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Providing Culturally Responsive Instruction to Strengthen
The Cultural Identity of American Muslim Students

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EDUC 606

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May, 2013

Abstract

As a teacher teaching in a private school whose students are predominantly American Muslims and do not share the students' cultural background, I am always aware of the need to ensure that my teaching practices include providing the students with culturally responsive instruction. In this study, I investigated how my teaching beliefs shape the learning process in my classroom. I also investigated the mismatches between the students' home culture and the school's academic curriculum and whether the students' experiences outside school and their funds of knowledge are actively used to help them connect and be more invested in the learning process thereby strengthening and fostering their cultural identity as American Muslim students at school. I collected and analyzed a variety of data sources and examined whether providing culturally responsive instruction that takes into account the students' literacies learned from outside school and their funds of knowledge affects their ability to be more engaged at school and value the use of these literacies as anchors in learning the school curricula.

Setting and Puzzlement

Schools are often powerful places where different cultures learn to co-exist and strive for the same goal for each and every student—learning success. Effective schools give students a sense of agency where they can develop their potentials and different gifts. Many studies have supported the need for schools to acknowledge and use the students’ different cultural backgrounds as a way to make the learning meaningful and culturally responsive for students. Barzon et al (2005) noted that culturally responsive education can strengthen student connectedness with schools. The craft of teaching is ever changing as teachers accommodate for the different needs of diverse students in every classroom. Because of the social nature of learning that builds upon one’s experiences and that of others (Fecho, 2010), teachers who are at the forefront of this cultural phenomenon happening at schools need to be prepared to use every avenue—from students’ background experiences and knowledge, school resources, parent involvement and other funds of knowledge—to deliver a kind of education where each individual student’s potential for growth is maximized, considered, and improved.

In Cynthia Ballenger’s book “*Teaching Other People’s Children*” (1999), the table was turned. As a teacher working in a strong Haitian school culture, she had to accommodate, consider, and respect the cultural background and experiences of her students as well as change many of her assumptions and former beliefs about teaching and learning in the process of meeting their needs. As Kohl (2002) posits, teachers, if they do not come from communities that are similar to those they teach, are particularly vulnerable to miscommunication. She had to overcome the challenges of understanding what is happening in her school environment.

Around 2003, there were a great surge of teachers from the Philippines being hired by public schools in many high need areas. Many came to California, New York, Virginia, and

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Maryland. These are teachers who can be coined as “voluntary minorities” in the teaching field here in the United States. According to Ogbu, voluntary minorities come to the United States with already existing differences in language and cultures (1998). Although I came here in the US using a different pathway (teaching in private schools), I was very much aware that I would be teaching a classroom with diverse students in a culture that may not be theirs nor is my own.

In 2011, I accepted a teaching position in a community school for Muslims in the Virginia-DC-Maryland area. The school is non-secular school for Muslims. As a graduate student, I felt that this to be an exciting place to learn given the different cultural transactions that I can learn from and reflect on as I help the school build a literacy program that is culturally responsive to their faith and their cultural background. I am not Muslim. Aside from the International Saudi Academy in Alexandria, Virginia who hires non-Muslims, the school at which I work is the only other school in the area that hire non-Muslim teachers. The first year went well and I was “invited” back to continue the work I have already started the previous year. As I move forward this year, the question of whether my Western style and approach to teaching still lingers as I finish every lesson. Am I depriving my students of their need to connect their cultural background and Islamic values in the learning experiences I help shape in my classroom? Can a non-Muslim teacher really fit in to a school specifically founded to accommodate the needs of Muslim students that the public school is not able to provide? These are some of the puzzlements I have that led me to investigate and find answers as to why up to this very moment I still fit-in in this school culture.

Setting

Mali Preparatory located in the suburbs close to Washington, DC. The school’s student population is predominantly Muslim-base coming from diverse countries including India,

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Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, to name a few. A majority of the students have ties with the diplomatic community and attend our school as an alternative to public school education. The school is a private school serving preK-12 students in the Virginia-DC-Maryland area. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 88% of our students are classified as “White, non-Hispanic”, while 6% are Black, non-Hispanic. We are a tax-exempted non-profit school. A majority of our students come from middle-class families with both parents working in professions requiring Ph.Ds.

The school follows Montgomery County Public School’s curriculum in the core subject areas of language arts, math, science, and social studies. We offer Art and World Languages both in Spanish and Arabic. In addition to these subjects, students are required to take Arabic, Islamic Studies, and Quran. Students from first grade to high school are also required to attend the daily prayers in their prayer room and attend the weekly Friday Congregational Prayer. Students at our school are required to wear uniforms that comply with the Islamic dress code. The girls must wear a head scarf but are allowed to choose the style and color.

The school has three distinct department—the early childhood unit for our Pre-K3 and Pre-K4 classes; Elementary Department, Middle and High School Department. Currently, two departments (Elementary and MS/HS) work collaboratively and meet bi-weekly to discuss key school, student, and/or teaching issues. I am assigned in the elementary department. Aside from our male Physical Education teacher, I am the only non-Muslim, female teacher employed by the school. I have previously led the Humanities/Language Arts department involving all Language Arts and English teachers for both elementary and MS/HS departments. I continue to lead the Professional Learning Community started last school year in an effort to improve the teaching and learning environment in our school. In many ways, I serve as our school’s resource teacher

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mentoring when needed and heading the bi-weekly PLC meetings of the Language Arts Department. Part of my role is to form strong relationships with parents school-wide to help promote strong literacy both at school and at home.

My fourth grade classroom's physical setting includes two large group of tables set face-to-face—one column for girls, and the other for boys, in accordance to the Islamic practice of these students who are of age (girls are to be separated from boys specifically when they reach the age of 9 years old). I have a U-shaped table at the left side of the room for small group instruction. This setting allows grouping and cross-gender grouping whenever needed. Small-group instruction is not common-place in our traditional school practice. Whole-group instruction is the norm in our school which means when the students get to my class, it will be the first time that they will have to do rotations to facilitate small-group instruction.

