

**Eastern Illinois University**

---

**From the Selected Works of ShamAh Md-Yunus**

---

Fall 2015

# Understanding Immigrant Children from Muslim Backgrounds: Issues and Challenges

ShamAh Md-Yunus, *Eastern Illinois University*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/shamah\\_md-yunus/18/](https://works.bepress.com/shamah_md-yunus/18/)

## **Understanding Immigrant Children from Muslim Backgrounds: Issues and Challenges**

Sham'ah Md-Yunus, Ph.D.  
Eastern Illinois University

---

### **Abstract**

*Immigrant children from Muslim communities come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, speaking 60 different languages. Some of their religious beliefs, values, and practices created issues and challenges for teachers of these children. This article provides basic information about Muslim and Islamic practices, issues, and challenges Muslim immigrant children face in new country and in the school and offers some suggestions for teachers on how to understand Muslim immigrants.*

**Key Words:** Muslim immigrant children, Islamic teaching and practices, education

### **Understanding Immigrant Children from Muslim Backgrounds: Issues and Challenges**

Since September 11, 2001, Muslims in the United States (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). 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.

As children of immigrants enter schools in larger numbers, these children may be at risk for failure when teachers are unacquainted with their home culture (Haboush, 2007). Research on marginalized groups has shown that teachers’ limited experience or understanding of their students’ cultures may lead to negative educational and psychological outcomes in children (Kunjufu, 2002). The Longitudinal Immigrant Families and Teachers Study (LIFTS) by Rogers-Sirin, Ryce, and Sirin (2014) examines how cultural mismatch in the school context can affect teachers’ perceptions of and judgments regarding immigrant children and their parents. The study revealed significant differences between a student’s home culture and school culture. This

leads to situations in which teachers can “easily misread students’ aptitudes, intents, or abilities as a result of the difference in styles of language use and interactional patterns” (Delpit 2006, p. 167). Parental beliefs about education and their interactions with schools and teachers may be misunderstood or conflict with school rules and subsequently be viewed negatively by teachers (Delpit, 2006). For example, teachers expect parents to be involved in their children’s education however, this is not generally a practice in many immigrant families. Although this finding is not inherently negative, previous research with LIFTS and other samples has found how value differences can negatively affect teachers’ perceptions of parents (e.g., Lasky, 2003) as well as their perceptions of students’ academic achievement (Hauser-Cram et al., 2003) and behavioral well-being (Sirin et al., 2009). Thus, teachers may perceive value differences as harmful to students’ well-being in school.

In order to inform readers about Islam 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. as immigrants explains how these values and practices affect participation in everyday life. To clarify the subject of the article, the term “Muslim” will refer to a worldwide community of people who adhere to Islam as their religion, in varying ways. First, I will give an overview of who Muslims are and the distribution of Muslim populations in the world. Second, I will explain some basic concepts of Islam, Muslim family and community values, and Islamic teaching and practices. Third, I will discuss some issues and challenges faced by Muslim immigrants in general. The article concludes with some discussion and brief suggestions for how to understand Muslim immigrants.

### **Who is Muslim?**

“Muslim” is an Arabic word meaning “one who submits to God” (The American Heritage Dictionary 2009, p. 161). A Muslim is an adherent of Islam, a monotheistic Abrahamic religion based on the Qur’an (Nasr, 2006). The word “Islam” is derived from the Arabic verb *Aslama*, which means “to accept, surrender to, or submit to God” (Council of Islamic Education, 2011, p. 2). The core Islamic sources of Qur’an (the highest source of religious authority) and *Sunnah* (the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad) provide knowledge in Islamic teaching (Mawdudi, 2011). 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.

### **Muslims around the World**

There are more than 1.57 billion Muslims living in 57 countries. This number makes up about 23% of the 2011 world population (Pew Research Center, 2011). Sixty-two percent reside in Asia, 20% in the Middle East and North Africa, 15% in Sub-Saharan Africa, and around 2% in Europe and North America (CIA world fact book, 2008). Nine million Muslims reside in North America (Pew Research Center, 2011). Muslims speak 60 different languages and come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Center for Immigration Studies, 2012). Arabic is the most commonly spoken language, followed by Bengali and Punjabi (Al-Romi, 2006).

