Muslim Immigrant Children in the United States: Practical Suggestions for Teachers

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Abstract

Immigrant children from Muslim communities come from a variety of ethnic, cultural backgrounds, and speak 60 different languages. Some of their religious beliefs, values, and practices created issues and challenges for the Western society. This article provides basic information about Muslim and Islamic practices, issues, and challenges Muslim immigrants children face in schools and offers some suggestions for teachers on how to accommodate Muslim immigrants in the United States.

KEYWORDS: Muslim immigrant children, teachers, United States

Landscape of Muslim Immigrant Children in the United States

In 2010, approximately 12.9% of the United States (U.S.) population consists of immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Of this, about 0.6% (9 millions) is Muslim immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2011). The Muslim population of the U.S. increased dramatically in the 20th century, with much of the growth driven by a comparatively high birth rate and immigrant communities of mainly Arab and South Asian descent. Muslims whose religious-faith is based on Islam, is a third-largest faith the U.S. after Christianity and Judaism.

Immigrant children from Muslim backgrounds in the U.S. come from 57 nations and speak 60 different languages (Center of Immigration Studies, 2012). Arabic is the most commonly spoken language, followed by Bengali and Punjabi (Al-Romi, 2006). They generally tend to settle in major metropolitan areas such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. As the children enter schools in larger numbers, they may be at risk for failure when the teachers are unacquainted with their home culture (Haboush, 2007).
Research on marginalized groups has shown that teachers’ limited experience and understanding of their children’s cultural backgrounds may lead to negative educational and psychological outcomes in children (Kunjufu, 2002). The Longitudinal Immigrants Families and Teachers Study [LIFTS] revealed the cultural mismatch in the school context can affect teachers’ perceptions and judgments regarding immigrant children (Rogers-Sirin, Ryce, & Sirin 2014). Other studies reported that “these differences may lead to the situations in which teachers misread students’ aptitudes, intents, or abilities as a result of the differences in styles of language use and instructional patterns” (Delpit, 2006, p. 167), as well as their perceptions of student’s academic achievement (Hauser-Cram & Sirin, 2003), and behavioral well-being (Sirin et al., 2009). Furthermore, Muslim parents’ belief about education and their interactions with schools and teachers may be misunderstood or conflicted with school rules and subsequently be viewed negatively by teachers and administrators. For example, teachers expect parents to be involved in their children’s education but, this is not generally a practice in Muslim families. Thus, teachers may perceive value differences as harmful to the well-being of students in school.

Since September 11, 2001, Muslims in the U.S. and other parts of the world are facing greater levels of discrimination, suspicion, and racism (Maira, 2004). Negative portrayals of Muslims in various forms of media and in popular entertainment have become an integral part of public consciousness and affect the well-being of Muslims both in the U.S. and globally (Maira, 2004). Nevertheless, Muslims feel vulnerable to terrorism and are perceived as a potential threat to the larger society and certain government agencies (Trakim, 2004). This negative attention makes it vitally important to understand the diversity of immigrant and indigenous Muslim experiences, along with the various ways of practicing Islam for individuals who work with this population.
In a survey conducted by Mastrilli and Sardo-Brown (2001), a third of teachers in the U.S. reported a negative reaction upon hearing the word “Islam”; they responded using terms such as “terrorists,” “enemy”, “trouble,” “war,” “Bin Laden,” and “unfair treatment of women” (p. 156). Other teachers receive information through media but little from research or direct personal experience with this population.

In order to inform readers about Muslim immigrants in the hopes of improving the education of young Muslim immigrant children and their families, this article provides some basic information on cultural values and practices of immigrant children and families from Muslim backgrounds living in the U.S. and discusses what differences teachers should know and how they can address the issues and help the children success in schools. To clarify the subject of the article, the term “Muslim” is referred to a worldwide community of people who adhere to Islam as their religion, in varying ways. First, I will give an overview of some basic concepts of Islam, Muslim family and community values, and Islamic teaching and practices. Second, I will discuss some issues and challenges faced by Muslim immigrant children and how teachers accommodate these children. The article concludes with some discussion and brief suggestions for how to understand Muslim immigrants.