Our classroom is in the second floor of our school's building. The upper right quadrant of my classroom houses the teacher's table, while the U-shaped table sits on the upper left quadrant of the class. The classroom has two whiteboards, a retractable screen for use with the LED projector. Three 7ft x 5ft bulletin boards hang on the other walls of my classroom. There are two windows that overlook the residential area of where our school is nestled.

Puzzlement

According to Ogbu (1998) the education of the descendants of immigrants continues to be influenced by the community forces of their forebears. A majority of our parents at our school are immigrants to this country themselves. Some are voluntary minorities while there are some who are involuntary minorities who emigrated as a result of the war in the Middle East. They are highly educated individuals who strive to follow the tenets of Islamic education and

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extend these to their children. They bring their child/ren to our school as part of their moral obligation to provide an education that sustain and immerse their children in Islamic faith.

The school community itself is a reflection of the community forces that work together to keep their cultural identity as Muslim alive and celebrated across different nationalities sharing the same faith. The children are mainstreamed however they reference their parents' experiences in many classroom discussions that shows me parents actively transferring cultural values at home. They do adhere to what Ogbu calls *folk theory of making it* (1998, p.172). This involves the belief that hard work, following the rules, and most important, getting good education will lead to good employment and success in U.S. society. Some of the parents have very high academic expectations of their children and holds their children accountable for academic performance. As a non-Muslim teacher charged with their children, I do wonder if their acceptance of my teaching pedagogy is influenced by the fact that we share a common link—we both understand how it is to be a voluntary minority in this great country and share the same struggle they may have experienced as they assimilated in this new land. Do the parents trust my non-Muslim, non-traditional teaching style because of our common experiences as voluntary minorities here in the United States?

I have good rapport with not only my class' parents, but parents school-wide. This may be due in part to the kind of relationship I built with their children. As Chen (2010) cited, the first and most essential ingredient is the development of relationships with these students. Building trust—whether small scale such as that found in the classroom, or large scale such as that which promotes home-school collaboration—maybe one key to successfully crossing the cultural boundary between me and the school. Can good school relationship built on trust and effective teaching-learning dynamics make up for my very little knowledge of their culture that I

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acknowledge in my teaching practice?

With the different literature about the importance of K-3 and its impact to 4th grade learning, my teaching methods and strategies have been very focus-driven, and data-driven. This is a complete departure from the school's traditional teaching culture. Culturally responsive instruction acknowledges and accommodates students' culture, language, and learning styles in the curriculum and classroom (Ogbu, 1998) and yet my students are mainstreamed. They seem to internally compartmentalize the study of Quran and Islamic Studies as separate to the core subjects which I teach. My lack of full knowledge about Quran and Islamic Studies limits me in doing cross-curricular activities that support and use these cultural values that can reflect culturally responsive teaching and learning.

Ogbu (1998) posits that voluntary minority groups who are culturally very different from the mainstream culture of the school can succeed *without* culturally responsive instruction. If this is the case, how can my pre-adolescent Muslim students maintain and strengthen their cultural identity in a classroom taught by a non-Muslim teacher who uses Western teaching pedagogy that is completely different from their traditional mode of learning? More importantly, how can a non-Muslim teacher connect the content and curriculum and make it relevant to their cultural practices and experiences? Is there a mismatch between my expectations and theirs—both students and parents? And if so, what are these mismatches?

Framing the Issue

In teaching fourth grade bilingual students with some-what limited vocabulary, it became essential for me to reconstruct the way I deliver my instruction to help the students connect their prior knowledge to the learning goals. More and more I see a disconnect with not only the academic language that these students should have developed overtime, but more so words that are typically part of the conversational language. Therefore, my first cultural question based on the Cultural Inquiry Process is—how might my beliefs or values, in terms of what I perceive as students should know by certain milestone or grade level, be contributing to the puzzling situation? Understanding that the students I teach are coming from a very sheltered community, albeit mainstreamed in terms of being educated using a totally American curriculum, I feel that our school needs to somewhat acknowledge that the funds of knowledge these students bring should be reflected in our curriculum. Adapting the district's curriculum and compartmentalizing Islamic Studies and Quran as distinct from the core subjects does not make effective use of what the community has as the school's foundation. As an educator coming from a different culture, I see this potential of both using and enriching the students' cultural capita while developing the different literacies used both at home and in the community while serving as the active bridge that can make the learning at our school more meaningful and potent.

According to Ben-Yosef (2003), recognizing students' out-of-school literacies help creates inclusive environments and meaningful educational experiences. Being a non-Muslim teacher of American Muslim students and leading our school's reading program, it is very important for me to examine if the values I perceive as necessary for each developmental stage are consistent with Muslim parents and educators. This is essential for me as I try to create the

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bridges that use what they value as building blocks to use in planning for the instruction I give to my pre-adolescent fourth graders.

Our school is founded to provide both the academic and Islamic educational needs of American Muslim students, however, using a curriculum that does not enhance or make use of the students' cultural values and experiences in teaching the core subjects seems to disregard the need for these students to treat both their first and second languages as contributing forces that advances their literacy and knowledge base. Our school provide these students the freedom to practice their faith and cultural practices, however their academic learning experiences does not make use of these funds of knowledge. This cultural mismatch between the students' home culture and the academic goals aligns with 3.3 of the CIP. Specifically, I want to focus on 3.3.2 that discusses the mismatch between our school curricula that uses a basal for all the core subjects.

Barzon et al. (2005) cited that culturally responsive education can strengthen student connectedness with schools. Culturally responsive teaching creates a school climate where there is a match between classroom instruction to cultural norms which facilitates the social interactions that enhances students' social development and problem-solving ability. One of my goals as a teacher for my students is to be more familiar with how I can re-tool my curricula to reflect the cultural background of my students. Taking into account the cultural value system of my diverse students sharing the Muslim faith and the academic goals of my core subject curricula can help them perceive schooling as an agency that promotes their entire well-being by helping them see their home values as a significant resource that they can use to broaden their knowledge base.