### **Muslim Family and Community**

#### **Family Structure and the Role of the Family**

In many Muslim communities, the family is considered to be the most fundamental and important social unit. It can be difficult for individuals to avoid the mediating influence of their family. In traditional Muslim families, members relate to one another based on hierarchies; the

older the member, the more authority and respect the member is afforded. Within this structure, obligations are seen as more important than rights, and family interests outweigh personal interests (Salman, 2007). Mothers typically are the primary caretakers of children, especially those with disabilities. Fathers tend to be less involved with child care responsibilities, but this is not always the case for families having children with special needs. Some fathers were more accepting of their children with disabilities than are mothers (Ansari, 2002).

For Muslims, the family bond is founded on mutual expectations of rights and obligations for every member of the family and a cooperative approach with regard to family cohesion is emphasized. Each member is expected to contribute toward the overall family welfare with his or her individual resources and income (Ross-Sheriff & Hussain, 2004). Islamic teaching charges parents with the duty to cherish, sustain, educate, and train their children (Giger & Davidhizar, 2002). Even as adults, Muslims rely on their parents and other family members for many necessities of life, such as food, clothing, and housing. The strong cultural emphasis on maintaining family harmony and stability can lead to efforts to avoid conflict and defer decision-making in the family hierarchy.

In Islamic countries, relatives and extended family members either live together or live close to each other so that children are thought to have multiple sets of “parents” who have as much authority over them as their own biological parents (Abu El-haj & Bonet, 2011). Extended families remain an important part of the family structure and can be an asset to the community as they can provide emotional and material supports for the core family. In some cases, members of the extended family are included in discussions about family affairs such as making decisions about children’s educational plans (Abu El-haj & Bonet, 2011).

## **Parenting Styles**

Muslim parents usually demand complete obedience and devotion to the family and community. Children often accept this authoritarianism as normal and learn to abide by their family's rules (Ismail et al., 2009). Parents believe that their children are best educated by memorization and repetition rather than concepts of reflective questioning (Ismail et al., 2009). While most schools in the U.S. develop individualism, autonomy, personal initiative, and a critical sense, at home children are expected to cooperate with family members and neighbors. This situation sometimes creates a situation in which children must learn to embrace a dual set of values, often remaining more passive at home and more vocal at school.

Some immigrant parents do not support their children's pursuits in extracurricular activities in school and may even question the purpose of such activities (Md-Yunus, 2012). They may feel their children are being distracted from their education, becoming too involved in Western culture and thus are gradually slipping away from their ethnic culture, or becoming too "Westernized" by involving themselves in the community (Karim, 2009). Although immigrant parents do not necessarily prohibit such activities, they do not encourage their children to actively participate either (Karim, 2009).

Some Muslim parents limit their participation in schools, especially those with limited education (Haboush, 2007). One of the reasons for this is conflict with work schedules or being unsure of how to get involved. Some parents may feel that they do not have to participate in school unless there are issues with their children's education (Md-Yunus, 2008). Teachers may also be unsure how to involve parents in schools (Ross-Sheriff & Hussain, 2004).

### **Collectivism and Individualism**

Collectivist attitudes are often given more emphasis among Muslims in the family structure and the needs of the group. Family members feel a responsibility for one another, and individuals usually are not expected to function independently of the family unit (Hasnain et al., 2008). Muslims often express a religious duty to care for and provide for the weak or disabled. For example, a family's responsibility to support persons with disabilities extends to aunts, uncles, cousins, grandchildren, and grandparents.

