

Perspectives From Stakeholders

This Journal feature presents school counseling stakeholders' perspectives that potentially reframe school counselors' conceptualization of service delivery, ethical considerations, and professional development needs.

Say the Word Islam: School Counselors and Muslim Children

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Abstract

Two Muslim women who hold Ph.D.'s, a clinical and developmental psychologist and a teacher educator speak personally and professionally about important information school counselors need to know about Islam and providing services to Muslim children. First, the authors draw from personal experiences in parenting Muslim children who have come of age in public schools. Second, the authors' collective years of professional interviewing, counseling, and teaching facilitate analysis and unpacking of half-truths and untruths circulating about Islam and Muslims in the public forum today. They provide accurate facts about Islam and most importantly, address the damaging impact to the self esteem and identity formation of Muslim children and young adults who develop their sense of self in today's post 9-11 anti-Islam climate.

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Optimizing healthy emotional adjustment of Muslim students in the public schools must be grounded in accurate knowledge about Islam, Muslims and Muslim culture. In many cases Muslim children are attending schools where the entire school community—other children, their parents, teachers, principals *and* school counselors have accepted without question, the biased and often incorrect messages that have been conveyed overtly and covertly through the media. It is no wonder that, when being dropped off at school one morning, a kindergarten child from a Muslim family told his mother “Don't

tell them we're Muslim.” Or, that another child whose name was Osama *before* the World Trade Center tragedy, has subsequently begun to hate school and to exhibit an increasing sense of isolation from his peers. Or, that Muslim girls have had their scarves pulled off by laughing mischievous children buoyed to action by the hate and fear filled messages about Muslims in their environments. Because there has been a wave of anti-Islamic sentiment stirred in the American news media since 9/11/2001, school counselors must interrogate their own knowledge and perceptions of Islam and Muslims if they are to deal fairly and effectively with Muslim children themselves and if they are to help other professionals in their institutions to do the same.

In another more detailed example, a ninth grade social studies class was given an assignment to do a project on “terrorism.” The choices given the students involved “Islamic terrorist groups.” A Muslim student in the class requested to do her project on peace movements, but the request was denied. The student then requested to do her project on terrorism by whites against blacks in America. This project was grudgingly permitted. Although her project met the stated requirements, she was given the lowest grade in the class. The student and her parent sent her project to outside evaluators at a teacher education program at a nearby university and were uniformly told that the grade was not fair. The teacher education department invited the young Muslim student to present her project for teacher education majors at the college and was again uniformly given grades of “A” or “B.” Numerous conferences with administrators and the teacher even-

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tually resulted in the grade being changed.

The words *Islam* and *Muslim* have been equated in numerous multi-media forms in the US with *terrorism* so often that even well-meaning typically critical thinking citizens—including school counselors and classroom teachers—may display some signs of “Islamophobia.” Islamophobia is a term coined recently in the counter-media to describe the hatred, fear, and religious intolerance engendered among some American people as a result of *overt* media messages. In the entertainment media there have been overt media messages as well, sending the direct message that Islam and terrorism are words to be paired. For example, in the movie “Traitor,” there are people donned in Islamic garb (kufis, carrying dhikr beads, etc.), saying “Allahu Akbar!” and then setting off bombs.

There have also been covert media messages conveying subliminal messages designed to bring negative associations with Islam and Muslims. Over the years, a number of popular movies such as “Back to the Future” have included brief scenes implying that Muslims are terrorists. In that movie, in one scene Libyans, riding in a van, were shooting at the protagonist and attack the beloved character known as “Doc.” In other movies, (e.g., *The Omen*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*), Islamic imagery is paired with satanic imagery to send the subliminal message that Islam is evil. Such inflammatory and inaccurate portrayals must be countered with truth. It is imperative that school professionals have basic knowledge about the Qur’an—the religious book of the Muslim, the hadith—the second source of religious knowledge in Islam, and the basic tenets of the Islamic faith tradition, i.e., 1) that there is nothing worthy of worship but the One God and that Muhammad of 1400 years ago was God’s last Messenger; 2) that prayer is a duty owed to God; 3) that charity is a requirement of faith; 4) that fasting during the month of Ramadan and 5) journeying to Hajj at least once in a lifetime as one is able. These five points are universally accepted as the five pillars of Islamic faith.

