

Advocating for Muslim Students in the U.S. Schools: If not Us, Then Who?

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Muslim population in the United States:

- Muslims are projected to number 8.1 million by 2040 (Sullivan & Zezima, 2016). According to estimates, the Muslim population in the US ranges from 3 million (Bagby, Perl, & Froehle, 2001) to 4.3 million (Janssen, 2017) to 7 million (Mohamed, 2016) observant followers.
- Muslims are made up of three groups: (1) immigrants, (2) American converts, and (3) those born to the first two groups as Muslims (Podikunju-Hussain, 2006). American Muslims are the second most racially diverse religious group in the United States (Hossain, 2017).
- Pew (2018) has estimated that American Muslims are 41% white, 20% black, 28% Asian, 8% Hispanic, and 3% other or mixed.

Discrimination and Hate Crimes Towards Muslims in the United States:

- The profound effect of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the American society & culture > A sense of unity against a common enemy: Islamic extremism > A negative media portrayal > A drastic increase of Islamophobia > Islamic ideology=Terrorism=A threat to Western civilization> (Lebowitz, 2016).
- A significant increase in hate crimes & discrimination toward Muslims in the US (Seward & Khan, 2016). The 114th Congress Resolution 413 officially recognized Muslim Americans (even people perceived as Muslims) become the target of increased violence and hatred (2015).
- 60% of Muslim Americans reported some level of religious discrimination in 2016 (Mogahed & Chouhoud, 2017).

Challenges Muslim School-Aged Children Face

- **Bullying:** 53% of Muslim youth experience bullying, while 26% face cyber-bullying and 19% physical bullying; 36% of girls wearing head scarf (hijab) were bullied just because of this (CAIR, 2017). Muslim school-age children are four times as likely to be bullied compared to their peers; of these incidents, one quarter involve bullying by a teacher or other school official (Mogahed & Chouhoud, 2017; American Psychological Association, 2018).
- **Othering:** Situations in which teachers & peers position Muslim students like they do not belong to the US. *“We’re really not that different than any others. We have a different culture, but then we’re all Americans... It’s not like we are some different species. We’re not aliens/anything.”* (Seward & Khan, 2016).
- **Muslim Students’ Responses to Islamophobia:** Muslim students face to correct others’ misperceptions. Personal disappointment/fear for responding. A female student: *“I was on the school bus, and this random guy said –Go back to your country, you f-king Afghan-... I felt horrible, I was only in 7th grade, what am I going to do? I wish I could stand up...show America that we’re not a bad religion. We don’t teach violence, we teach tolerance.”* (Isik-Ercan, 2015).
- **Difficulties Following the guidelines of their religion:** Performing the noon prayer; navigating gender relations; participating in physical education classes and sports (Seward & Khan, 2016); fasting during the holly month of Ramadan; wearing head scarf (hijab) particularly when not allowed; following the certain rules about what they can eat (halal); participating in holidays and celebrations with their families (Mahalingappa, Rodriguez, & Polat, 2017).

Raising Awareness

How can school counselors advocate and empower Muslim students at their schools?

- School counselors' ethical responsibility to understand the religious beliefs and practices and be prepared with counseling strategies (Sink & Devlin, 2011).
- School counselors educate themselves about the religious and cultural practices of Islam. Be conscious of their own perceptions and beliefs about Muslims (Podikunju-Hussain, 2006). Allow the student to educate the counselor regarding his/her own culture, religion, and connection to the larger society.
- Respect individuality within Muslim student population. Remember the much diversity in how Islam is practiced by individual Muslims. Assess the religious and cultural identity of Muslim clients (Meymand, 2018; Podikunju-Hussain, 2006).
- Helps students recognize the effects of discrimination on their identities and work with students to identify ways to deal with their struggles in a manner that honors a student's sense of self (Seward & Khan, 2016).
- Create a safe, supporting, welcoming school climate and provide a safe space for all students. Muslim students' positive recognition of themselves as Muslims by school personnel and affirmation of their religious identities help them feel belong (Isik-Ercan, 2015).
- Support Muslim students by helping them find ways to accommodate their religious practices in a manner that is least disruptive to a normal school schedule such as helping them get permission to go to the library during lunch time when fasting (Seward & Khan, 2016).
- Assist Muslim students in forming alliances with individuals and groups sharing similar concerns/interests as their own that might be broad enough to include other racial, religious, or ethnic minorities. Interfaith club, multicultural student association, etc. (Seward & Khan, 2016).
- Help them organize events like "multicultural appreciation week" or "major holidays" and encourage Muslim students to be a part of these events to introduce their culture so that their voice can be heard and their faith/culture can be represented as well (Isik-Ercan, 2015).
- Collaborate with members of the local Islamic community to provide professional developmental seminars on Muslims and their culture along with the effects of Islamophobia on Muslim youth. Make available free education guidelines for students, teachers, and staff teaching Muslim beliefs, holidays, and traditions. Council on American-Islamic Relations (www.cair-net.org) or the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago (www.ciogc.org)

Advocating for Social Justice