**Religious Practices and Cultural Values**

Immigrant children with Muslim backgrounds generally practice Islamic teaching, beliefs, and values. Muslims believe that Islam as a religion is a comprehensive way of life based on Qur’anic teaching and that one must believe in God.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Practices and Values</th>
<th>Descriptions of Practices and Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family and community</td>
<td>Family is an important social unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value extended family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family members relate to one another based on hierarchies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hierarchy determined by the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
community
Family interests outweigh personal interests
Community based on the collective practice
Obligations are more important than rights
Parents demand complete obedience and devotion to the family and community.
Children accept authoritarianism and learn to abide by their family’s rules
Children are best educated by memorization and repetition rather than concepts of reflective questioning
Parents not in favor of children’s pursuits in extracurricular activities in school
Provide after-school and weekend religious schools for children to learn Islamic teaching.
Some parents may feel that they do not have to participate in school unless there are issues with their children’s education
Seclusion of a child also may be a means of escaping the shame or humiliation associated with having a child with disabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Islamic teaching and practices</th>
<th>Religious practice based on Five Pillars:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Religion’s Five Pillars</td>
<td>Shahadah (declaration of faith),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gender issues</td>
<td>Pray five times per day,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Food and dietary practices</td>
<td>Fasting the whole of month of Ramadan,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dress code</td>
<td>Zakat (tax), and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca)</td>
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<th>Gender issues:</th>
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<td>Young children are free to choose whom they play with and the play area Free mixing among men and women is prohibited after puberty</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Male teachers should generally avoid eye contact with Muslim mothers, and female teachers should avoid contact with Muslim fathers.

Food and dietary practices:

- Two types of food: *haram* (forbidden) and *halal* (permissible)
- Muslims do not eat pork products, or any food that contains pork-based gelatin or mono diglycerides, consume blood, carrion, and alcohol
- They eat only food containing vegetable mono diglycerides or foods which are labeled with a U or K indicating that they are classified as Kosher by the Orthodox Union
- Seafood is allowed

Dress code:

- Clothing is expected to be loose for both men and women
- Men to be covered from the navel to the knees and women to be covered over their whole body except for their face and hands
- In some Muslim countries, women are required to wear a veil.

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**Classroom Accommodations for Muslim Immigrant Children**

**School Curriculum and Activities**

Some children who had previous education in their home country might find education in the new country different and contradictory in its contents and emphasis. For example, in some war-torn countries, the oral tradition is the main source communication of these cultural treasures (Jones, 2010). Reading and story time may be new to these students. Furthermore, some textbooks in these countries incorporate Muslim elements or war topics through subjects in the
curriculum. For example, in mathematics textbooks in Afghanistan featured the question, “In one year a group of Muhajideen spent 124,800 Afghanis, what was their monthly expenditure?” (Interim Textbook, 1986, grade 4, p. 54 as cited in Jones, 2010, p. 30). Children who have been exposed to this type of curriculum may talk about this or used these as examples in class. Some topics and lessons in science and technology might be conflicting with Islamic teaching and values. For example, according to Islamic principle, human beings were created by God not by evolution (Ismail et al., 2009). Therefore educators need to be sensitive when explaining this topic to Muslim children.

There are culture-specific beliefs regarding watching television, listening to music, and pursuing secular activities that do not in some way enhance spirituality (Athar, 2011). Teachers should be aware that some Muslims may have reservations regarding music. Some types of music might not be acceptable to Muslim parents. Although most Muslims have no problems with soft, relaxing music, Islam teachings prohibits loud, violent, or depressing music (Athar, 2011). More orthodox Muslims, for example, might request that musical activities be conducted with unaccompanied voices. In addition to music, art projects involving human forms might be a concern for some Muslims (Ismail et al., 2009) whose belief in one God has led them to question the use of photos or pictures of human beings, animals or even statues that might be considered idols. Although Muslims do allow such depictions when made by children or when created as toys for children (Ismail et al., 2009), some parents may be offended by school requests to have children bring stuffed animals for show and tell activity (Borhan, 2004). Muslim parents consider stuffed animals in the same way as in art projects, which involved of human forms. Nevertheless, teachers should be sensitive to this potential concern and be prepared if some parents request that their children be excused when class photos are taken or if they request that
their children not be photographed in the classroom. In addition, Muslims are not allowed to keep dogs and puppies as pets or to touch these animals (Borhan, 2004). Parents may feel offended by books, stories or movies that glorify these animals.

