

# Meeting the Needs of Muslim Learners in U.S. Classrooms

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## Abstract

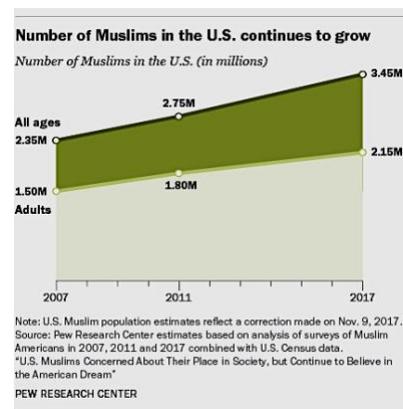
*Muslims in the United States make up a large, growing population from varied national backgrounds and ethnicities, displaying, naturally, numerous differences both internally and with respect to the larger American culture. Despite the increasing Muslim population, school practices often do not meet their educational needs. This article offers a new framework of Critical Southwest Asian Studies to address the ingrained fear of Southwest Asians among Americans that is often present in the media and politics and seeks richer, fuller narratives of those from the region. Many schools do not address Muslim needs - by not acknowledging student differences in race, religion and ethnicity, by not offering foreign language courses that represent the region, and by not helping to promote counter narratives of Islam. Suggestions for all teachers are offered to help better meet the needs of Muslim learners in our pluralistic society.*

**Keywords:** *Muslim learners; Islamophobia and schools; Muslim student identity; culturally sustaining pedagogy; critical theory*

## Introduction

With our increasingly diverse population, U.S. schools are filled with multiethnic students who bring their cultural backgrounds with them to the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This article focuses on how our schools typically do not meet the educational needs of Muslim students and suggests changes to address these shortcomings. These practices, such as the lack of relevant language instruction and curriculum issues, are discussed in this article. I offer a theory to frame the discussion and to address these problems, as well as an improved teaching tool to implement in the classroom. The article concludes with strategies for teachers to better meet the needs of Muslim students.

The need to understand Muslim culture and Muslim students is increasing: there are currently 3.45 Muslims immigrants in the United States, and the Muslim population is predicted to double by 2050 (Mohamed, 2018). Despite this fact, “the Muslim population often appears invisible and misunderstood in American society” (Callaway, 2010, p. 217). This invisibility intersects with the educational experiences of Muslim students, as their Muslim identity does not cease to exist when they walk into school settings. Many Muslims are also impacted by an increase in Islamophobia, a dislike or distrust of Muslims, particularly heightened since 9/11 (Zagumny & Richey, 2013; Saleem & Thomas, 2011; Eraqi, 2015). In the Post-9/11 era, the United States has witnessed an increase in Islamophobia, heightened by conflicts in Southwest Asia and by terrorist



attacks both in the United States and abroad, as some Americans associate Muslims with violence and terrorism. The rise of hate crimes, post-9/11, is one illustration of how increasingly difficult life is for many American Muslims. Politicians also play a role in continuing this negative portrayal of Southwest Asians. On January 29, 2002, during George W. Bush's State of the Union address, he categorized Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil," along with Iraq and North Korea. Such a statement provides little context besides reifying an "Us versus Them" (Said, 1978; Ladson-Billings, 2005) paradigm. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump proposed a ban on all Muslims coming to America (Gökarıksel, 2017), which is now partially implemented despite many legal challenges.

Muslims in the United States make up a large, growing population from varied national backgrounds and ethnicities, displaying, naturally, numerous differences both internally and with respect to the larger American culture. Muslims differ in terms of "their educational levels, occupations, socioeconomic backgrounds as well as geographical origins" (Callaway, 2010, p.218). Muslims also practice different forms of Islam. With the exception of Pakistanis, studies show the longer Muslims live in the United States, the more likely they are to want a more moderate or flexible interpretation of Islamic laws (Callaway, 2010). The diversity of Muslims makes "Islamic home life" difficult to capture. While differences exist, some characteristics of Islamic culture can be delineated: a patriarchal society, a strong focus on the family, traditional gender roles in favor of men, a high value on education, and modesty, particularly in women (Greenberg & Sagiv-Reiss, 2013).