On the other hand, individualism is generally practiced one's own family. For example, families embrace "a culture of pity" for the disabled, and prefer to keep family struggles and affairs secret, which may lead Muslim families to hide their children with disabilities from society (Fazil et al., 2002; Khedr, 2006). These families claim a responsibility (and even an expectation) to continue to care for their children into adulthood (Ross-Sheriff & Hussain, 2004). Seclusion of a child also may be a means of escaping the shame or humiliation associated with having a child with a disability. Thus, families of children with disabilities may be less likely to visit friends or socialize; but when they do go out, they are more likely to leave the child at home (Bywaters et al., 2003). Moreover, many Muslim families deal with family matters privately and therefore seek only minimal outside support, if any (Laird, 2006).

### **The Role of Community**

Members of Islamic communities consider each other "brothers and sisters" (Ross-Sheriff & Hussain, 2004). They use a wide range of family relationship terms to frame other relationships. For example, when speaking to an unrelated woman 10 or 20 years older, a young man might use the vernacular terms for "elder sister" or "auntie," and a young woman may address any man of the older generation as "uncle" (Abd-Allah, 2006). This practice might seem



stifling or naïve to people accustomed to the flirtatious discourse between males and females of all ages that occurs in some societies, but it tends to create a more inclusive, less competitive environment in which those who are shy, lack confidence, or are less physically attractive can play their roles without embarrassment. It also avoids forcing children and young people into sexualized conversations before they are mature enough to handle them (Abd-Allah, 2006).

Members of the community also promote relationships and support among each other. Usually when individuals meet with each other, they will wish *salam*, a greeting and farewell ritual. Another example is visiting the sick, which is considered a religious responsibility, and being visited while sick is one of the essential rights of a Muslim (Margolis et al., 2003). Some families or individuals give moral and financial support to new immigrant families who have just arrived in the community. Some newly arrived immigrants may reject services that conflict with their cultural norms, even when these are provided by the community. For example, ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) in Dearborn, Michigan, started a child care service for the Islamic community in the area to fulfill the needs for child care services (Siddiqui, 2011).

Many Islamic communities establish mosques and centers as places for Friday prayers and for after-school and weekend religious school for children to study the Qur'an and learn about Islamic teachings. Some teachers and *imams* (Islamic leaders) provide services free of charge. These places also serve for social gatherings such as funerals and general activities like dinners and bake sales. The mosques and centers are mainly used as a house of worship, but community-sponsored cultural programs and activities are also held there (Al-Romi, 2006). When immigrants arrive in a new country, they often undergo significant stress in adjusting to their new surroundings, and these centers serve as sources of information (Al-Romi, 2006).

### **Islamic Teaching and Practices**

Most Muslim children learn about Islamic teaching through formal and informal education in *madrasah* (educational institution), mosques, or at home starting as early as preschool (McCreey et al., 2007). Islamic teaching aims at producing Muslims who are knowledgeable, competent and pious, with moral and ethical values that enforce a strong belief and devotion in God based on the Qur'an and Sunnah (Borhan, 2004). The faith also includes beliefs about what is best for the development of well-balanced individuals through an outlook that integrates spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual dimensions (Borhan, 2004; Ismail et al., 2009).

#### **Prayer**

Prayer "is an integral part of a person's life and considered an activity of daily living for Muslims" (Margolis et al., 2003, p. 61). Muslims pray five times per day: dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall (Haron, 2011). Schools 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. Friday is considered a weekly mini-holiday of sorts; it is the day on which congregational prayers are held (Haron, 2011). Men are required to attend Friday prayer, and many women also attend.

#### **Gender Issues**

Gender is one of the most misunderstood aspects of Islamic practice and culture and is routinely a source of conflict (Laird, 2006). Young children are free to choose whom they play with and the play area; no attempts are made to separate children of different sexes when they come into physical contact with each other during the course of their play (Borhan, 2004). However, free mixing among men and women is prohibited after puberty, including sitting together in class, eating together in the cafeteria, on the bus, during class, and extracurricular

activities (Borhan, 2004). In particular, direct skin and physical contact between post-pubescent males and females who are not direct blood relatives is prohibited (Conly, 1998). This includes shaking hands or otherwise coming into bodily contact with individuals of the opposite gender (Nimer, 2002). Male teachers should be especially sensitive to the belief that physical contact between nonrelated males and females should be avoided (Borhan, 2004). Male teachers should generally avoid eye contact with Muslim mothers, and female teachers should avoid contact with Muslim fathers.

