



## How teachers' values affect their evaluation of children of immigrants: Findings from Islamic and public schools

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the implications of how teachers' views of immigrant parents predict their ratings of first-grade students' academic competence and behavioral problems. Teachers rated 191 first-grade immigrant students attending Islamic and public schools in the Northeast United States. The results showed that when teachers perceived parents as having discrepant value differences, they rated students more negatively both in terms of academic competence and behavioral problems, even after controlling for student gender and ethnicity, parental education and parental school involvement. Surprisingly, teachers in Islamic and public schools did not differ in their perceived value differences with parents. The type of school students attend, however, moderated the effects of teachers' perceived value differences on their academic ratings, but not on their behavioral ratings. While both Islamic and public school teachers rated students' academic competence equally high when they perceived little or no value differences with parents, public school teachers held lower academic expectations than Islamic school teachers with increased value differences. These findings suggest a mechanism by which children from immigrant families enter a path of diminished expectations, albeit through slightly different levels in Islamic and public school settings.

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### 1. Introduction

Today, more than 23% of children in the United States under 10 come from immigrant families (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008). For these children, schools serve as the first and, in many cases, primary entry into mainstream U.S. culture (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Negotiating with schools can present several challenges for immigrant families because many have to overcome language and cultural barriers to effectively advocate for their children's educational success (Griffith, 1998). At the same time, as teachers have students from various cultural groups different from their own, it is critical for them to become familiar with a range of culturally related parenting beliefs that can be as diverse as the number of students in their classrooms. As children of immigrants enter the nation's schools in large numbers, the students may be at risk for failure when teachers are unacquainted with the home culture of their students, as parenting beliefs about education and their interactions with schools and teachers may be misunderstood and subsequently viewed negatively (Delpit, 1995). In response, some parents choose to send their children to schools that match their home cultures (McCreery, Jones, & Holmes, 2007).

The quality and frequency of home and school interactions have important implications for students, particularly in the early school years (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It has been well established that effective, two-way interactions between parents

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and teachers positively shape students' academic progress (Epstein, 1983). Students often display externalizing behaviors and suffer academically when there is an impoverished mesosystem with little interaction between home and school, or when parents and teachers endorse different value systems (Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003). Furthermore, Lasky (2000) showed that teachers were more comfortable with parents who shared a value system similar to their own, but often became demoralized, angry, and discouraged with parents who did not share the same values. In this study, we focus on how value differences between teachers and parents are related to teacher perceptions of immigrant children both in terms of academic and behavioral problems. More specifically, we will examine the role of cultural continuity across two types of schools: Islamic schools and public schools. While most other immigrant groups do not have an option to send their students to schools that are specifically geared toward their home cultures, some Muslim parents send their children to Islamic school where teachers and students do share similar cultural beliefs. On the other hand, public schools can potentially create a culturally incongruent setting for recent immigrant students and non-immigrant teachers comprising the majority of the staff.

Prior research on marginalized groups has shown that teachers' limited experience or understanding of their students' cultures may lead to negative educational and psychological outcomes in children. Most of this research has focused on African American or other minority students, using slightly different conceptual terminology such as "cultural discontinuity" (Delpit, 1995; Ogbu, 1993), "cultural congruence" (Au & Kawakami, 1994) or "cultural mismatch" (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas, 1988). Combined, these authors have shown that cultural incongruence between teachers and parents can negatively impact the experiences of children who come from different cultural groups than the ones teachers are familiar with. In addition to the impact of cultural differences that stem from racial and ethnic background, research examining socioeconomic differences between teachers and parents has also illustrated a similar pattern. Even after controlling for children's skills and parental education, when teachers perceived value differences with low-income parents, they tended to rate children as less competent (Hauser-Cram et al., 2003).

Potential value differences between teachers and parents may also play a role in how teachers view children's behavioral problems. For example, teachers may misinterpret students' behavior when teachers do not understand or have limited exposure to the cultural norms of their students (Rueda, Artiles, Salazar, & Higa, 2002). Upon analyzing data from 11 large urban school districts in Southern California, Rueda et al. (2002) found that an unusually high proportion of Latino English Language Learners have been placed in special education based on behavioral assessments. Similar findings have emerged from other scholars' work (e.g., deValenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006; Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005), identifying a disproportionate number of English Language Learners placed in special education. These findings are of particular relevance for children of immigrants who practice different customs at home, speak a language other than English outside of school, and are in the process of becoming acculturated to the U.S. society. Teachers may negatively or mistakenly evaluate immigrant children and consequently refer them to special education, where students often suffer stigmatization, isolation, and restricted access to general educational settings (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2005).

### 1.1. *A brief introduction to Muslim immigrants in the United States*

In this study, we extend the work on cultural incongruence to children of immigrants in general and Muslim children of immigrants in particular, two groups that have recently experienced increasingly negative stereotypes in the United States. Although the exact number of Muslim immigrants is unknown because the U.S. Census Bureau, by law, does not collect information about religious background, it is estimated that there are between two and six million Muslims in the U.S. and that they come from more than 100 different countries (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001). Although the labels "Muslim" and "Arab" are often used interchangeably to refer to the same group of people in the public discourse, they signify two distinct characteristics of a person; the former referring to one's religion and the latter referring to one's ethnicity. Not all Arabs are Muslims and not all Muslims are Arabs. Indeed, one out of four Arab-Americans are Muslims and the remainder are Christians. Furthermore, only about 12% of Muslims worldwide are Arab (Leonard, 2003). In this paper, Muslim participants hail from countries all around the world.

Muslim-Americans constitute one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. population (Dudley & Roozen, 2001). According to 2000 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey, which gathered data from 14,301 congregations representing 41 denominations and faith groups, the number of mosques in the U.S. is growing faster than any other type of religious center in the country (Dudley & Roozen, 2001). Furthermore, young children make up a large proportion of this community, as in many other immigrant groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). A recent public survey by Pew Research Center (2007), a nonpartisan "fact tank" that researches issues, facts, and trends in the United States, found that Muslim-Americans are a much younger group compared to the general U.S. population. Specifically, the proportion of young adult Muslim-Americans between ages 18 and 29 was found to be at least twice as large as the proportion in the general U.S. population. Additionally, the percentage of elderly Muslim-Americans aged 65 and above dropped to less than 10%, in contrast to the 27% comprising the elderly in the general population.

Muslim immigrants are also quite well integrated into the fabric of the mainstream U.S. society as illustrated by the use of English at home and intermarriage across religions. According to U.S. Census data documenting home language use of the 14 largest immigrant groups in the country, about 66% of children from Afghanistan, 61% of children from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and 53% of children from Iraq reported using both English and another language at home (Hernandez et al., 2008).

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