

A Conversation with Hebh Jamal

This conversation explores what it means to be a youth activist in the struggle for education equity. Hebh Jamal gives an honest assessment of her experience being a student in a predominantly white, high-achieving school where Black young men were virtually absent. She shares how she came to rally other youth to advocate for integration and how that moment became a movement in New York City.

Paloma Garcia: To start, can you state your name, age, and current occupation?

Hebh Jamal: My name is Hebh Jamal. I'm 19. I'm a sophomore in college and am currently a youth director of an organization called Muslim American Society. I've been at the Muslim American Society for about five months. Before that, I was a Youth Policy Fellow with New York Appleseed.

At the Muslim American Society, we try to inspire youth, get them active, and make them feel comfortable and [aware] that there is such a thing as a Muslim community around them. Part of the focus could be, you know. The interests of the students. Maybe it could be political activism. A lot of it is rooted in spiritual awareness as well, but mostly the idea is to provide a community [for] Muslim youth.

PG: As you know, this issue is about integration and you're doing many things. You're a sophomore in college currently. You've worked with New York Appleseed who focuses on integration work in New York City, and you're also actively involved with the Muslim American Society. Can you start by focusing on your connection with school integration?

HJ: So, I've probably told this story so many times, but my relationship with integration actually started out as mere curiosity. Before I was in this integration work, I was actually on the front cover of The New York Times for my commentary on Trump's presidency and rising Islamophobia in the U.S. I was then invited to speak at a few high schools on the topic.

I went to a predominantly white high school in Times Square. So, when I visited this other high school to speak, I saw an environment that was like really inclusive and diverse, and that was super abnormal to me at the time. And I didn't really understand why up until then. I continuously researched, and realized it's because New York City [has] one of the most segregated school systems in the country. And after that, I just kept talking about it. One space where I would talk about it was in my high school, and afterwards I got involved with integrateNYC, which was a really, you know, small organization at the time. I came up with the concept of having a monthly Youth Council where students could actually come and build ideas of what integration was about. And yeah, that's how we actually developed the five R's, which I'm sure you know about. [It] was just adopted by the NYCDOE. So, yeah, this all started from a very genuine kind of thing. It just happened.

PG: It's great to hear that you were able to pursue this curiosity and deeply understand why having an inclusive and diverse space was not the norm in New York City. What was it about that inclusive and diverse space that was important to you? How does that build on the general idea of integration?

HJ: For me, I really believe that in order to be in an educational environment, you have to have diverse opinions, and you have to have, you know, a variety of people from different backgrounds who can speak to different things. For example, at the school I visited, there was no such thing as a clique. Right. There wasn't this inherent self-segregation that you see in other schools. That in itself was abnormal considering that we often are in self-segregated environments. [We] don't go out of our comfort zone. Don't really want to learn new things and be around different people. And honestly, a lot of prestigious schools may have opportunities—you know, I went to Beacon [a magnet high school in NYC], so there was a "great education." But there wasn't diversity in thought, and it didn't really push students to think outside of their comfort zone. They believed that their point-of-view was the truth. And if we're going to be honest in educational environments, that's not a way for progress.

Another thing I noticed in segregated spaces like Beacon is that Black boys are the ones who are not in these environments. Right. One of the main shocks in an inclusive and diverse environment is that there were Black boys, and they participated in the conversation. That wasn't something I was really exposed to in my high school. It's just like there was a very singular thought process and a very specific type of person who went to my high school.

PG: You mentioned there was a singular kind of thought and specific types of people were very obviously excluded from conversations. When you were able to see a more integrated space, these specific people who you never saw as part of the conversation before became part of the conversation. You mentioned Black boys specifically. Do you think there are other groups who you've seen in an integrated space who've had a voice in a way that you hadn't seen in segregated or homogeneous spaces?

HJ: Right, so I'll give you the example of my cousin. She went to a high school that was extremely segregated and had metal detectors. She didn't have a science teacher for like a year and a half. And I went to an extremely different environment, and we live five minutes away, right! Just looking at her experience and hearing stories about how teachers would treat students and, you know, the environment, and she would kind of mention that no one really cares. I remember I brought her to an integrateNYC meeting once, and she actually was comfortable to speak her mind, have ideas, and feel supported in what she was saying. You could tell the difference between a supportive, diverse, inclusive environment versus a segregated one filled with students just like her who don't get the attention they deserve.