### **Food and Dietary Practices**

In Islam, there are two types of food: *haram* or forbidden and *halal* or permissible (Borhan, 2004). Muslims do not eat pork products, or any food that contains pork-based gelatin or mono diglycerides (Hoot et al., 2003). Rather, 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 (Hoot et al., 2003). In addition, Muslims are forbidden to consume blood, carrion, and alcohol (Margolis et al., 2003).

This dietary restriction is mandatory for both adults and children. 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 is acceptable for Muslim children.

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* 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).

Non-pork meats also require special preparations; the slaughter of an animal for food requires a certain ritual. The butcher must recite the name of God, slit the throat of the animal, and drain the blood (Haron, 2011). Meat from an animal slaughtered this way is called *zabiha* or *halal* (Mawdudi, 2011). Many Muslims will eat meat only if it has been prepared this way. Many Muslims also accept meat prepared according to kosher rules. Seafood is almost universally allowed, regardless of how it has been prepared (Mawdudi, 2011).

Before meals, Muslims are supposed to recite *doa* (saying) to thank God (Haron, 2011). They are not to play with food and must finish their food as a manifestation of appreciation of God's benevolence. Eating with one's right hand is religiously prescribed (Haron, 2011). Children are taught to handle food with the right hand when eating with their hands and also to use utensils with their right hand (Borhan, 2004).

### **Dress Code**

Modesty is highly valued in Islam, and many Muslims consider dress to be an important expression of modesty. After reaching puberty, both men and women are instructed to dress modestly and to avert their gaze when encountering someone of the opposite sex. Clothing is generally, but not always, expected to be loose for both men and women. Commonly stated rules are for 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 (Haron, 2011). These rules vary from country to country, and family to family, and they do not apply universally across any group.

The issue of *hijab* (veil) and headscarf is especially interesting. In some Islamic countries, women are required to wear a veil, whereas in others it is not obligatory. Thus, the decision to wear the headscarf in certain cultures is considered necessary and in others is interpreted as simply going a step further in terms of piety (Ross-Sheriff & Hussain, 2004).

Although children are generally not restricted in what clothing they wear until puberty, many Muslim families encourage their daughters to wear the *hijab* and dress very modestly early in life to avoid difficulties during the teen years. The *hijab* is always seen as a physical symbol of conservative Islam, thus to wear it in public in a non-Muslim country is to call attention to oneself rather than assimilate. Hence, choosing to wear the *hijab* in the West is a “gendered badge of religious and political allegiance” (Nimer, 2002, p. 20) and a way for Muslim women from various nation states and social and cultural backgrounds to “engage modernity in a new manner and within different paradigms” (Kadi & Billeh, 2006, p. 320). The *hijab* is therefore a physical symbol of Islam adopted by many for cultural reasons and by others for religious reasons. 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*.

### **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 its contents and emphasis. For example, in some war-torn countries, the oral tradition is the main source communication of these cultural treasures as fathers tell their sons old tales “he does not have in his pocket, he carries in his mind” (Jones, 2010, p. 29). 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, 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 use 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.

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. 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 (Borhan, 2004). Muslim parents consider stuffed animals same as concept in the 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.

## **Holidays and Events**

The Islamic year follows a lunar calendar of 12 months and 354 or 355 days; thus, Islamic dates rotate throughout the Gregorian calendar. 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 (Huda, 2006). Although this practice may seem rigorous, Muslims generally greet Ramadan as a time of spiritual renewal.

Some Muslim families might have some reservations regarding common holiday celebrations in the U.S. such as Halloween and Thanksgiving but others do not mind if their children are exposed to the traditions and customs of other religions and cultures. If parents request that their children not participate in such holidays, related school programs or activities, alternative programs should be offered by the schools.