Teachers and administrators should also be aware of potential problems regarding the preparation and serving of food. For example if the cafeteria simply removes the pepperoni or sausage from cooked pizza, it is still haram (forbidden) because of the pork grease. Well-intentioned teachers sometimes make pepperoni and cheese pizzas available but use the same knife to cut both, thus defeating the purpose of keeping pork fat off the children’s food (Hoot et al., 2003). Therefore, teachers should work with administrators to assure that school cafeterias offer Muslim parents information regarding the ingredients of lunches served at school and make certain that at least one menu item such as fish, vegetables, yogurt, or cheese are acceptable for Muslim children.

In light of the attention given to modesty, teachers can support Muslim children by being flexible with the related issues. For example, if schools require shorts for physical education, the option of wearing sweatpants might be provided. Girls may be allowed to wear headscarf instead of hijab (veil). Schools also should provide at least one or two very short (5-7 minutes) prayer periods during school hours, with a special area of the room that will provide accommodation for religious obligations.

Holidays and Events

There are two main holidays in Islam: Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha. Eid Al-Fitr is celebrated at the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting, and Eid Al-Adha is celebrated at the end of Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (Huda, 2006). Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and is one of the most anticipated times of the year for Muslims. They commemorate this event with fasting throughout the month. Some Muslim families might have
some reservations regarding common holiday celebrations in the U.S. such as Halloween and Thanksgiving. If parents request that their children not participate in such holidays, related school programs or activities, offering alternative programs may be a solution.

**Fasting**

Fasting means to refrain from all food and drink from dawn to until sunset during the month of Ramadan (Athar, 2011). While they are fasting Muslims must also abstain from smoking and sexual contact. Although fasting is not obligatory before puberty, younger children sometimes choose to follow their parents in fasting. If teachers have children fasting in their classroom, providing a separate area for them while the other children have snack or lunch may be easier for those children. Lack of food and drink also has potential physical implications as fasting can result in dehydration (Giger & Davidhizar, 2002). Dehydration is especially dangerous for people with certain medical conditions, and extra attention to fasting children may be necessary for signs such as paleness or exhaustion. Therefore, fasting students may need to reduce vigorous physical activities.

Medications can pose another issue during Ramadan. Consuming anything by mouth, including medication, can break the fast, so Muslims may be reluctant to take medications scheduled during the daytime hours (Giger & Davidhizar, 2002; Haron, 2011). Ramadan is also a month of community and socializing, as Muslims often gather in the evenings to share in fast-breaking meals. Parents and children may not be able to participate in school functions if they are scheduled during fast-breaking time as the children and parents must be at home to break the fast with their families.

**Challenges of Muslim Immigrant Children**

Immigrant or expatriates from any part of the world face challenges as students at school in their new country. They may have to deal with the differences in school system and
programs, sometimes resulting in problems in their studies that may ultimately lead to failure in school. However, there are challenges which are tied to the overarching character of Islam. They may be alienated and marginalized due to the differences in their faith and religious practices involving special obligations and responsibilities.

**Muslims as Immigrants**

As a common challenge for immigrants, students often face discrimination, stereotyping, racism, bias, and even marginalization by schools and communities because of their minority status. They may feel that they are being treated as second-class citizens, especially those who came to the West for political asylum or as refugees. However, differences in religious beliefs, values, and practices have set Muslims apart from adherents of other religions. Moreover after the 911 tragedy, Muslim immigrants in the U.S. and other parts of the world are affected by the War on Terror in the Middle East and Asia. “Islamophobia” in the U.S. has further put Muslim children at a disadvantage through discrimination against them.

The well-being of children is influenced not only by the legal status of parents, but also by family income and structure, parental work patterns, educational attainment, and language proficiency. If immigrants fail to assimilate in the new culture and become less proficient in the language of their new country, they are generally excluded from mainstream society. Moreover for Muslims, “the process of assimilation and acculturation is conflicting with the values, norms, and expectations of their religious and ethnic communities and those of the dominant society” (Abu El-haj & Bonet, 2011, p. 35). For example, in school, Muslim children are often kept apart from their peers as they avoid eating pork items in school lunches, fast during school physical activities, avoid direct skin and physical touch contact between post-pubescent males and
females who are not direct blood relatives, and engage in other religious practices such as prayer during the day.