I sat down with her once and recorded all of her school experiences. She remembered very traumatic stuff from as early as third grade. I don't think that these environments show genuine care for students. Also, teachers have it bad in these environments. I remember she mentioned that there were a few teachers whom she appreciated, but they were gone before you knew it because that's what ends up happening in segregated high schools. The teachers just want to leave to be in environments that are more prestigious or exclusive.

So yeah, it really depends. Because if you're in an environment that specifically doesn't care about you, that shows you that they don't care by lack of access to opportunities and just the way you're treated in the morning going through a metal detector, then you're going to be affected. It definitely has an impact on your quality of work and your opinions. I feel like that's true across all racial boundaries. If that's how you're treated, it's more common than not that your future won't be as bright as someone who did have those opportunities, who had genuine support from diverse and inclusive environments. But mostly, if we're talking about specific groups of people, it's usually low-income students of color who experience this far more than affluent students for example.

PG: You mentioned earlier that you were just intrigued by this idea of integration and desegregation, and you were able to dig into it and find a lot of information that you were then able to share to advocate for yourself and others. I'm wondering beyond yourself, who are people who should be concerned about school segregation?

HJ: Well, honestly, I think everyone should be. I think education is one of the most important things people should really invest in. And I mean, are you talking about like who should or why should?

PG: Let's start with who should, and then we can look to the why—both questions are important to the conversation.

HJ: Well, the obvious one is politicians and people who fund our educational systems. But the reality is that that won't happen unless the common person understands the importance of education. Students understand that the issues affecting their communities are due to the lack of support within their educational institutions. What

some students understand is that a lot of the issues that happen with their communities is because of the lack of support within the educational institutions.

I remember reading Malcolm X's biography, and there was a specific moment [in the book] where [Malcolm X's] teacher asked the students, what would they want to be in life? And this is a teacher that Malcolm X looked up to. The teacher went to Malcolm X, and Malcolm X said he wanted to be a lawyer. The teacher said, "Well, that that's not something for you people." Right. It was a very ... transformative moment in his life when he was a child.

He was told this. This kind of mentality, these words, can really impact a student's image of themselves and their aspirations. Critically challenging the biases illustrated by this example is really important if we want to foster the positive development of children in schools.

Another example is that my parents are immigrant parents. They didn't really understand the high school application process. If I didn't figure that out for myself, I would probably have gone to a high school that really wasn't as good. Honestly, there is a good/bad dichotomy in New York City, so what I'm trying to say is that if I didn't figure out the process, I probably wouldn't have gotten the educational support that I needed. I probably would have never figured out what school segregation was because I would have been in that environment. So, yes, I really think that the isolation that I saw in my high school was a wake-up call. Those years were transformative because I don't think I would have been cognizant of that isolation, and I don't think I would have understood that this is an extremely problematic issue within America.

PG: You also mentioned low-income students of color being the most negatively impacted by segregated schools, and it sounds like in your framing those are the people who should have the most information and be able to advocate for integration. But I'm also wondering what do you think is the role of the affluent families and students who you mentioned who may be in homogeneous spaces, who may reap benefits of a well-resourced school, and who may perceive their schools as better with more opportunities in general? What is their role in understanding school segregation?

HJ: Well, so here's the issue, the whole conversation on education has been super commodified, whether we're talking about high school or college, and especially high school specific to New York City. But just generally the education is super commodified, and it's very competitive. You know people are going to do what they can to get the best quality education.

Now, I wish that people acted from the kindness of their hearts to be cognizant about where their child goes and how it affects other students. But I don't know if that's a feasible solution. What I really think should happen is that the whole conversation around education should be different. There should be no such thing as a good and bad school in New York City; there should just be high school. Whether you go here or there, it's a good one, a quality one, the same amount of resources and opportunities.

I was mind boggled when I realized there were so many different types of high schools and so many different types of qualities of school. And it was such a competitive process.

Although I really believe that there should be very conscious decision making when it comes to high school, I think there should be advocacy about

doing it through a systemic approach rather than just saying people should do this out of the kindness of their heart. Their needs to be a conversation around the commodifying of education and why that's so harmful. You know the whole neo-liberal aspect to education needs to stop because if we're talking about education through a free market perspective, there are winners and losers. And oftentimes the losers are Black boys.

I think the issue is much deeper than just what white parents should do. They're just playing the system right. We just have to change the system. We can't expect people to freely do what is right in a system that structurally isn't right. There needs to be a systemic change that gets to the deep-rooted issues that cause segregation.

PG: I'm going to shift the conversation slightly with this next question. Who do you look to (this could be organizations or individuals) as role models or allies in the movement for integration?