## **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. In addition, 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). The purpose of fasting is to develop appreciation for what one has and to reconfirm responsibility toward those who are hungry and in need by feeling how those who are without food or water feel (Athar, 2011). 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, they should provide a separate area for them while the other children have snack or lunch. 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 teachers should pay attention to fasting children for signs such as paleness or exhaustion. In addition, fasting students should be exempted from 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). Non-oral medications such as those that are inhaled, applied to the skin, or injected also pose a challenge. In general, the rule is that such medications will not break the fast unless they act as a source of nutrition (Haron, 2011), so people who take medications are not required to fast; in fact, they are discouraged from fasting because Islam prohibits doing harm to oneself. It is important to mention that exemptions to fasting are available for people who may be at risk or may put others at risk; this applies especially to people in jobs that make them directly responsible for the safety of others, such as long-distance travelers, breastfeeding mothers, pregnant or menstruating women, and sick people (Laird, 2006). 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 children from Muslim backgrounds generally face two major challenges in their new country which are tied to the overarching character of Islam. First, they are alienated



and marginalized due to the differences in their faith and religious practices involving special obligations and responsibilities, which shapes the way Muslims as individuals and as a group respond to the conditions in their new country. Second, they have to deal with differences in school systems and programs, sometimes resulting in problems in their studies that may ultimately lead to failure in schools.

### **Muslims as Immigrants**

Muslim immigrants practice a different culture and faith from those of their host countries. As immigrants, they 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. Differences in religious beliefs, values, and practices have set Muslims apart from adherents of other religions. Moreover, after the 9-11 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, official language proficiency, health insurance coverage, and access to work supports such as tax credits, food assistance, and child care. 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. However, 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).

Immigrant Muslim children must attempt to deal with the contradictions and search for ways to create alternative forms of acceptance and a sense of belonging that would extend beyond the assimilation discourses that often create tension and stress. For that reason, Muslims agree that basic differences exist between their culture and Western culture. Although some develop integrated paths by skillfully melding their Muslim and mainstream culture (Al-Romi, 2006) many are torn between cultures, marginalized by their communities, positioned as threatening outsiders, and construct hyphenated identities.

### **Differences in the School System and Program**

The promise of a better life in a new country is not always simple and straight forward for Muslim immigrant children. They are not only living in a new culture that is totally different from their own, but also learning a new language and new subjects in a new school system. 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. Like immigrant children of other backgrounds, Muslim immigrant students struggle to understand and become frustrated. 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 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 students as English language learners 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. 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. This example highlights the facts that concepts of normalcy are not universal and that impairment must be seen in its social and cultural context (Hasnain et al, 2008). 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 were not based on their ability and culturally inappropriate, so the results are skewed and children are placed in the low-track classes. School districts should evaluate students using broad-based assessment rather than standardized tests. Researchers suggest that pre-service teacher preparation programs include mandatory bilingual and multicultural education training (McBrien, 2006). In addition to have English as Second Language (ESL) teachers and program should be placed in schools. In their 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.

Adams and Kirova (2006) suggested some social support strategies such as welcoming children and making their classroom 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 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 (2005) reported that teachers who allowed these children write in their native language or illustrate their answers and used audio recording of English books and computerized lesson proved the tools to help the children understand. 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**

September 11, 2001 dramatically changed the landscape for Muslim immigrants throughout the world. The criminal behaviors of some Muslims brought a negative image to the Muslims. Although some first generation immigrant students often seek to involve themselves in the community, society still perceives them as strangers. As a result, the trials and tribulations of Muslim immigrants are not limited to the decision to assimilate into their host country's society

but to what immigrants and their children also face as the “Muslim paradox,” characterized by “extreme vilification” on one end and by a “considerable degree of acceptance, on the other” (Huda, 2006, p. 28). Contradictory images of Muslims praying peacefully in mosques are broadcast alongside footage of bearded men committing heinous acts (Trakim, 2004).

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 an expression of faith and spiritual freedom. This bias research about it 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, 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. Unfortunately, despite such efforts to reach out, many in the Muslim community remain marginalized (Salman, 2007).

