Perspective of a First Generation Pakistani American

Talal Jawaid

California State University, Sacramento

Abstract

As a first generation immigrant, my journey through multiple education systems and my experiences at home have given me a unique perspective on how I approach life. I was born in Manama, Bahrain in 1995 and began Montessori school in 1998. From there I moved to Pakistan in 2000 where I went to Springfield School in Karachi for my Kindergarten and a portion of my first grade. Shortly thereafter my father decided that we were going to emigrate to the United States in search of a better future. We moved to San Jose in October 2001, less than a month after the September 11 Attacks that changed the America we thought we were moving to. From there I attended four elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools, in the process dealing with a severe lack of motivation, bullying, racism, an abusive childhood, and a controlling religious journey. Throughout my life, I’ve dealt with these issues as they came and became a better person because of them. In spite of the difficulty they caused me, I do not regret having a troubled past. I’ve become mentally strong and now I have no fears or uncertainty with my life.

I was born in Manama, Bahrain to two Pakistani parents, my father, Nadeem Jawaid and my mother, Hina Sami on September 26, 1995 and I’ve just turned 23. In Bahrain, I attended a Montessori school that catered primarily to children of U.S military members stationed in Bahrain as a part of the U.S Navy Sixth Fleet. We moved back to our hometown of Karachi, Pakistan in 1998 and shortly thereafter, I was gifted my only sister in June 1999, Amna Nadeem. While in Karachi, I attended Springfield School, a private school which was geared towards helping students achieve higher grades on the Cambridge O Levels Exams. In 1998, Pakistan conducted its first nuclear weapons tests in response to India testing their own nuclear weapons. A year later, in May 1999, Pakistan initiated a conflict that would lead it into the Kargil War with India. After the war, in October of 1999, the Pakistani government fell victim to a coup d’état in which the Chief of Army Staff took over the civilian government and declared martial law. At one point, Karachi was designated as the sixth most dangerous city in the world. Due to this instability, a few months into the first grade, we moved to the United States due to my father’s decision that it would lead us to a better life in terms of health, safety, and security. This decision has easily been the most influential decision in my life so far as it’s provided me with opportunities that my cousins back home could never have and has given me the chance to succeed on a higher level.

While I don’t really remember my years in Bahrain, I have old videos that my parents took that showed me at Montessori and the classrooms bear a striking similarity to the classrooms in the preschool that I work at today. The classroom in my Montessori has a carpet where all the students sit and tables for them to do group work at. There aren’t any desks or chalkboards similar to the preschools I’ve visited in Pakistan where students less than the age of five are made to sit in rigid rows in hard chairs and pay attention as the teacher provides instruction. Maria Montessori detailed a classroom in which students would be given choice in their activities and I believe that’s one of the major experiences in my formative years that defined the free-flowing attitude I have today. I always feel that I have a choice in what I’m doing and that doing what you enjoy is the only way to continue doing it.

Once we moved back to Pakistan, there was a major shift in the way I was educated. At Springfield school, I was made to sit quietly in a desk alongside thirty other students as we attentively listened to the teacher lecture for hours to children the age of five and six. I vividly remember being smacked on the hands by the teacher’s rule multiple times when I would fail to maintain attention. I used to believe that it was an acceptable method to gain a student’s attention, however as I’ve grown and experienced first-hand at work how volatile a child’s mind is, I’ve learned that it’s extremely detrimental to a child’s learning brain. A child that is hit to pay attention may associate the negative action of being hit with school. I now believe that the best way to make a student learn is to engage them and relate the material being taught to them. I remember my only enjoyable moments in Springfield School as the short lunch period we were provided and being picked up from school. Luckily however, my experiences in Pakistan were short lived as we moved to the United States.

When we came to America, we had to live with my mother’s uncle in San Jose for a short while as we couldn’t afford to pay rent while my father didn’t have a job. He started working at a gas station to save up money while my mother rested at home due to her deteriorating health after my sister’s birth. I began attending first grade at Silver Oak Elementary school less than 3 weeks after the September 11attacks. My first day in school I had my backpack stolen from me on the bus ride home by students calling me racial epithets. My second day in school I was suspended because a group of children had surrounded me and were pushing me around. The students were several years older than me and held me back as they each got their hits in. When I finally managed to get out of their grasp, a teacher saw what was happening and grabbed me. He asked the students what was going on and they told the teacher that I was trying to fight them for no reason and that they didn’t understand my “hindu talk” in reference to my thick accent. I was brought to the principal who explained to me that my actions weren’t acceptable in America and that they could get the police to come get me. Silver Oak elementary is located in a very affluent and diverse neighborhood in San Jose. There was no reason for my parents to believe my story that I was being beaten up for no reason, so they didn’t. I choose to remember nothing more of that school past that moment as it turned me into a more cynical person. Ever since then I’ve adopted the attitude that you shouldn’t rely on others to fight your battles because when you need them, they might not be there. The following years unfortunately did nothing but cement that attitude within me.