These children struggle to find their place in the new society. They have often left their original countries at a young age and, unlike their parents, might lack meaningful connections to their country of origin, making them unlikely to consider it a place to return or point of reference. Instead, these children evaluate themselves or are evaluated by others by the standards of their new countries. Through interactions with natives these immigrant children negotiate their identities, develop a sense of belonging, and form new associations (Abu El-haj & Bonet, 2011), but there is no guarantee that tolerance will immediately follow after interactions and integration. Usually tolerance takes precedence at schools over integration, as integration happens in the community. It is impossible to foresee whether greater integration in schools will immediately foster interaction and mutual respect between students of different cultures (Abu El-haj & Bonet, 2011; Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto, 2009).

**Differences in the School System and Program**

Muslim immigrant children fare poorly in almost all aspects of schooling and well-being. Even those who came to the West as volunteer immigrants, still face the same hurdles due to their immigration status. The differences in the school system such as curriculum, teaching approach, and assessment, as well as the kind of school are all important factors contributing to discrimination, harassment, and racism in schools. These new experiences often create confusion and frustration as the children struggle to understand the new situation. As a result, some children feel depressed and uninterested in school, which may lead them to be at risk for academic disengagement. The cultural-ecological theory of minority schooling posits that some educators position these students by placing them in low-stream tracks (Ogbu, 2003). Ogbu
further asserts that current educational discourse continues to attribute to Muslim immigrant students underachievement primarily to school and societal factors (e.g., tracking, stereotypical teacher attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions, social-class inequities, and cultural differences) between home and school.

Some teachers and administrators see Muslim immigrant students as English language learners (ELLs) who struggle to understand the academic language and are less proficient in oral communication. Proficiency in English is critical for these students in understanding academic concepts and functioning effectively in schools. As mentioned earlier a high percentage of ELLs from Islamic backgrounds speak Arabic as their native language. Arabic is one of the most difficult languages in the world. The language is not only written form left to right but also has an issue of diglossia between spoken and written language. This has become a significant complicating factor to the Muslim children learn English in the U.S. A diglossia is a situation in which two languages (or two varieties of the same language) are used under different conditions within a community, often by the same speakers (Kruizenfja, 2010). A diglossia has a significant influence in the thought process and writing in Muslim education. This situation is quite similar with immigrant children from Fareast Asia (e.g., China, Korea, and Japan). Some developing Muslim countries do not have written form until early 60s or 70s such as Muslim immigrant from Somali and Afghanistan. These children used oral tradition and memorize the information in large volumes. In addition, many parents were not expose to written language, they may not able to read to their children books and stories, a practice which is prominent in U.S. schools.
When working with immigrants whose first language is not English, educators should assess the barriers to communication caused by language discomfort or lack of ability. Teachers can contact centers that provide resources such as interpreters or someone that is familiar with the culture and language of the immigrants to assist these students in schools. Some children who have been in the school and community for quite some time also play a role as language brokers to their families. Acting in this role helps them become proficient in more than one language, acquire better language skills, and maintain their native language as well (Md-Yunus, 2012).

The status of Muslim immigrant children with special needs is also perceived differently than in the West. Muslims from South Asia see disabilities as a taboo because they worry about their reputations and the possible stigma associated with a disability (Ansari, 2002). As a result, both children and adults with disabilities are kept at home because they are perceived as being unable to learn or in need of protection and extra care (Bywaters et al., 2003). The understanding of cognitive deficits such as an intellectual disability or mental retardation is different from the way it is understood in developed nations. In the Muslim world, judgments about cognitive ability are based less on standardized testing and more on a sense of what the family and community demand of the individual (Hasnain et al., 2008). Given that many immigrant and refugee Muslims are not literate, they are not likely to see a teenager as mentally impaired if he or she has not yet learned how to read. Teachers can use this information to set expectations and evaluations of their students that are culturally sensitive and unbiased.

**Teachers Roles in Helping Muslim Immigrant Students**

McBrien (2006) indicated that the issues of being marginalized due to the differences in schools systems and educational programs could be addressed through the following ways:
provide social service to facilitate children’s adjustment, provide language instruction to students and their parents, and combat discrimination. For example, using field-dependent teaching approaches may help these students better understand the contents of the subject matter, as many of these students are familiar with a field-dependent learning style. Field-dependent learning style “is characterized by a student’s preference for group work, the need for outside encouragement, and sensitivity towards others” (McBrien, 2006, p. 353). The problem with a field-dependent learning style is that many teachers in the adopted countries tend to associate it with low intelligence.