HJ: I'd have to say Matt Gonzales from New York Appleseed, IntegrateNYC students, Sarah Camiscoli and Sarah Zapiler who are the adult allies at IntegrateNYC, Brandon Hernandez who is the principal of Bronx Academy of Letters, and David Kirkland who is an NYU Professor and Executive Director at NYU Metro Center. These are all people that I've personally worked with who proved to be extremely amazing advocates for the work and who would do anything to uplift the voices of students in the process. But there are also so many other people behind the scenes who do so much work that I'm probably forgetting. But if I were to pick, it would be those people.

PG: You mentioned one of the things that makes them a role model and ally is their ability to uplift student voice in this movement to integrate schools.

Is there anything else that makes them ideal for being a role model/ally in this work?

HJ: A common vision. Every time I've been in these circles, these spheres of influence, there was never an argument over different visions of what a school should be. There was constant commitment to justice and having the most equitable education system. That's the vision, and that's another quality that makes them strong advocates for the work.

PG: You have been involved in various social justice movements including the pro-immigration rally you coordinated in response to President Donald Trump's January 2017 executive order barring people from seven predominantly Muslim countries. How would you say that these issues relate to the integration work in which you are also involved?

HJ: I received a lot of media attention for the rally I coordinated in response to the Muslim ban. I do do a lot of immigration work. I also currently do a lot of Palestinian advocacy work as well. And I'm Palestinian, so that's probably been my primary field of activism and advocacy for as long as I could remember. I guess this advocacy is what kind of ties everything together. I'm also focused on political imprisonment because I've had a lot of friends who were political prisoners.

When people ask me what I'm into I say education and Palestine, and they respond, "Why? How are those two ever connected? Why those two?"

I really think that what all of these are is the concept of separating people, the concept of segregation and othering of people whether it's in Palestine, or where there's apartheid. In each of these environments, you can find that there are separations of groups and people [in place] to advance the interests of the state.... So, I feel like all of these things

for me are really crucial if we consider the concept of separating people and othering people and that this process almost always results in an injustice. So yeah, I consider myself an anti-apartheid/anti-segregation person.

PG: What is your role in the future of the integration movement in New York City?

HJ: I'm currently on the board of IntegrateNYC, and I feel like it's definitely been a challenge to be on a different side of the work. It's not something I'm used to. I'm usually like super excited and into the work. It's an adrenaline rush constantly trying to get things done. But I feel like now at least that I would be a benefit to this movement if I were to study it in a more academic perspective, and my future career goal is to be an academic who's also an advocate. So, I really would like to be a professional on various topics, including education, and how to effectively translate that into advocacy work. It's a different side of it, but I do think in the future that's what my role would be. Still though, I probably would do advocacy work now and be a part of every kind of thing that's happening around the City, but I'm actually moving to Germany pretty soon. I still want to be involved in the work, but it's obviously going to look very differently.

PG: Are you moving to Germany as a study abroad, or is this a longer timeline?

HJ: I'm finishing college in two years. I'm getting married in June. My fiancé lives in Germany, so I'll be doing a master's and hopefully PhD program there. I'll be studying there, but I'm probably going to be settling down there as well.

PG: Congratulations! Do you have an idea of what integration work looks like over there?

HJ: I have explored it, but you know Germany is a pretty homogenous society. Things are much different when we're talking about education. For example, there's no such thing as a good and bad college. Every college is pretty great. So, when you get into college, you'll probably have a pretty good education and, then, probably have a pretty good job.

I plan on going in the summer to see qualities of life.

I know there's actually a lot of Islamophobia there. There is also a lot of Islamophobia in the U.S., but it just manifests differently. I think something that a lot of advocates tend to do is try to stretch very similar concepts of justice in different places. I think that's why it fails. The reason why education advocacy for me really works and I was able to get a lot of things done was because I was really genuine. It just started out of curiosity; it started out of a question.

Whenever people ask me how to get into this work, I always say that you have to

ask what's wrong first and never have any assumptions going into something because that's just not genuine. It's just not genuine advocacy if you don't start by asking that question, if you just want to do work to do work—not necessarily because there's a problem to solve. And that's really hard for me because I really just want to get into it. But the reality is you have to stop and analyze and be in the society and experience things. Questions will genuinely arise, and you will want to answer them and solve them. So yeah, I feel like if advocacy was done in this way, a lot of this work would be just a lot more genuine, intentional, and more effective which is why I really think what the students are doing is so effective because it really started out of curiosity.

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