Near the end of the first grade, we moved to Sacramento as it was much more affordable than the Bay Area. My father began a job working at Fry’s Electronics as a salesperson and my mother continued to stay at home and take care of us. We move to Taylor Terrace Apartments located in a low income neighborhood off Norwood Avenue. While the neighborhood has improved drastically over the past decade, violence and drugs were rampant in the community at the time. However, racism was not an issue I had to deal with at this school because, being a primarily Hispanic neighborhood, most children thought I was Hispanic. I spent the end of first grade, and the next two grades at Taylor Street Elementary school, which were my most enjoyable years of schooling as I had finally made friends who didn’t see my race or ethnicity as what defined me. The school is a part of the same low-income school district that I work for today and even today when I visit, I see in every faculty member the same passion for teaching that had me wanting to go to school every morning over fifteen years ago. I truly can’t thank the people that work there enough for what an impact they made on me, so I choose to give back by bringing the same attitude to my students at Robla Preschool, less than a mile away from Taylor Street Elementary.

Going into the fourth grade, we moved to the Natomas Village apartments located on Truxel in South Natomas. Due to the shift, I had to attend a school which was a part of the school district I was now located in, the Natomas Unified School District. At first, I attended American Lakes Elementary school, which shut down for repairs needed due to a fire and I was shifted to Witter Ranch Elementary, which is located in the neighborhood I live in now, by Arco Arena. Witter Ranch at the time was a very advanced school as it was recently built. However, I experienced the same racism and bullying there as I had at Silver Oak years prior. I can’t count on one hand how many times I was suspended for fighting as the school, similar to most schools, had a zero tolerance policy. This meant that even if you were defending yourself, you would be punished. As the principal and my teacher explained to me over there, I was supposed to go tell a teacher what happened instead of fighting back. I have never understood a policy which, in essence, tells students that they should just let themselves get beaten up. I was a short and scrawny kid and lost every single time, but that didn’t stop me from attempting to defend myself. I was placed into anger management classes due to my repeat incidents and then my parents, at the behest of my teachers, began taking me to see an actual counselor. I remember my sessions with the counselor being mostly just playing board games as we discussed the situation at school. While I respect the counselor for attempting to solve the issue, he never got it out of me that I was being bullied and that my anger issues didn’t really exist. However, one positive did come out of my time at Witter Ranch. I met a girl that to this day remains one of my closest friends. She too was a Pakistani immigrant that had just moved here and was facing the same issues that I had. Just being able to relate to me and what I was going through was such a tremendous relief for me and I truly felt like I had someone that understood me. I’m glad to have met her and our friendship continues to this day.

In 2004, my parents bought a new home in North Natomas and I started attending Regency Park Elementary for my fifth and sixth grade years. Regency Park Elementary was a new school that was built in the same neighborhood as my home. The staff there was warm and welcoming and the friendships I built there continue to last. While my bullying issues were at their worst point at Regency Park, I still fondly remember the days that I spent there enjoying with my friends. For the first time, the teacher and the principal asked me why I was getting into so many altercations and why I would act up. One of the defining moments of my schooling was in the fifth grade. Until that point, I didn’t feel interested in the academics of school. There was a multicultural day where we all had to wear our traditional clothing. I was forced against my wishes by my mother to wear a kurta, which is a long shirt dress worn by Pakistani men. I thought that dressing up in my cultural clothes would just lead to name calling and bullying. When I went to school that day, I was greeted by my classmates who told me that my clothes were “tight.” All day long people came up to me to tell me how awesome my clothes were and that they wanted clothes just like it. For the first time, I felt that people were truly interested in my culture and that I didn’t have to treat it as some disease or affliction that I had to be ashamed of. I made friends and began to become interested in school. I started excelling in my academics and came second place in both the speech competitions and spelling bees both years. I believe that the years I spent at Regency Park gave me confidence and the rare ability to make friends wherever I go. While I don’t believe it’s my defining trait, my confidence has helped me through nearly all of my issues and hurdles.