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Another question I want to explore is CIP's 3.3.3. According to Rogoff (2003), students learn the skills and practices of their community by engaging with others who may contribute to structuring the process to be learned and improve proficiency. If this is the case, stepping into my 4th grade class after being taught by Muslim teachers in primary school might create a mismatch between their learning approach and classroom processes that are very traditional as oppose to my very Western style of teaching. Although the students are able to adapt to my teaching style base on the interactions we have during the learning process, I am nonetheless concerned if they will be better off receiving the same type of instruction as they've had in prior years.

Hawley and Nieto (2010) shared that race and ethnicity influence teaching and learning in two important ways affecting how students respond to instruction and curriculum and influencing teachers' assumptions about how students learn and how much students are capable of learning. This is very apparent in my classroom when I give out my syllabus to parents or when I give the quarterly test coverage or even when I give assessments. My students always complain about the amount of work they have to do in my class and it always puzzled me why they see it as such. Well-guided curricula aligned with state standards and a well-planned assessment system to target instruction is one of my aims as an educator, and yet I strongly feel that there is a mismatch with my expectations and my parents' expectations of my teaching.

My last cultural question is 3.4 which deals with how students' experiences and meaning be contributing to the puzzling situation. As I plan for my lessons, I'm always thinking of what hooks I can use to frame my instruction simply because my knowledge of their culture and what possible background knowledge they might have from their cultural and home practices is very limited. Often times, I end up re-framing my questions when I use certain words whose

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meanings my students do not know. In my effort to ensure that they are made aware of what I perceive as “typical” pop-culture that they should know, it always falls short and flat because it is not valued in their culture. Hawley and Nieto (2010) highlighted the importance of knowing something about the students’ cultural and historic experiences. As a teacher, it is important for me to address this in my classroom because the ability of students to make meaning is an essential skill they have to learn to become successful in life.

According to Wiggins and McTighe (2008) learning for understanding requires that curriculum and instruction addresses three different but interrelated academic goals. Two of them are make meaning of content and effectively transfer their learning to new situations both within school and beyond it. The students’ ability to use and connect their prior knowledge and experiences to make meaning can lead to a sequence of learning events that help develop their skills as learners and accentuates the role of their cultural capita and backgrounds. This can positively affect and strengthen their cultural identities as Muslim students.

Vogt and Shearer (2011) likewise cited that the experiences of students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds make home, school, and community connections a challenging situation. Cultural differences can affect the development of literacies in the classroom. Actions should be taken to ensure that my students’ experiences from both home and community are valued and used as scaffolds in their learning acquisition and development.

Methodology

The primary focus of my puzzlement is around the cultural mismatches I bring to the classroom given that I am a teacher that is outside of the school’s and students’ culture. On one

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hand, my teaching methods and approach are aligned and that my students are gaining skills that are consistent with what their public schools peers are expected to learn. This may deviate from the way they have been previously taught or the manner of instructional delivery other teachers of their culture may have used and cause challenges related to academics and discipline.

Data Collection

To find answer to my puzzlement, I will use different data sources such as student surveys from elementary and middle school to address generational gaps. Parent surveys/interviews ideally from the three school departments to address their point of views. Teacher survey and interview from the elementary department will also be done to get a glimpse of my co-workers' teacher beliefs and how those translate to their teaching practices. Islamic teacher/leaders interview to glean their opinion on how to capitalize on the students cultural literacies. Student work samples and teacher journal logs will also be used in this study. The student surveys will be administered before and after the intervention process to inquire into students' perception of infusing their reading and math instruction with Islamic funds of knowledge. The informal interviews from students, teachers, Islamic teachers, and Imams will be used to inquire into the different literacies and funds of knowledge typical American Muslim students acquire both from school, home, and their community and how these can used more effectively to aid and improve learning connections and retention. The teacher journal logs and anecdotal records will be used to inquire into instructions where students make reference to their funds of knowledge or made a personal connection base on their cultural identities/practices.

Data Collection Table

Research Question, Puzzlement, OR Information Sought	Data Source				
	Student Survey & Interview	Parent Survey & Interview	General Ed. Teacher, Islamic Teachers, & Imam Interview	Student Work Samples	Teacher Journal & Anecdotal Records
1. How might my beliefs about student learning be a mismatch to the way Muslim students learn?	X			X	X
2. What are the mismatches between the students' home culture and the academic goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can student use their funds of knowledge from home and community to make new connections to the school curricula? • What type of instructional delivery best fit Muslim students? 	X	X	X	X	X
3. How can I use the students' experiences and funds of knowledge more effectively to help build stronger learning connections in the curriculum?	X	X	X	X	X

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Analysis of Data

Student Survey and Interview

All the elementary student respondents gave a “Frown Face” when asked how they feel about using stories from their Quran and Islamic studies as part of the English language arts materials and resources. A majority of elementary students wish that the learning materials used at our school uses their daily experiences as an American-Muslim students as examples. All respondents gave a “Frown Face” on the item that deals with talking more about their identity as American Muslim.

Sixty-one percent of the middle school students agree that they need to be exposed to Islamic literature and text to help them celebrate their cultural background and identity. A majority of them also feel that teachers can help them use what they learn from home in connecting it with what they are reading and learning. Fifty percent also responded that their teacher in middle school uses the teaching of Quran in helping them make connections to what they are learning. Thirty-nine percent agreed and thirty-nine percent disagreed on the need to make a connection between their cultural practices and the academics to make it more meaningful to them. On the topic of having a teacher who shared the same culture and language, thirty-three percent strongly agreed that this will be helpful while thirty-nine disagreed. With regards to talking about their identity as American Muslim students and the importance of practicing their religion, forty-four percent strongly agreed that this need to be supported at school and thirty-nine percent agreed. Collectively, this reflects our middle school students need of having their identity as American Muslim supported at school.

