

Chapter 3

Advocating for Muslim American Students in School Settings: Practical Recommendations for School Counselors and Educators

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ABSTRACT

Muslim American students deal with many challenges, including bullying and discrimination in schools due to their religious identity, resulting in adverse psychosocial outcomes. From a social justice advocacy stance, school counselors can play a vital role in empowering this student population. It is also school counselors' ethical responsibility to develop multicultural competency and promote diversity by gaining knowledge and skills regarding cultural elements. Therefore, this chapter endeavors to give voice to Muslim American students and serve as a resource for school counselors and educators to work with Muslim youth in PK-12 schools effectively. More specifically, this chapter provides an overview of the Muslim population, identifies critical tenets of Islam, explores significant challenges Muslim students experience in schools along with detrimental effects of discrimination on their psychosocial health and suggests practical recommendations for school personnel including school counselors to facilitate positive social interactions and healthy development of Muslim youth.

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INTRODUCTION

Presently, the United States is experiencing one of the most profound demographic transformations with severe educational implications. For the first time in history, America's racial and ethnic minorities represent more than half of the nation's under age 18 population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). This phenomenon urges educational institutions to proactively accommodate more diverse student populations' interests, as they will be critical players in the country's demographic and economic future. Given the increasingly diverse census in schools, it seems vital for educators to grow in their multicultural competency and apply culturally appropriate practices (Grothaus & Johnson, 2012). To support cultural richness through advocacy and leadership practices, school counselors continue to play a vital role to "maintain the highest respect for student diversity" (American School Counselor Association [ASCA]; 2016, A.6.e, p. 4). The ASCA *ethical standards* (2016) require school counselors to explore their cultural biases and seek to understand the cultures of the diverse student populations they serve.

Within the growing diverse student composition across the U.S., one less familiar represented group is **Muslim** students. **Islam**, the religion followed by Muslims, is one of the fastest-growing religions in the U.S. (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2018). There is increased realization that there has been much less scholarship focused on religious diversity particularly Muslims (Abu-Ras et al., 2018) and school counselors may lack cultural knowledge and abilities imperative to work effectively with students identified with **Islam** in an ethical manner (Ermis-Demirtas, 2019; Sink & Devlin, 2011) despite the explosion of research on multiculturalism, a growing number of **Muslim** American students in public schools, and their adverse experiences due to their adherence to **Islam**, with the rising issue of **Islamophobia**, significantly heightened since September 11, 2001 (9/11; Balkaya et al., 2019).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Muslim American students experience specific challenges in school settings because of their adherence to the Islamic faith. Ethically, school counselors are expected to be culturally competent by acquiring knowledge and gaining skills and awareness regarding cultural elements considering the growing diversity across the U.S. schools. Indeed, school counselors and educators seem more willing to learn from their religiously diverse students and recognize them as contributing citizens when they acquire further knowledge about cultural elements and adopt a social justice advocacy perspective in dealing with multiculturally challenging issues (Grant & Sleeter, 2011; Isik-Ercan, 2015). Therefore, this chapter endeavors to give voice to **Muslim** American students and serve as a resource for school counselors and educators to work effectively with **Muslim** youth in K-12 schools.

This chapter begins with the characteristics of the **Muslim** population in the U.S. to highlight diversity among this minority group, followed by a discussion on the basic tenets of **Islam** and the impact of culture on Islamic practices. After that, this chapter identifies specific concerns and challenges of **Muslim** American students and highlights adverse psychosocial outcomes of discrimination. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting practical recommendations for culturally sensitive and effective strategies for school counselors and educators to be better informed to empower and advocate for **Muslim** American students in educational settings.

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