It follows that Muslim students are diverse. Public schools in the United States are secular, leading Muslim students to navigate the complexities and difficulties of a dual identity—being both Muslim and American (Sarroub, 2005). Additionally, many Muslims feel the pressure to assimilate into American culture (Ahmad & Szpara, 2003). Given this tension between home and school life, the question becomes, how can schools and teachers better integrate strategies to educate Islamic students in the United States while also allowing them to retain their culture? Considering past and present hostilities towards Muslim people from Southwest Asia, it is important to examine how they are portrayed in classroom materials—and if this portrayal varies depending on the greater context of global events. Schools have both a unique opportunity and an inherent responsibility to help students embrace both worlds, rather than forcing students in one direction. I argue that meeting the needs of Muslim students in our schools is best achieved through the lens of Critical Southwest Asian Studies and teachers' use of *culturally sustained pedagogy*.

### **Critical SWAsian Theory: Power and Knowledge**

I have constructed a Critical SWAsian Studies (CSS) framework that allows for analysis centered on the people and cultures of Southwest Asia. The region of Southwest Asia includes countries outlined on the map in Figure 2. Southwest Asia comprises a huge area of more than a dozen countries, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan (See map on next page), but the varied peoples of the region are often painted with a broad brush and viewed as one.



CSS draws its roots from *critical race theory*, as it addresses inequalities presented from the dominant narrative and aims to promote change (Zagumny & Richey, 2013). Three main tenets comprise critical race theory: ingrained racism, the importance of offering a counter-narrative, and interest convergence (Milner, 2007). The notion of ingrained racism centers on how deep-rooted racism develops, so that it becomes normalized. Additionally, people in society make up the educational system, and therefore our system is also entrenched in issues of racism. The second tenet of a counter-

narrative is essential as a way to generate new knowledge from the dominant discourse. Individual and community voice are essential to critical race theory as people name their own realities that are often dismissed by society (Milner, 2007). The third tenet, of converging interests, states that until the interests of blacks converge with the interests of whites, racial equality will not be achieved (hooks, 1994). CSS acknowledges, in somewhat similar terms, the ingrained fear Americans have of Southwest Asians. The origin of this fear traces back to the Iranian Revolution and hostage crisis in Iran, and continues in recent years and today, post-9/11, as people who look Southwest Asian in appearance are associated with violence and terrorist activities by many Americans. While this fear relates to the appearance, or skin pigmentation of people in the region, it is more accurately related to ethnicity than race. Beyond ingrained fear, CSS also acknowledges that people from Southwest Asia are often misrepresented in negative, demeaning ways—which contributes to this fear.

This fear manifests itself in schools as several Muslim students have faced persecution for their identity post 9/11 (Niccolini, 2016). While we don't know all of the stories of hate and persecution, prominent stories of students like Ahmed Mohamed who was suspended for bringing a homemade clock to school and a Muslim girl being asked if there was a bomb in her backpack (Niccolini, 2016) to Muslim students being killed on college campuses as hate crimes. There is a need for a more balanced understanding by educators and their students through a more accurate and inclusive approach—all benefit from this as stereotypes are broken and dehumanizing groups of people ends.

CSS also considers the impacts of mainstream media, which too often center on a negative and dehumanizing portrayal of Islam and of Muslims (Said, 1981; Ahmad & Szpara, 2003). Edward Said (1979, 1981) is thought of as the pioneer in research on marginalized groups in Southwest Asia. Said exposed the Western view of Asia, including Southwest Asia, to be simplistic and a “single” story, and instead offered a more nuanced interpretation. Single stories tend to define both the region of Southwest Asia and its people through stereotypes and misrepresentations by the media (Zagumny & Richey, 2013; Saleem & Thomas, 2011). Research on the media's role in the portrayal of marginalized groups has grown, post 9/11, with research finding that Southwest Asians continue to suffer from negative and stereotypical media spins to favor U.S. policy and create fear among Americans (Kamilpour, 2000; Maleki & Tirman, 2015; Brown and Vincent, 1997; Morgan, 2008). Even reputable news organizations such as the *New York Times* have published stories which reify a good versus bad portrayal, while also not distinguishing the actions of a government from actions of its people (Fayyaz & Shiraz, 2013; Jahedi, 2012; Alkahtani & Nwanko, 2002). Events such as the Iranian hostage crisis, sanctions against the Iranian nuclear program, and the 2009 Iranian election and protests have been filled with the use of negative language, depicting Iranians as barbarians and violent, while portraying