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Parent Informal Interview

In talking with at least six parents from the elementary department, they have clear expectations on the academic growth of their students. They have expressed that they want their children to meet, if not exceed, the academic expectations each quarter. They were clear to indicate that they specifically enrolled their children at our school because they do not want them to be exposed to behaviors that are common in public schools like boy-and-girl relationships, gangs, bullying, etc.

Intervention and Monitoring

One of the key findings from the data collection is the middle school students' need to have their identity as American Muslim students supported. This aligns with a majority of them agreeing that they need to be exposed to Islamic literature and text to help them celebrate their cultural background and identity. It also reflects the majority of responses strongly agreeing and agreeing that the learning materials used at school should use their daily experiences as American Muslim students as example. Using these responses as guide, I came up with intervention plans that will enable them to connect with the learning materials that they can identify with as American Muslim students.

Intervention Plan

Based on what I know about my students, our school, and the community, I have come up with several interventions that I could try with my Muslim students to help them access and

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use their funds of knowledge as they learn new materials in their core subjects. This will also allow for opportunities for cross curricular learning between the core subjects and their Islamic and Quranic studies.

Intervention	Description
1. Teacher proactively uses texts that have similar themes from both Islamic and Western literatures in ELA class.	At Shared Reading, students will be introduced to the text from the basal series. Students will use their background knowledge to make connections with the text and record it in their KWL chart. During Guided Reading, a similar text from Islamic literature will be given. I will record the conversation as students make personal connections with the Islamic text. Students will complete a Venn Diagram using both text to compare and contrast themes.
2. Teacher creates DMR (Daily Math Review) that will use questions with Islamic influence to allow for Real-World application.	Teacher will collaborate with Islamic teachers to come up with questions that are more personal to the daily lives of Muslim students that use math problems. These questions will address the concepts and skills they have learned in the 4 th grade math curriculum as part of their review.
3. Teacher will create a CLT (Cooperative Learning Team) with the Islamic teachers to build the cross-curricula plan for next school year.	General Education teachers and Islamic teachers will engage in CLTs on how to strengthen the students' cultural identity through instructional planning that addresses both the academic goals and the Islamic influences/values.
4. Teacher will create a website to be used as a resource on how to use Muslim students' funds of knowledge in the classroom.	This website will be a virtual drop box of ideas that uses Islamic text, materials, literacies aligned with the CORE Curriculum standards for elementary teachers.

Monitoring

Last school year, I had the opportunity to see in action how my fourth graders used their personal funds of knowledge in responding to writing prompt that they were to read orally in front of the whole K-12 community during the morning assembly. Although our school caters to

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Muslim students, my class did a writing workshop connected to Thanksgiving. The students were tasked to write about something for which they are thankful. They could approach their writing using any of the three author purposes—to narrate, to inform, or to persuade. It was surprising that majority of the students wrote that they were thankful about the story of a certain personality in the Quran—Fatimah. When I asked them why it was significant to them, all of the students took turn to share about what they know of the story. In several occasion, other students continued telling about parts of the story the other forgot to mention. Even the boys were actively participating in this impromptu discussion and even asked permission to include a Surah in their work. A Surah is a division or chapter of the Quran typically written in Arabic. This anecdote was a glimpse of what my students bring to the table in terms of their funds of knowledge. In the same breath, these same students had difficulty fully understanding the intensity of a rollercoaster ride or the feeling of swimming in the beach. They never had the experience of doing those things, yet could empathize with stories from the Quran. As a teacher out of their culture, these disparities intrigued me. When I decided to teach at my school for another school year, I had two thoughts in my mind—the students’ experiences and the experiences they lack that will be part of the academic vocabulary. Learning about culture in one of my graduate courses, I was sensitive to the importance of providing culturally responsive instruction to my students.

Ben-Yosef (2003) spoke of cultural literacies and the fact that children have background literacies that are different from those taught and accepted in our classrooms. This led me to question whether there is a mismatch between my belief about student learning and the way my Muslim students learn. Knowing that race and ethnicity affects how students respond to instruction and the curriculum, I crafted a student survey to find out whether having a teacher

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who shares the same culture and language would help them succeed in school. Thirty-three percent strongly agreed that this would help while thirty-nine percent disagreed that this would be significant. This is interesting for me because I am very much aware of the areas on which I need to improve with my teaching practices to reach all the students in my classroom. My action plan is to use text that they can relate easily being American Muslims. The only problem I encountered with this intervention is the scarcity of this type of literature. I found two books—one chapter book more suited for grades 4-6, *A Boy from Makka*, and the picture book *Dinner Time* for the primary grades. Due to time constraint for this intervention, I chose to go with the text *Dinner Time*. This book was used in guided reading for a small group of second grade students (two boys and two girls). Another book, *I Will Never Not Ever Eat a Tomato* by Lauren Child was used alongside *Dinner Time*. After the book reading, the students made several personal connections with both texts, thereby making use of funds of knowledge from home. They clearly identified with *Dinner Time* even commenting “They are Muslims too!” as I read aloud the story. When asked where their family is more similar to, one boy said *Dinner Time* because the other story had a Christian family unlike his Muslim family.

To answer whether there are mismatches between students’ home culture and the academic goals of school, I conducted informal parent interviews. Five families answered with one parent expressing that home culture is very distinct and separate from the academic goals of the school. For this parent, the expectation is that teachers teach the academic subjects with little to no influence from other strands of study (i.e. Quran or Islamic Studies). This was somewhat supported by one comment made by a student in the student survey who commented that Islamic literature should only be used in Islamic Studies. In the same manner, there is an even split—thirty-three percent Agree and thirty-three percent Disagree, on the view of students of the

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importance of connecting their culture to academics in fostering their cultural identity. As an action plan, a collaboration between the Islamic Studies department was initiated to create a “shadow” curriculum as response to 50% of students agreeing that learning materials used at school should talk about or use their daily experiences as examples. The plan is to create Daily Math Practice packets or Exit Slips that include math problems that has “Real-World” application parallel to the experiences they have as American Muslim students (e.g. The school needs new carpet for the Masjid. The Masjid has a total area of 30 ft by 20 ft. If each carpet is 5 ft x 7 ft, how many carpets does the school need to buy?).