Throughout my elementary years, I dealt with abuse outside of the school as well. During these years, I was also attending a Qari Saab after school. A Qari saab is a man who has memorized the Qur’an and teaches children how to read and pronounce Arabic, as well as guiding them through reading the Qur’an properly. My Qari Saab was a strict old man who would yell at us and hit us if we made the slightest imperfections. When I would tell my mother this, she would tell me that it’s okay because they are all like that. I was always heavily invested in religion and because of this, I didn’t view it as abuse, I just thought it was acceptable, even if I didn’t like it. While I accepted the abuse, this caused me to be disinterested in learning the Qur’an and slowly put me on a journey that drove me away from religion. It was a journey built on the narrow minded associations of pain with religion. While I now have better reasoning and understanding to keep me away from the religion I was raised in, I regret that it was this specific path that I took away from it instead of one of education and understanding. Most of my childhood friends all took the same path as I did but, to this day, most of them choose to bash the religion out of hatred for the abuse they suffered instead of holding the ones that dealt the abuse responsible. Religion plays a very powerful role in a Pakistani household and I would argue that it’s necessary for every Pakistani child to be educated in the religion even if they choose not to be a part of it. I feel pity for my friends who leave the religion out of hatred instead of leaving due to understanding the issues with the religion.

My middle school and high school years are very similar in that I had similar experiences throughout and I don’t feel like I matured much over the years. I attended Westside Charter Middle School for the seventh grade and was not allowed to return for the eighth grade due to amount of fights I had gotten into. I then attended Rio Linda Jr. High and Rio Linda High for the next two years. I quickly made friends at Rio Linda and began to take my academics seriously again. I maintained a high GPA and kept out of trouble for the most part, only being suspended about three times for fighting. In 2010, we moved out of the Rio Linda School District neighborhood and into the Natomas Unified School District. However, my parents enrolled me into Natomas Pacific Pathways Prep Charter School, or NP3, so that I could receive a better education. This school was small, with only about 100 students in my graduating class. At NP3 I was not interested in school due to my mind being elsewhere. One semester I even managed to attain a GPA of 0.5. While I managed to stay out of most trouble, I simply felt like I didn’t care for school, even though I had big aspirations. I began to code Android apps and began listing them on the App Store. My apps quickly blew up and I managed to achieve over 50,000 downloads on a few of them. While most of them were free, I did manage to make some money from two that I sold for $0.99. This income heavily motivated me and by the time I graduated, I had decided that I wanted to pursue Computer Science as a field. While I was still focused on what I was achieving at home, I didn’t focus much on school. I spent four years at American River College where I transferred with a GPA of 2.08.

After transferring to Sacramento State, I felt as though I was finally learning material that I hadn’t already taught myself and the challenge motivated me. Over my university career, I’ve managed a GPA of 3.80 and am always trying my best. Becoming a student at Sac State has completely changed the attitude I bring to school and I hope I can maintain this attitude as I consider going for an MBA degree.

My educational background and my experiences at home have given me an outlook on life which I consider to be unique. However just because something is unique doesn’t mean it’s always beneficial. I now possess the attitude that I can achieve anything and in the words of Jay-Z, “the only thing that can stop me is me.” However, I think this cocky attitude can be a detriment because I don’t see value in others or in teamwork. I’m currently a team lead in the Hyperloop team but I still have this attitude where if I want something done, I can’t rely on anyone else because I know they’re going to let me down. I understand it’s an unhealthy attitude for me to have, but I believe that’s what makes me so effective as a leader and as a person. While in public I show humility and am humble around others, I have this other state of mind that I can’t share with others due to its arrogance. I have this idea in my head that I’m unstoppable and so far, nothing has shown to prove me otherwise.

**References**

Burnett, A. (1962). Montessori Education Today and Yesterday. The Elementary School Journal., 63(2), 71-77.

Laurent Gayer. (2007). Guns, Slums, and "Yellow Devils": A Genealogy of Urban Conflicts in Karachi, Pakistan. *Modern Asian Studies,* *41*(3), 515-544. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4499791>

Tellis, A., Fair, C., & Jo Medby, J. (2001). THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KARGIL CRISIS. In *Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis* (pp. 5-28). Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mr1450usca.8>

School Profile: Taylor Street Elementary. (n.d.). Retrieved September 26, 2018, from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sdprofile/details.aspx?cds=34674216033757>

MARZOUKI, N., & Delogu, C. (2013). MUSLIM AMERICANS: A Religious Minority Like Any Other? In *Islam: An American Religion*(pp. 37-68). New York: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/marz17680.7