the U.S. in a positive light (Jahedi, 2012; Brown and Vincent, 1995). Muslims also have received negative portrayals in other Western countries, such as Australia, dating back to the Iranian Revolution (Ata, 1984). Ata's (1984) examination found that Muslims were positively portrayed 12% of the time in his examination of four Australian newspapers during the post-Revolution era. These media portrayals exhibit a deficit framework of distrust and conflict toward Islam and the peoples of Southwest Asia. The term "Islamophobia" (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2007; Faimau, 2015) describes this perceived fear of Muslims and of Southwest Asians, and is displayed all too commonly in the media, in political stances, and in U.S. society. As Islam continues to grow in the U.S. and globally, a better understanding and portrayal of Muslims is necessary to counter the binary, deficit approach of Islamophobia—and of seeing them as extremists and terrorists (Faimau, 2015).

If this negative, dehumanizing portrayal of Muslims also makes its way into textbooks, it reinforces the dominant narrative with a new generation of students. This, along with the casual discounting—or ignoring, of the Islamic culture of Muslim students not only isolates them in the classroom and schools, but leads to larger issues of social injustice: "Consequently, the distinctive cultural identity of American Muslims is neither recognized nor valued" (Ahmad & Szpara, 2003, p. 296). Eraqi's (2015) study of the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in five secondary US History textbooks, post-9/11, illustrates the bias that exists in textbooks, as he found that Arabs and Muslims were only mentioned post-World War II, in a conflict setting, and without much background information for the reader that would help situate it in a broader context. Texts emphasize stereotypes rather than portraying accurate information and do nothing to challenge the dominant narrative (Eraqi, 2015; Zagumny & Richey, 2013; Saleem & Thomas, 2011; Morgan, 2008). Morgan (2008, p. 318) finds that:

In discussing religion, the textbooks often give faulty descriptions of Islam, which is frequently associated with violence when it is first introduced. Many authors write that Islam was spread by the sword, thus giving readers a biased impression, because there is no mention of the violence practiced by other religious groups.

Power and knowledge are intertwined, and nowhere is this as evident as in schools. Banks (1993) speaks of "mainstream knowledge" (p. 8) as the dominant mode of knowing, claiming to be based on objective facts and to be uninfluenced by the bias of the researcher. By contrast, "transformative knowledge" emerges from marginalized voices and challenges mainstream knowledge in its contention that knowledge is not neutral, but rather reflective of the researcher and reflective of power (Banks, 2016). Mainstream knowledge is privileged not only in society but also in school, where it ignores and misrepresents marginalized voices—including those of Muslims and of Southwest Asians. By addressing the power-relations of those who construct knowledge such as that in textbooks, transformative knowledge dismantles the supposed objectivity of the dominant paradigm. In this way, voices that are often silenced can finally be heard and make a difference in creating a counter-narrative, one which is their own positive alternative.

CSS acknowledges that those in power control curriculum, and that current curriculum reinforces negative, stereotypical portrayals of people from the region. The policies of the United States educational system tend not to reflect the diversity of the country (Ladson-Billings, 2009). While Christianity has an influential role in United States politics and education (Moore, 2009), the same cannot be said about other religions (Callaway, 2010). As a result, current schooling

practices largely ignore the religious diversity that exists in schools. CSS acknowledges that institutions and teachers often reinforce White, Christian values even in secular classrooms and values the lived cultural experiences of students from the SW Asian realm as part of creating transformative knowledge. Towards this end, CSS seeks richer, fuller narratives of SW Asians in the classroom and in textbooks to better reflect the diversity of individuals within Southwest Asia, including people of varying ethnicities, religions (but predominantly Islam), and language.

### **Muslim Identity and Curriculum Issues**

Geographer Gillian Rose (1995) defines identity as “how we make sense of ourselves” (p. 87). Identity has a powerful presence; it is complex, nuanced, and fluid. The identities of Muslim students—and the difficulties faced by these students in public schools—are many and varied, yet seldom considered. Educators should consider the identities and difficulties of Muslim students by listening to the narratives of these students to learn how they feel about their educational experiences (Ahmad & Spzara, 2003). Previous research shows Muslim students feel that most of their teachers and fellow students have inadequate knowledge, including negative stereotypes, about Islam and its values (Fahlman, 1984; Nord & Haynes, 1998). This is in part because some teachers lack the communication skills and sensitivities to teach diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Fahlman, 1984). Some teachers have admitted to having negative attitudes and being openly prejudiced towards Muslims (Fahlman, 1984; Sarroub, 2005). These misconceptions affect Muslim students (Nord & Haynes, 1998; Sarroub, 2005).