Another challenge is appropriate assessment and grade placement for Muslim children. For example, standardized testing and examinations are not based on their ability and are culturally inappropriate, so the results are skewed and children are placed in the low-track classes. School districts may consider evaluating students using broad-based assessment rather than standardized tests. Broad-based assessment is a norm-referenced type of assessment which yields an estimate of the position of the individual student in relation to the population or peers with the respect to the element being measured. Researchers suggest that pre-service teacher preparation programs include mandatory bilingual and multicultural education training (Md-Yunus, 2012). In the graduate programs, students are encouraged to conduct ethnography studies to build their understanding of the political, social, and cultural backgrounds of immigrant families in their schools. Understanding Muslim immigrants’ cultural and faith differences may eliminate prejudice and discrimination.

As a solution to immigrant children around the world, Adams and Kirova (2006) suggested some social support strategies such as welcoming children and making their classrooms like home by providing emotional support and a caring attitude such as smiling,
projecting an assuring attitude, and staying near the newcomer so the teacher’s proximity can be reassuring. Using a “buddy system,” putting the child in a small group of students for class work, and avoiding giving any one child extensive responsibility for the newcomer are also helpful (Md-Yunus, 2012). Social support is also critical for children and families to be successful in the community. A sibling in the school or someone from outside the school can communicate with the new comer and explain the class routines and procedures may be called upon for support (Md-Yunus, 2008). Some school personnel can also welcome and inform parents and families about the school and community and reach out by inviting the child or family to share about their home culture and bring traditional foods to share with the class so that the child feels welcome, appreciated, and more confident and secure in school.

Teachers can also consider adjusting the learning standards and being more flexible to address the culturally relevant aspect such as using multicultural aspects in the curriculum. Many teachers have been quite successful helping these immigrant children with strategies for supporting cognitive development such as using visuals, concrete examples or manipulatives, demonstrating, using gestures, repeating instructions (Md-Yunus, 2008), offering way to remember words and signs (Adams & Kirova, 2006). McBrien (2006) reported that teachers who allowed these children write in their native language or illustrate their answers, audio recording of English books and computerized lesson were proved to help the children understand better. Some schools have utilized virtual tour technology to help children learn the culture and practices of Muslims in an effort to help overcome some of these differences.

Conclusion

Islam’s basic teachings are counterintuitive to many cultural practices that are considered “Islamic.” Many contemporary scholars, instead of distinguishing fact (the prescribed belief
system) from practice (cultural practices) introduce their own biases to their analyses, leading to conclusions that are misleading and confusing (Delpit, 2006; Karim, 2009). For example, the hijab, is said to be an expression of faith and spiritual freedom. This bias research sends the message that Muslim women are oppressed, secluded, and vulnerable, considered inferior, and denied basic human rights. Muslim children have suffered from a clash of cultural practices and religious edicts. The clash has almost always ended with “the religion morphing into a watered down, more agreeable version of its original self” (Karim, 2009, p.15) in school.

Through the Cultural Bridges Act of 2002, the late Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, along with a bipartisan coalition of U.S. senators, pointed out the importance of promoting national security through international educational and cultural exchange programs between the U.S. and the Islamic world (NAAA-Action Alert, 2005). As authorized through this legislation, approximately $75 million was spent in fiscal years 2003 through 2007 to expand the activities of the State Department’s existing educational and cultural programs in relation to the Islamic world. Such spending shows the U.S. commitment to connecting to the 1.5 billion people who live in the Islamic world in the hope of bridging cultural barriers.

Some media organizations have used programs and broadcasting information about Muslim and Islamic culture live on local television stations and newspapers as part of the community diversity programs to create understanding and awareness about Islam. At the community level, interfaith dialogue can also help the community understand and build trust when they meet and share their personal beliefs. Dialogue takes place not only in the schools, but also at work places, and even in the neighborhood. Through range of activities including forms of cultural production and consumption, such as pop music and on-line educational
forums, young people from Muslim transnational communities are asserting their “voice” to belong and participate as full members of their communities.

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