The last action plan involves creating a website which will become the online/electronic storage system for approaches, learning materials, resources that teachers can use to make their teaching more culturally responsive.

Conclusions and Implications

Looking back at the data I collected to find out the answers to my puzzlements, I found it resonated with what Ogbu (1998) found out about voluntary minorities who are culturally very different succeeding without culturally responsive instruction. The students in our school are very academically focused and are used to compartmentalize their learning expectations based on the subject area with no preference with cross-curricular undertaking. Instructional delivery that makes use of other literacies outside the academic subject being taught gives students room to see the interconnectedness of concepts that is key to a cross-curricular planning. Teachers who

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actively make use of the students' background knowledge pave the way for these students to build stronger connections to new concepts while learning in the different disciplines.

Teacher beliefs highly influence the type of teaching and learning taking place in the classroom. From the teacher interview of a senior teacher who has been teaching at our school for five years now, it is apparent that her view is that cultural background and funds of knowledge should not influence the type of learning and the learning content of the core subjects being provided to students. According to this teacher, core subjects are to be taught devoid of any integration from the Islamic Studies or Quran.

School culture is partly created by the teachers with whom the students interact on a daily basis. In our case, disregard of the funds of knowledge and literacies that students have does not necessarily have any negative impact on student learning and growth. The quality of academic learning is highly favored at our school by all stake holders—parents, teachers, and students. This makes it possible to see why any effort for cross-curricular initiatives is not seen as valuable to building a stronger cultural identity given that students are provided Islamic Studies and Quran as classes to accommodate that need.

The result of this research made it clear to me that although it is very important to make sure that as teachers we are culturally responsive and respectful in our teaching and planning, there are factors that might inhibit us from practicing this in our own school community. We always strive for what is best for our students by providing them with activities we see as important to them base on what we have learned about culture and best practices in teaching. But if the students do not see the value or importance of including their literacies as focal points or “anchors” for their own personal learning, it becomes a waste of their instructional time. Even though this experience points out to going back and using the regular text we have in our basal, I

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will still continue to use texts that celebrate their cultural identities and incorporates their daily practices as American Muslim students alongside other texts that celebrate other cultures.

Diversity is an important concept that all students should know and it can start with the texts they use and learn from in the classroom.

Reflection

This experience gave me the opportunity to see the applicability of some salient theories in my current school environment. The concept of culturally responsive instruction has a strong foothold in many schools. The diversity of students that brings with them different cultural backgrounds that may affect the way they respond to the teaching and learning experiences in the classroom. Teachers need to take the necessary steps to ensure that these differences do not pose a roadblock to students' ability to learn.

Research like this which aims to make us look at the cultural dimensions of student learning allows us to consider multiple perspectives as we evaluate and plan for instruction to meet the needs of our diverse learners. This project allowed me to investigate how culture can play a pivotal role in enhancing student learning. As a teacher, it is so easy to get lost with the different demands of teaching. However, it is very seldom that we take a moment to consider how we can make full use of the literacies that our students naturally have learning from home and their community. It is so easy to access the internet to pull out pre-made teacher resources thinking that it will work with our students. What I fail to do is think and reflect if these materials are suitable for my particular set of students and whether the thinking prompts I use

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acknowledges and respects their need to make powerful connections with what they know from the literacies they bring from home to the topics and concepts we explore inside my classroom.

Focusing on the cultural component is an area that I could have addressed early on while planning for my curriculum. It is a little unfortunate that this course was offered half-way through the school year, nonetheless, the interventions I have come up with in doing my cultural inquiry research project paved the way to forming a positive collaboration with teachers who sees the value of using texts and learning materials that our American-Muslim students can identify with.

With the learning I have gained from the course, I am hoping to be more conscious with my choices of teaching materials to use with my students. Activating prior knowledge is always part of any instruction, knowing more about the possible funds of knowledge the students already possess, it will be a good investment to investigate and know more about my students' family background and their out-of-school activities. Creating an inclusive classroom that respects the different cultures represented by the students will be one goal I have for the coming years. Building trusting relationships centered in dialogues and conversations that give students the power to use their voice and celebrate their individual identities is another goal that I am hoping to further develop as I grow in the teaching profession.

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Appendix Table of Contents

- A. Student Survey (Elementary)
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Instruction for American Muslim Students