The identities of Muslim students are not reflected in the Foreign Language curriculum. Muslim students speak a variety of home languages such as Arabic, Turkish, Farsi (Persian), and Urdu (Chacko, 2016). Although schools typically offer courses in languages such as French, German and Spanish, few offer Arabic or other SW Asian languages. Studies show that students in a supportive learning environment that affirms their cultural identity excel in school (Spzara & Ahmad, 2007). The language identity of Muslim students is often ignored because ideas of assimilation that do not promote their culture.

The ways educators depict Islam as a religion often confirms negative stereotypes (Uphoff, 1989; Nord & Haynes, 1998; Douglass & Dunn, 2003). While public schools certainly do not engage in practicing religion, they can and should acknowledge aspects of religion, especially as these relate to learners in the classroom. For Muslim students, as for every student, this would include a more holistic narrative of major world faiths. This would include the Islamic faith, covering history and aspects of the faith and attention to issues that affect followers of Islam—including the recent rise of Islamophobia. If the curriculum allows students to explore Islam only through the context of conflict and terrorism, this reifies the negative portrayal of Islam. Such portrayals lead to possible prejudice by mainstream students and frustration by Muslim students (Ayish, 2003). If textbooks are problematic, the lived and shared cultural experiences of Muslim students provide a positive alternative to give voice and power in providing a counternarrative. Historically, many Western countries have done little to include the local identities of students into the classroom curriculum (Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008). When teachers become more learner-centered and include the identity of Muslim learners (and others), they invite all students to learn and increase their motivation and engagement.

### **Culturally Sustaining Practices as an Improved Tool for Educators**

Twenty-two years ago, Ladson-Billings introduced *culturally relevant pedagogy* to the education field. It seeks inclusion of students' experiences in the classroom to enhance meaning making and learning. Teachers who practice culturally relevant pedagogy "can be identified by the way they see themselves and others" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 29). The goal of culturally relevant pedagogy is to move beyond mainstream portrayals that are often negative, to more accurate representations. Mainstream portrayal often depicts Muslim students' native cultures pejoratively and implies they should conform to the dominant group. Teachers practicing culturally relevant pedagogy help students make connections between home, school, and community, and view knowledge construction as fluid and shared (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teachers and schools using culturally relevant pedagogy are "helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 36).

From culturally relevant pedagogy emerged *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, an attempt to further Ladson-Billings' ideas. Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to move beyond CRP by not only encouraging, but also maintaining, the languages and cultures of both the dominant and marginalized groups in the classroom setting (Paris, 2012). Students of any group bring their cultural identity with them to the classroom, and teachers practicing culturally sustaining pedagogy will see their students' culture as an asset (Milner, 2011), and likely will better meet the needs of their students – including Muslim students. A teacher practicing culturally sustaining pedagogy recognizes the fluidity of culture and the need to take care when depicting a culture. There is no ideal guide for teachers to meet the needs of their students in this way, but CSP can provide a strong foundation and practical ideas to foster a more equitable relationship.

CSP will require a reconsideration of teacher preparation to ensure that educators become more familiarized with cultural differences and learn their importance. Therefore, preservice teachers should learn about diverse cultures in their surrounding communities, as that may be their future. But time constraints are not the only challenge to raising cultural awareness; people often feel an inherent discomfort when addressing issues of cultural difference. Preservice educators may feel they should not acknowledge differences in race, gender, ethnicity, or religion. Whatever the cause, teacher education programs should include discussions centering on student cultural differences and prepare their future educators to handle them.

Beyond teacher education programs, classroom teachers also need to engage students in critical thinking about Islam. Critical thinking fosters dialogue with students in critiquing what they think they know as well as what they read and hear from politicians, the media, and in textbooks (Callaway, 2010). The critical piece is transformative as it challenges assumptions grounded in Western thought, and also provides an opportunity to involve Muslim students in classroom dialogue. It is also important to note the nuances that exist with students, and to understand the comfort level of each Muslim student when speaking about their faith. Some Muslim students may not feel comfortable talking about their faith, while others may feel comfortable as long as the discussion remain religious rather than political.