Adaptations to diverse cultures sometimes create tensions in public spaces such as schools. In particular many Muslim children living in the new countries are still bound by traditional Islamic practices (Al-Romi, 2006). For these children differences in culture, religion, and values between school and home created conflict. 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.



### References

- Abd-Allah, U. F. (2006). *Islam and the cultural imperative*. Retrieved from <http://www.crosscurrents.org/abdallahfall2006.htm>
- Abu El-Haj, T., & Bonet, S.W. (2011). Education, citizenship, and the politic of belonging: Youth from Muslim transnational communities and the “war on terror.” *Review of Research in Education*, 35, 29-59.
- Adams, L. D., & Kirova, A. (2006). *Global migration and education*, Mahwah: New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Al-Romi, N. H. (2006). Muslim as a minority in the United States. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 33(6), 631-638.
- Ansari, A. (2002). Parental acceptance-rejection of disabled children in non-urban Pakistan. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 4(1), 121-128.
- Athar, S. (2011). *Ramadan fasting and Muslim patients*. Retrieved, from [www.imana.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=7720](http://www.imana.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=7720)
- Banks, J., & Banks, C. A. (2010). *Multicultural education*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Allyn Bacon.
- Borhan, L. (2004). Teaching Islam: A look inside an Islamic preschool in Malaysia. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education*, 5(3), 378-390.
- Bywaters, P., Ali, Z., Fazil, Q., Wallace, L. M., & Singh, G. (2003). Attitudes towards disability amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents of disabled children in the UK: Considerations for service providers and the disability movement. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 11(6), 502-509.
- Center for Immigration Studies. (2012). *Muslim immigrants in the United States*. Retrieved from [www.cis.org/articles/2002/back802.html](http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/back802.html)

CIA world factbook (2008). Muslim in the world. Retrieved from

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/id.html>

Conly, S. (1998). Gender gaps and gains. *People Planet*, 7(3), 22-23.

Council of Islamic Education (2011). *Defining Islamic education: Differentiations and applications*. Retrieved from [www.cie.org](http://www.cie.org).

Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Fazil, Q., Bywaters, P., Ali, Z., Wallace, L., & Singh, G. (2002). Disadvantage and discrimination compounded: The experience of Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents of disabled children in the UK. *Disability & Society*, 17(3), 237-253.

Giger, J. N., & Davidhizar, R. (2002). Culturally competent care: Emphasis on understanding the people of Afghanistan, Afghanistan Americans, and Islamic culture and religion. *International Nursing Review*, 49(2), 79-86.

Haboush, K. (2007). Working with Arab American families: Cultural competent practice for school psychologists. *Psychology in the Schools*, 44(2), 183-198.

Haron, S. email correspondent on August 2, 2011. All citations of Haron, 2011 and 2012 refer to personal communications.

Hasnain, R., Shaikh, L.C., & Shanawanim, H. (2008). *Disability and the Muslim perspective: An introduction for rehabilitation and health care providers*. Center for International Rehabilitation Research Information and Exchange. State University of New York, University at Buffalo.

Hauser-Cram, P., & Sirin, S. R. (2003). When teachers' and parents' values differ: Teachers' ratings of academic competence in children from low –income families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(4), 813-820.

- Hoot, J.L., Szecsi, T., & Moosa, S. (2003). What teachers of young children should know about Islam. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 31(2), 85-90.
- Huda, Q. (2006). *The diversity of Muslims in the United States*. Special report, United States Institute of Peace. Retrieved from [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)
- Ismail, H., Md.Yunus, A. S. A., Ali, W. W.Z., Hamzah, R., Abu, R., Nawawi, H. (2009). Belief in God based on the national philosophy of education amongst Malaysian secondary School teachers. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(1), 160-170.
- Jones, M.E. A. (2010). Muslim and western influences on school curriculum. *Journal of Asia Pacific of Education*, 27(1), 27-39
- Kadi, W. & Billeh, V. (2006). Special issue on Islam and education-myths and truths. *Comparative Education Review*, 50(3), 311-324.
- Karim, H. (2009). *Jihad of youth: Why first generation immigrant Muslim youths are drawn to the philosophy of Tariq Ramadan*. Master Thesis, Georgetown University Washington, D.C.
- Khedr, R. (2006). *Putting disability on the Muslim agenda*. Retrieved from [www.islamonline.net/English/family/2006/05/article02.shtml](http://www.islamonline.net/English/family/2006/05/article02.shtml)
- Kunjufu, J. (2002). *Black students- middle class teachers*. Chicago, IL: Images
- Laird, L. D. (2006). *Muslims and the cultures of healing*. Unpublished manuscript, Boston University School of Medicine: Boston, MA.
- Laksy, S. (2003). The cultural and emotional politics of teacher-parent interactions. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 843-860.