It is important, for example, that school counselors know that Muslims worship the same God that Christians do—the God of Adam, Abraham, Moses and Noah. One of the misleading untruths subtly expounded in the media is that worshiping Allah is different from worshiping God. Allah is the Arabic word for God; even Arab Christians call God “Allah.” Other basic truths that can help school personnel to interrogate their assumptions about 9/11 have actually been shared, though downplayed, in the media. For example: (1) Prior to the events of 9/11 in 2001, overwhelmingly *most Muslims throughout the world*

had never heard of either Al Qaeda or Osama Bin Laden. (2) There were several hundred Muslims working in and around the World Trade Center on 9/11/2001, and Muslims died in that tragic event. (3) Among the ground zero rescue team there were Muslims. (4) 9/11/2001 occurred on the High Holy Day of Rash Hashanah. Because most of them were at home observing their holiday, there were only three Jewish people in the Twin Towers at the time of that event. The significance of mentioning this is that Al Qaeda is alleged to have committed these acts of terrorism in protest to Israeli occupation of Palestine. (5) The word “Islam” literally means “submission to God’s will or peace,” and while God (in the *Qur’an*) instructs Muslims that they have a right to defend themselves from attack, they are warned that it is a sin to aggress against innocent people. In fact, the *Qur’an* teaches that to kill one innocent person is equivalent to having killed all of humankind, while to save such a person is equivalent to saving all of humankind. “We ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he slew all people: and if anyone saves a life, it would be as if he save the life of all people.” (5:32). If these teachings from the *Qur’an* are understood, then it is clear that a true religious Muslim cannot be a “terrorist.”

Thomas Jefferson stated in his published works that he wanted America to be a land where people of all faiths were free to practice their religion and he included Islam in a list of faiths he wanted to have free expression (Hayes, 2004). Jefferson owned a *Qur’an* and studied other Islamic texts in an effort to understand the *Qur’an* as a book of law. Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams negotiated a treaty with the Emperor of Morocco in 1784. They knew that earlier, in 1777, Morocco, a Muslim country, was the first sovereign nation to recognize the United States as an independent country (Moroccan American Center for Policy, 2007). Another reference to Islam in American history is found in the architecture of the United State Supreme Court. The sculptor of the frieze located on the north wall of the Supreme Court carved Islamic references into the stone walls in an attempt to “honor Mohammed” (p.2, paragraph 4) (Office of Curator, US Supreme Court, 2003).

If America is to live up to its espoused tenet of freedom of religion and religious tolerance, school counselors, other school personnel, and the public must become aware of alternative points of view. The truth about religious messages should be conveyed from members of that faith, rather than messages promoted from groups who despise and denigrate that faith. A lesson can be learned from

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the Civil Rights Movement. Whereas racial stereotypes depicting African-Americans in the media as sub-human had pervaded the media in those times, when whites had the opportunity to meet African-Americans, they learned that those stereotypes were false. Counselor education preparation programs, professional organizations, and school systems, in general, must take the lead in assisting counseling professionals in surpassing religious tolerance, arriving at interfaith respect and human decency. Indeed, the American Counseling Association's Multicultural Competencies and the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) ethical codes set the tone for school counselors to interrogate their beliefs about Islam and to establish culturally relevant and meaningful interactions with Muslim children and their families.

As professionals who work with the public, school counselors must prepare themselves and their students for interacting effectively in a world where one in five people is Muslim. Further, the Muslim demographic shift in the United States indicates that by the year 2020, Islam may be the dominant religion in certain urban centers throughout the country (Turner, 1997). While some Georgia school counselors may not have had a Muslim child in their programs, recent demographic shifts indicate that they will soon likely serve this group of students. Muslim children, like all children, come in a variety of sizes, shapes, colors and ethnicities. They are the offspring of indigenous African Americans, European Americans, and Hispanic American as well as first or second generation immigrant parents. Their family traditions range from conservative to moderate to liberal.

Advocacy, Cultural Competence, School Counselors, and Muslim Children

How prepared are school counselors to work with Muslim children and families? What resources are available for school counselors to assess their advocacy skills for working with this group of students? Of course, assessment of multicultural competence is an ongoing unfolding process rather than a single event. An effective way to begin the self assessment process is to utilize the ACA Multicultural Competencies which challenge counselors to become aware of their multicultural attitudes, beliefs, knowledge at the individual, worldview, and practitioner levels (Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke, Sanchez, & Stadler, 1996).