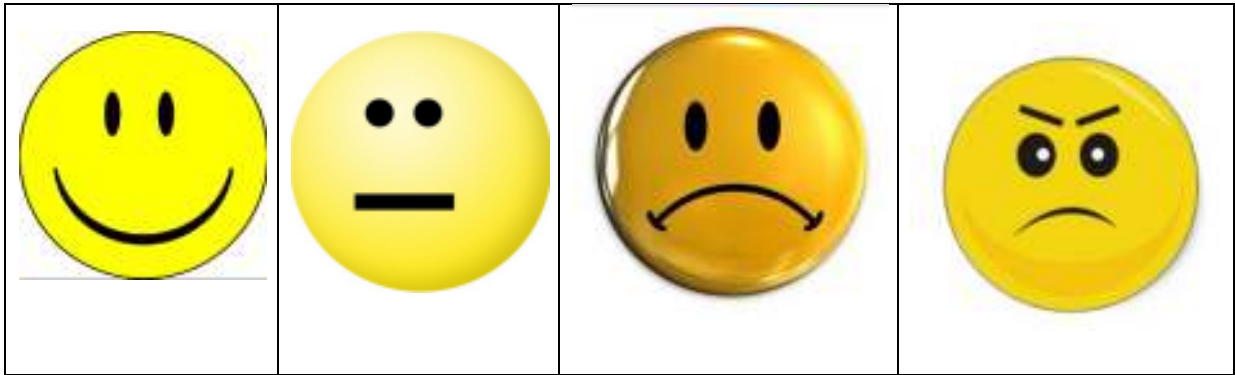
A. Student Survey ~ Elementary

ELEMENTARY

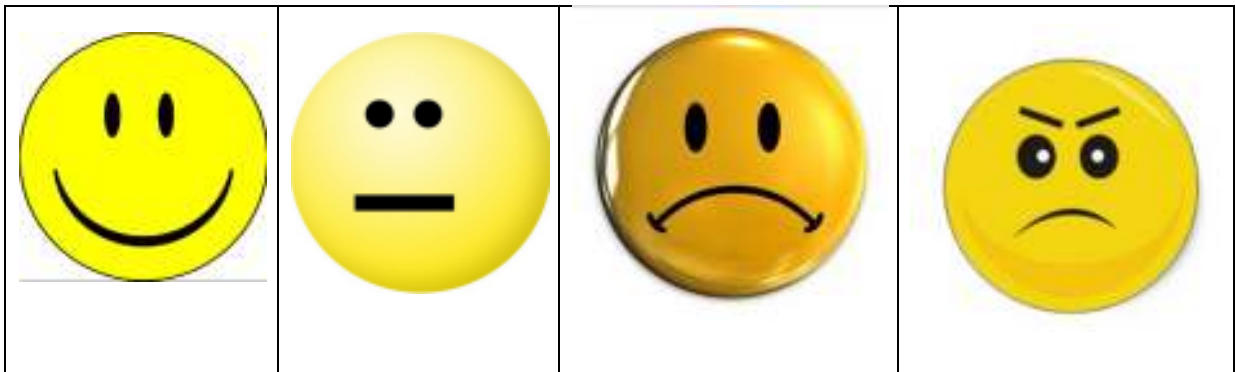
Dear Student,

Please circle the picture that describes how you feel.

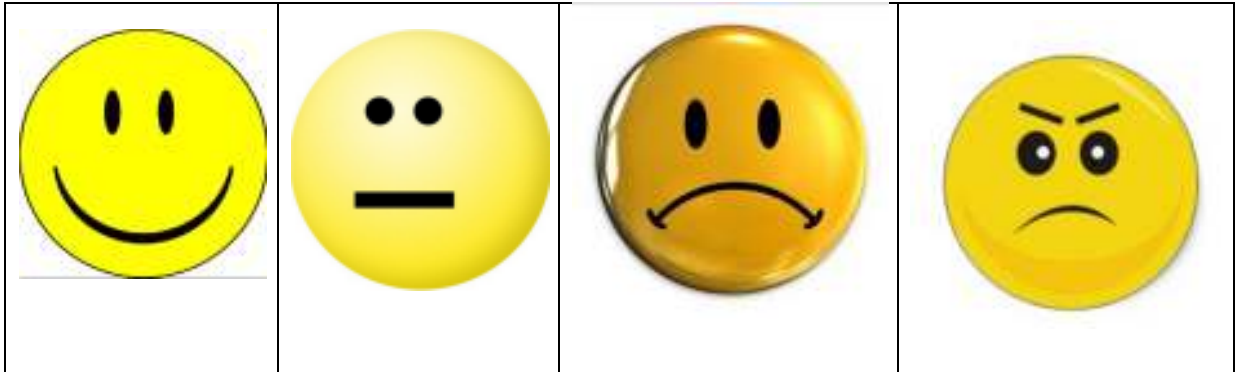
1. I feel that stories from the Quran and Islamic Studies should be included in my English/Language Arts reading materials and resources.



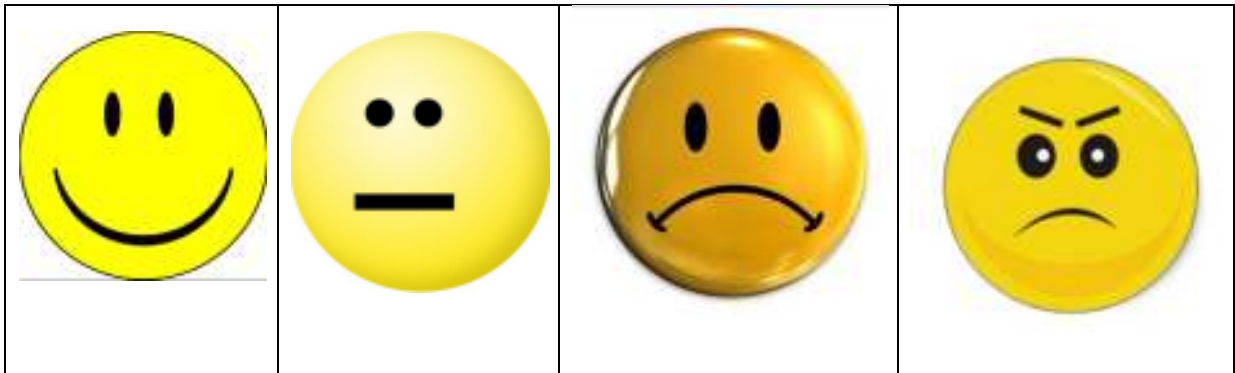
2. I feel that my teacher can help me use what I learn from home to connect it with my learning at school.