To better reflect and promote the identity of Muslim students, schools could offer Arabic (or other languages of Southwest Asia). The number of students studying Arabic in the United States has increased more than any other language (Temples, 2013). For Muslim Arabic speakers, the offering of Arabic as a language and the use of Arabic in schools are immensely important in an attempt to maintain a dual identity (Sarroub, 2005). Indeed, including Arabic as a course offering strengthens the opportunities for all students in a school. Employment opportunities are

strengthened, as globally Arabic is the fifth most widely spoken language. For example, there are many government jobs for speakers of Arabic; the U.S. State Department has identified Arabic as one of several “critical needs” languages. Students who do not learn to speak Arabic fluently will still develop sensitivity, as it is hard not to learn about culture when learning a language (Jackson, 2013).

Since textbooks may misrepresent Islam, it is important teachers first acknowledge that textbooks are not objective (Eraqi, 2015). Additionally, teachers should search for ways to supplement the textbook. Teachers can examine supplements about Islam published by Islamic groups or local Mosques. Involving Muslim students or community members could also provide a counternarrative of lived experiences.

### **Conclusion**

The previously mentioned strategies for in-service and preservice teachers, language offerings, and textbook bias, are general ideas for all educators to consider to better meet the needs of Muslim students. The suggestions below are merely guidelines that schools and educators might follow as they continue to redesign education to meet the needs of all learners—and in this case to meet the needs also of Muslim students.

Using the CRP framework and CSP as tools—and CSS as one guiding theory, teachers should remember that all Muslim students are not the same and cannot be painted with a broad brush, whether in terms of country of origin, ethnicity, language, or even religious adherence. There may be a number of Muslims in the same classroom who practice and show their faith very differently, and these individual differences deserve respect. Muslim students should be engaged in dialogue so that their lived experiences—and identities—also become accepted as knowledge beyond what is in the formal curriculum. Educators should critique textbooks and examine pre-conceived notions of Islam that enter the classroom—including their own. Instead of making assumptions or being afraid to say something, educators should ask for clarification about Islam if needed. Muslim students may enjoy serving as “fact checkers” for teachers as now they become the experts in the room. A positive classroom environment should be fostered, so students feel open and comfortable enough to engage in discussion and critical thinking. Such a conversation could move into other aspects of Islamic culture, such as food, dress, gender roles, space, and society. These kinds of discussions may well result in the positive growth of classroom relationships with Muslim students.

#### Teacher suggestions:

- ✓ Respect individuality within the Muslim student population
- ✓ Encourage dialogue about Islam
- ✓ Help Muslim students in honoring what is important to them
- ✓ Ask Muslim students for clarification on confusing issues, or generally about their traditions and culture
- ✓ Promote a positive classroom environment so all students feel comfortable having difficult conversations
- ✓ Continue the conversation!

In a pluralist, democratic society, the views of many rather than only those of the dominant should be visible in the classroom. How can Muslim students find their purpose when their cultures and voices are not present in the classroom? The dominant narrative of mainstream knowledge and identities are often present in education, silencing marginalized groups such as Muslims. Teachers and schools need to recognize the rich opportunity that the cultures of these students represent. When students' identities are reflected and celebrated in the classroom, counternarratives are produced and cultures are maintained. These counternarratives are part of transformative knowledge that challenge the assimilationist type of mainstream knowledge and empower marginalized voices. Employing this non-binary approach helps build the cultural wealth of a classroom, of a school, of a community, and of our country - in a way that moves us forward with respect for all. This is especially critical at a time when political debate is filled with isolationist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-SW Asian voices—and when refugees from some Muslim-majority countries have been banned from entering the United States (“Trump Travel Ban,” 2017). In exposing some of the practices that exist, this work is intended to convince educators to allow Muslim learners also the opportunity to have their culture present and maintained in the classroom setting. In using CSS as a framework for acknowledging the negative bias and fear that many have toward Muslims, teachers can work with students to reconstruct a positive view of their culture. Teachers who use CSS and culturally sustaining practices encourage a positive view by welcoming the culture of the student to classroom.

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