Advocacy is a key aspect of school counselors' roles (ASCA, 2005); therefore, a systemic perspective of ad-

vocacy benefits school counselors in planning a comprehensive school counseling program that is meaningful to Muslim students. One way to conceptualize school counselor advocacy is to apply Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) maintains that children's development is influenced by different systems in their environment: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem. The microsystem includes the students' families, school community, and neighborhood; the microsystem reflects those relationships and experiences that are most intimate to children's daily lives. The mesosystem reflects the functioning of the microsystem and shapes the overall development of the child; an encouraging and affirming mesosystem contributes to the optimal development of children. The exosystem reflects the influence of persons and environments that the children do not experience directly but still influence their lives (e.g., parental work environments that may be stressful and affect how parents interact in the home). Bronfenbrenner's next system is the macrosystem, which includes societal forces that influence the quality of children's lives such as the national economy, health care policies and access, availability of suitable housing, etc. Finally, the chronosystem refers to the effects of time on development over the lifespan. "Change or consistency of any element affecting an individual's life over a long period of time encompasses the chronosystem" (Paquette, as cited in Feinstein, Baartman, Buboltz, Sonnichsen, & Solomon, 2008). The example of the kindergartener who expressed concerns about being identified as Muslim offers the opportunity to consider the influence of the chronosystem. As this child progresses through twelve years of public school, his perceptions of religious micro-aggressions will likely deter high regard for the schooling process and environment. Well meaning but uninformed educators may consider this child 'at risk', 'disengaged' or perhaps even 'unmotivated' without fully considering how years of institutional and societal disregard or disdain for his religious faith has shaped his attitudes toward school.

Bronfenbrenner's Model leads school counselors to assess their ability to provide culturally responsive programming to Muslim children. For example, how do these systems influence Muslim children's development in public schools? What information does the school counselor have about the various systems that shape Muslim children's learning and development? Certainly, if school counselors lack information about the various shaping influences of the children's microsystems and mesosystems, counseling interventions will not be relevant to the chil-

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dren, their families, or take advantage of cultural strengths that support Muslim students' academic, personal/social, and career development. A simple word association with the word "Islam" might yield important information for the individual counselor. Say the word Islam and see how close to the top of this list the word terrorist is. How far down the list would the word children be?

Cultural Considerations

Based on their personal and professional experiences, the authors have identified five critical themes that can assist school counselors in promoting the development of Muslim children:

1. School counselors need to be aware of the Islamic calendar and should make parallel accommodations for Muslim youth as are made for their non-Muslim counterparts. Of course, Saturday and Sunday—the sacred days of Christians and Jews are not school days, so that young Adventists, other Christian denominations and Jews do not face the challenge that Muslim youth do. For Muslims the day of communal worship is on Friday. School counselors should be cognizant that Muslim children may choose to attend the Friday congregational worship and benefit from not being penalized for absences or tardies because of this decision. Counselors and classroom teachers can collaborate on strategies to sensitize classmates and other adult school personnel on the Muslim faith requirements.
2. Muslim youth at the age of seven are required by their religion to perform formal acts of worship that sometimes occur during the school hours. The precise times of these acts of worship vary according to the time and geographical location. School counselors can print prayer times monthly so that accommodations can be made for those students needing to make their *salah*. Allow them to go to a quiet area to perform their worship.
3. Just like nuns and many devout women of a variety of faith traditions, some Muslim girls cover their heads, arms, necks and legs while in public. School counselors can be pro-active in providing information about Muslim girls' modesty requirements to other adult school personnel. School counselors can also be instrumental in providing in-service training to teachers and coaches who need this information and assist in the creation of a school wide policy that reflects sensitivity and respect for the modesty of the

Muslim children.

4. Before a student or his or her parent expresses concern about the male/female dynamic in the classroom, school counselors can be proactive by ensuring that those Muslim girls and boys are given the option to sit in same sex cohorts if they choose. An interview with the parents and in the case of older children the child can be held early in the semester to determine where the individual family's practice of Islam is situated- e.g. conservative, moderate, or liberal.
5. Make accommodations for children and young adults who observe Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn to sunset. They do not drink water or food during this time. They also avoid excessive talking, viewing of materials that are not pleasing to Allah (God) and they read the Qur'an all the way through. Many Muslim families spend more time in the Masjid (the Muslim place of worship) and in other religious activities. These increased demands may result in the children being less energetic in school. Muslim children should have other legitimate places to go during lunch time when it is Ramadan. As advocates, school counselors can assist classroom teachers in identifying appropriate places such as empty classrooms or the media teacher.

Implications

The Jewish educator Haim Ginott (1995) spoke eloquently of the role of the classroom teacher and by extension the school counselor in shaping a child's school experience. Although this essay is devoted to the plight of Muslim children, school counselors can take heed for children everywhere who have to experience the denigration of their beliefs and culture by powerful others. Ginott writes: "I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my daily mood that makes the weather...I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized." Ginott's challenge can lead school counselors to critically and boldly consider how their beliefs, knowledge, and skills support Muslim children in achieving optimal academic, personal/social, and career development within the public school environment.

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