3. My teacher uses the teaching of Quran in helping me make connections to what I am reading and learning.

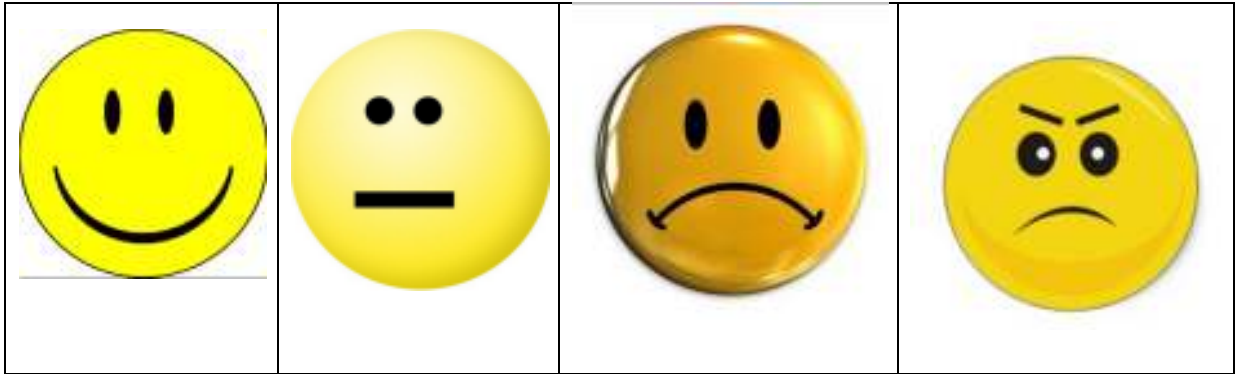


4. I feel that my teacher knows how important is Islamic values to me and my family.

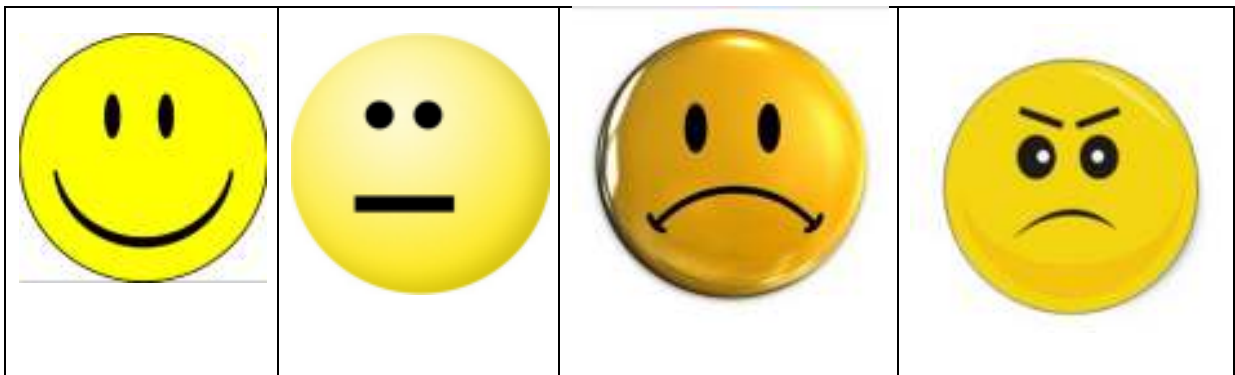


5. My teacher uses stories from the Quran when s/he teaches to help me understand what I'm learning more easily.

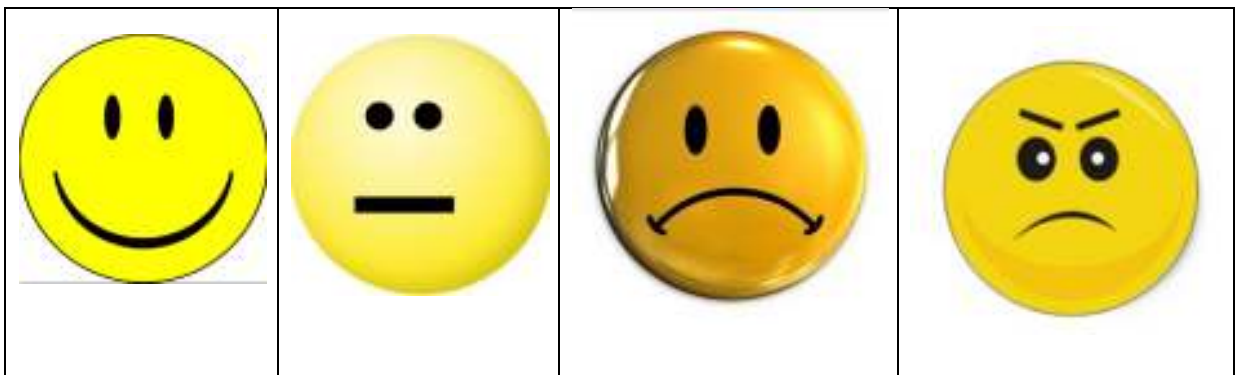
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6. I feel that my teacher respects my culture and my Muslim practices and leads me to think about how I can apply what I have learned in Quran and Islamic Studies in my other class subjects.

