

Steps for Special Education Teachers to Take to Appropriately Service Students Who Practice Islam

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Growing Number of Students Practicing Islam in the United States

The World and the United States (US) are constantly changing in terms of demographics. This change includes the important characteristic of religious affiliation of its population. Noteworthy of this change is the growth of Islam in the world and in this country over the past decade. Today, Islam is not only the second largest practiced religion in the world, but it is also the fastest growing religion in the world, with over 1.1 billion followers (National Council of Churches, 2005). Islam is growing about 2.9% per year. This is faster than the total world population which increases about 2.3% annually. It is thus attracting a progressively larger percentage of the world's population (Religious Tolerance, 2002). Islam is also the fastest growing religion in the US in terms of followers. A recent survey estimated that there were approximately 650,000 children practicing Islam in the US (Adherents.com, 2005). As a result of this upward trend, it would be safe to assume that there are an ever-increasing number of students that follow Islam in this country's public schools and special education classes.

Importance of Determining What Special Education Teacher Should Know About Islam

As the number of students practicing Islam increases it is ever-more important for all educators including special education teachers to understand a variety of specific Islam-related factors for the purpose of improving the education of these students. It should be remembered that limited knowledge often leads to feelings of being uncomfortable, negative stereotyping, and even negative behaviors towards these children (Kendall, 2006). No educator wants to conscientiously or unconscientiously react negatively to a student because of lack of knowledge regarding the student's religious practices. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present some of the common religious practices found in Islam and the common practices related to serving students in the special education setting that could possibly conflict with these religious practices. Also, the paper presents possible solutions to these dilemmas.

Islamic Practices That Might Effect Special Education and Solutions to Deal with Potential Problems

Teachers should always remember that it is considered unethical to ask a child or a parent questions regarding their religious preference unless they begin the discussion. If a parent begins such a conversation, the teacher should use caution in the questions that are asked. Also, if the child begins the discussion it is recommended that the conversation be continued only with the parent present. With this said, many modifications should not be made unless parents/guardians express a desire for such accommodations. If a teacher is made aware of the fact that the parents/child are Islamic, there are religious practices special education teachers may often have questions in regards to including those dealing with the following topics:

- 1.) removal of head covering
- 2.) attendance at school on holy days
- 3.) prayer obligations for students
- 4.) co-educational issues.

The following sections present information on these four important religious practices, possible conflicts with special education, and possible solutions.

Removal of Head Covering

As a sign of their religious beliefs, girls of the Islamic faith often wear head coverings. Special educators, as would many others, may believe that the wearing of such a head covering would present a problem during certain class activities because of a restricted field of vision. However, this is rarely the case as the covering is only supposed to cover the hair – not the face as many people believe. Exceptions may be culturally related such as in the case of a burka for individuals with a heritage from Afghanistan who practice the religion of Islam. If this is the case, the following steps should be taken:

- 1.) The student should not be forced to remove any clothing.
- 2.) The student should not be signaled out for wearing the clothing so as to avoid possible negative stigmas or embarrassment.
- 3.) The student should be positioned in such a location in the classroom so that she can easily see the teacher.

Attendance at School on Holy Days

Public school systems in the United States have traditionally followed a schedule recognizing Christian holidays such as Christmas. As such, the public school systems have ignored religious holidays associated with other religions such as the holidays of Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha which are part of Islam. Public schools do however recognize the rights of students to miss school because of religious holidays. However, a problem arises when schools plan special events, such as field trips – often integral to special education because of their hands-on nature, on the religious holiday that is celebrated by a minority of the students. School officials, including teachers, should plan such events carefully so

as to avoid such conflicts. If such changes are not possible, at the very least, the following steps should be taken:

- 1.) Schools should videotape the event.
- 2.) Schools should allow the students that missed the event to observe the video at a later time, possibly with others peers that were absent, both Muslim and non-Muslim.
- 3.) School officials should ensure that these students are not stigmatized as a result of the alternative plans.

Prayer Obligations for Students and Potential Conflicts with Class

Individuals of the Islamic faith often set aside time periods during the day in which to pray. Special education teachers may believe that such prayer obligations for students could be in conflict with the daily schedule because of conflicts with activities for which students with disabilities are involved (physical education, music, speech therapy, physical therapy ect.). However, this should not represent a problem, because individuals involved in this religious practice usually have a time span of about three hours to complete their approximately 20-minute prayer session. Special education teachers should have no problem accommodating this religious practice. Steps that schools should take in order to accommodate the prayer obligations of a student include:

- 1.) Schools should always accommodate for prayer obligations by providing a quiet area for students in which to pray for the time that is designated by parents and children.
- 2.) Students should be allowed to pray together, with other students of the Islamic faith, during these times to help alleviate their fears because of possibly being isolated.

Coeducational Issues

Islamic schools usually have classes separated by gender as children grow older. Coeducation is not viewed favorably by many Islamic clerics as students reach the adolescent years, especially in activities that require girls and boys to participate in close proximity – such as in group activities. However, special education classes in public schools are coeducational. In terms of coeducational issues, boys and girls participating together is most likely not going to be a problem for parents and Islamic clerics in elementary school when the children are still young. Problems may arise in middle and high school. Steps that schools should take in order to accommodate the concerns with coeducational issues for Islamic students in the special education setting include the following:

- 1.) Boys and girls in middle and high school should be separated in class for activities if possible.
- 2.) Teachers should remember not to signal out the student being separated to avoid the possible negative consequences that the student may encounter.

Conclusion

With a growing number of diverse students, including students of the Islamic faith, attending public schools across the country it is more important than ever for teachers, such as special education teachers, to recognize differences among students. Teachers should avoid allowing negative stereotypes to form in their minds or to flourish in their classrooms. With a better understanding of these

differences, such as Islamic beliefs and traditions, and following the steps provided previously, special education teachers can hopefully serve students of the Islamic faith better than ever.

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