, put New Jersey on the national map as the state where young black men could not go without being stopped by the police for no reason. The ACLU and various other groups condemned the actions of the police and the courts. Different, in this case, African-American, was perceived in a negative light. Racial tensions, especially in urban centers and along the New Jersey Turnpike on the way to the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels ran high.

Fast forward to September 11, 2001. I was an English teacher in Monmouth County, and living in Middlesex County, not far from New Jersey Turnpike Exit 9 – New Brunswick. On the morning of September 11th, I was teaching 10th graders and one of them came in late, near the end of class. This student (I don't remember his name anymore) mentioned a plane hitting one of the Towers. I distinctly do remember telling him that I would take a look on my computer once the bell rang, saying that it was probably another Cessna. We had had some near misses in the area recently and there might have even been an accident which might have been the reason I had it in my head. The student did not describe this plane as a 747 or a United jet.

When the bell rang, the students filed out of the classroom and I went to my computer. My next period was my planning period. Within moments of seeing my computer screen, I realized the tragedy that was in progress and started to move from my room. I was interrupted by our school's PA system coming on with an emergency code for keeping the students in the classrooms and not allowing hall movement. I left my classroom and went to the library where many of the teachers who did not have classes were congregating to watch the available television. We watched the media coverage as students were locked in their classrooms. While I was in the library, an order came down from our administration that televisions were not to be turned on in classrooms and computer access was not to be permitted. In addition, students were to be kept in the classrooms unless someone from the front office came for them. This order lasted until the lunches began and then students were allowed to have their final two periods of the day, although the media blackout was still in effect.

In addition to the general mayhem that ensued because the students did not originally know what was going on, many of the parents did work in Manhattan and tried to get in touch with their children. As parents made contact with their children, word of what was happening got around to the students and made them upset. In addition, the inability of some parents to get to the children in the afternoon made for a chaotic building. Afterwards, we found out that one student lost a father. The decisions made by the administration were considered deplorable by many of the faculty and there were complaints made afterwards about the handling of the entire situation. On my way home, I could see the smoke billowing from the Towers, as I lived only 40 minutes from Manhattan at that time. My brother-in-law, a firefighter for a local company, was called

to Brooklyn to handle local calls for that fire company while they responded at the Towers. For nearly two more weeks, he helped pull bodies from the rubble. None of this justifies hatred toward any group of people.

The tragedy at the World Trade Center and later in London in 2005, put two other groups that are different in the consciousness of people's minds – Muslims and Arabs. These groups existed before September 11th and exist after September 11th. The words “terrorist” and “Muslim” are not synonymous. Neither is “Arab” and “terrorist”. But some people think they are. I would like to explore in a paper why what we perceive as different is often looked at in a negative light and specifically how Arabs and Muslims have been affected since September 11th. In doing this, I would like to take a more academic approach, looking at how Muslims and Arabs are perceived and then perhaps looking at hate crime statistics after 9/11. I would also like to explore ways that educational institutions are attempting to change perceptions of Muslims and Arabs.

Preliminary Source List

Please note: These are books and websites that I have just started to review in relation to my ideas. I may decide that these are not what I am looking for. In addition, because this is a preliminary list, all sources are not in correct APA format.

Islam in the American Mind: Lessons for Arab Public Diplomacy – Cornell University, Survey Research Institute. http://www.eriknisbet.com/pdfs/islam_america.pdf

Muslims in New York City. Middle East Institute, Columbia University – (Re)Embracing Diversity in New York City Schools. http://www.tc.edu/muslim-nyc/education/reembracing_diversity/inst_guide.html

Islam and the Textbooks by Gilbert T. Sewall.
<http://www.historytextbooks.org/islamreport.pdf>

The Muslim World After 9/11 by Angel M. Rabasa. RAND Corporation, 2005.

Hate Crimes Revisted: America's War on Those Who are Different by Jack Levin and Jack McDevitt. Westview Press, 1992.