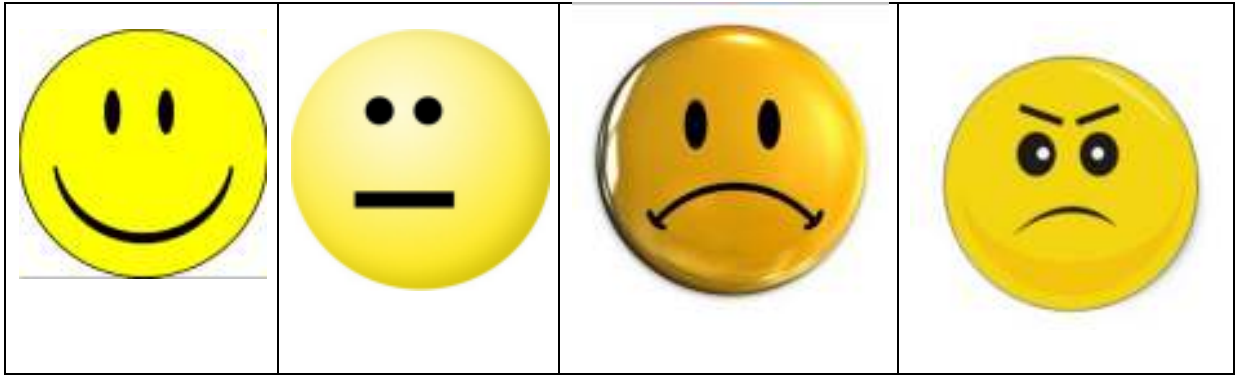


7. I feel ok discussing my Muslim practices at school (e.g. making Du'a, doing Wud'ju).

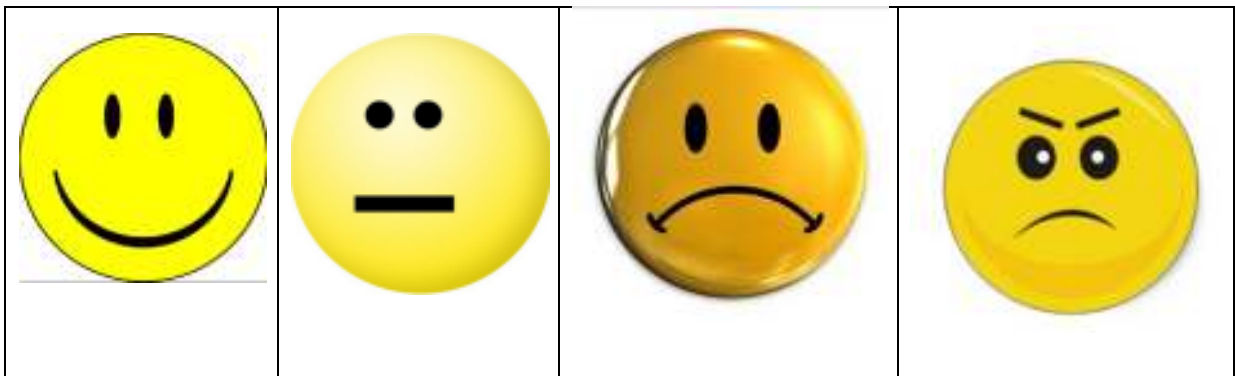


8. I feel that it will help me more if my teacher shares the same culture that I have and if we speak the same language.

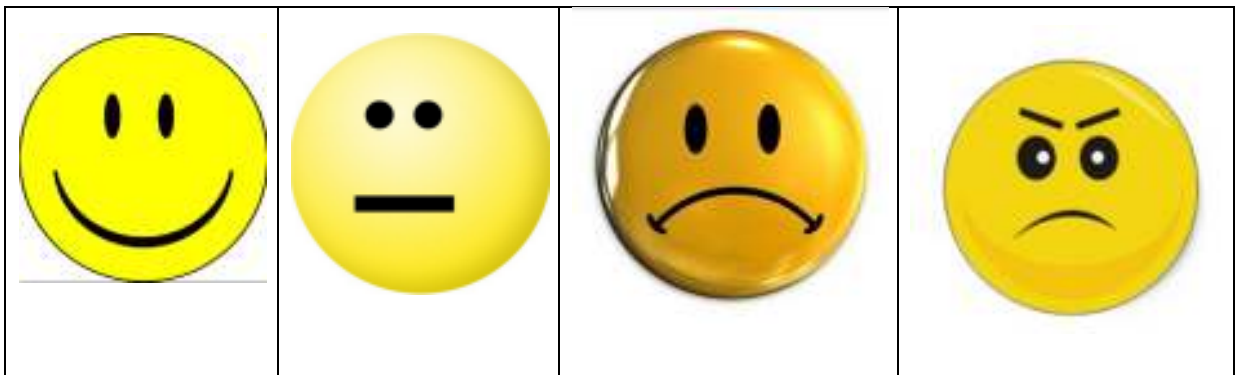
Instruction for American Muslim Students



9. I wish that the learning materials we use at school talks about or uses my daily experiences as a Muslim student as examples.



10. I think we should talk more about our identity as Muslim students to help us see how important it is.



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B. Student Survey ~ Middle School

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Dear Student,

Please circle the number that best describes how you feel. Use the following category:

4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

1. I feel that I need to be exposed to Islamic literature and text to help celebrate my cultural background and identity.

4	3	2	1
---	---	---	---

2. I feel that my teacher can help me use what I learn from home to connect it with my learning at school.

4	3	2	1
---	---	---	---

3. My teacher uses the teaching of Quran in helping me make connections to what I am reading and learning.

4	3	2	1
---	---	---	---

4. I feel that there should be a connection between my cultural practices and what I'm learning academically to make it more meaningful to me.

4	3	2	1
---	---	---	---

C. Parent Interview

Teacher Interview

1. As a teacher of Muslim students, do you think it's important for the students to make use of the learning they've gained from home, the community, and their special subjects (Quran, Islamic Studies) when teaching the core subject areas?

2. How frequent do you use your students' cultural practices when teaching? Can you give an example?

3. Do you feel that students are more engaged in the learning process when you use references to stories or daily practices that are innate to their cultural background/identity as oppose to using what the teacher manual prescribe as probing prompts/questions? Can you give an example?

4. Do you feel that we as teachers should be using more Islamic text and literature in our teaching practices? What areas of the curriculum do you think we can infuse with their Muslim literacies?

5. Do you think assessment should make use of questions that reflects the daily practices of Muslim students to make it more Real-World to them? Can you give an example of an assessment that has "Real-World" application to our Muslim students?

Instruction for American Muslim Students

6. Do you feel that parents think we should help strengthen their children's Muslim identity while at school? How can we do this in our teaching practices?

7. Do you feel that Muslim students learn differently than other students? Please explain.

8. Do you think it's ok to talk about our students' cultural practices and faith when teaching the core subjects of ELA, Math, Science, Social Studies?

9. Do you feel that the learning resources we use at school fully meet the different needs of our Muslim students? Please explain.

10. How can we help our Muslim students strengthen their identity at school?

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D Website Link

<http://www.muslimstudentsfundsofknowledge.com/>