- Maira, S. (2004). Youth culture, citizenship and globalization: South Asian Muslim youth in the United States after September 11<sup>th</sup>. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 24(1), 219-231.
- Margolis, S. A., Carter, T., Dunn, E. V., & Reed, R. L. (2003). Validation of additional domains in activities of daily living, culturally appropriate for Muslims. *Gerontology*, 49(1), 61-65.
- Mastrilli, R. & Sardo-Brown, D. (2001). Pre-service teachers' knowledge about Islam: A snapshot of post September 11, 2001. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 29(3), 156-161.
- Mawdudi, S. A. (2011). *Islamic way of life*. Retrieved from [http://web.youngmuslims.ca/online\\_library/books/islamic\\_way\\_of\\_life/index.htm](http://web.youngmuslims.ca/online_library/books/islamic_way_of_life/index.htm)
- McBrien, J. L. (2006). Educational needs and barriers for refugee students in the United States: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 329-364.
- McCreey, E., Jones, L., & Holmes, R. (2007). Why do Muslim parents want Muslim schools? *Early Years*, 27(3), 203-219.
- Md-Yunus, S. (2008). Immigrant parents: How to help your children succeed in school *Journal of Childhood Education*, 84(5), 315-318.
- Md-Yunus, S. (2012). *She is my language broker: How does cultural capital benefit Asian immigrant children in the United States*. ERIC EDS 5295567.
- NAAA-ADC action alert: Support Cultural Bridges Act of 2002 (2005). Retrieved from <http://www.cafearabica.com/nuke/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=12&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>

Nasr, S. H. (2006). *Islam*. The world almanac and book of facts 2006 (pp. 14-16). New York: World Almanac Education Group.

Neito, S. (2009). Language, culture, and teaching. 2<sup>nd</sup>.ed. New York: Taylor & Francis.

Nimer, M. (2002). *The North American Muslim resource guide: Muslim community life in the United States and Canada*. New York: Rutledge.

Ogabu, J. (2003). Theory of academic disengagement: its evolution and its critics. *Intercultural Education*, 15(4), 385-395.

Pew Research Center (2011). Religion & Public Life Project. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/the-future-of-the-global-muslim-population>

Rogers-Sirin, L., Ryce, P., & Sirin, S. R. (2014). Acculturation, acculturative stress, and cultural mismatch and their influences on immigrant children and adolescents' well-being. *Advances in Immigrant Family Research*, doi 10.1007/978-1-4614-9123-3\_2

Ross-Sheriff, F., & Hussain, A. (2004). South Asian Muslim Children and Families. In Fong, Rowena. *Culturally competent practice with immigrant and refugee children and family*. New York: The Guildford Press.

Salman, S. (2007). Muslims in America. *The Trust*, 10(3), 10-15.

Siddiqui, E. (2011). *A brief history of Islam in the United States*. Retrieved from [www.islamamerica.org/history.cfm](http://www.islamamerica.org/history.cfm)

Sirin, S. R., Ryce, P., & Mir, M. (2009). How teachers' values affect their evaluation of children of immigrants: Findings from Islamic and public school. *Early Childhood Quarterly*, 24(4), 463-473.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Ed. (2009). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company

Trakim, L. (2004). From conversion to conversation: Interfaith dialogue in post 9-11 America.  
*The Muslim World*, 94(3), 343-355.