(Mis)Understanding Islam in a Suburban Texas School District

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This case study reports one Texas suburban school district's efforts to promote cultural proficiency after leadership trainings and explores how and in what ways this may or may not have improved school leaders' understanding of Islam. Terrell and Lindsey's (2009) conceptual framework of Leadership and the Cultural Proficiency Continuum guided the inquiry, which was comprised of constructs that span from culturally destructive to proficient. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and documents. The analysis of data revealed that the cultural proficiency trainings did and did not influence the cultural proficiency of educators working in the district.

KEYWORDS cultural proficiency, Islam, leadership, Muslims, professional learning

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The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon changed the perception of Islam in America from a peripheral religion to one at the forefront of the

American psyche. Islam became linked with war, Muslims were viewed as actively hostile to America, and Islam became politicized and considered a threat to American national security,[1] even though the vast majority of Muslims condemned the attacks and declared them un-Islamic.[2] Today, Muslims in America continue to experience harassment and discrimination[3] albeit they have lived in the United States for over a century and comprise less than 1% of the American population.[4] Nonetheless, erroneous beliefs about Islam and Muslims continue to occur. In Texas, a resolution was introduced to the State Board of Education that accused Texas textbook publishers of having a 'pro-Islamic and anti-Christian bias' asserting that textbooks devote significantly more space to Islam than they do to Christianity.[5] These attitudes can create a schism in the relationship between educators and their Muslim students and families.[6] One way in which to allay these discrepancies is to ensure that districts develop avenues to promote religious competency in its teachers and leaders so that they can model respecting, accepting, and caring relationships.[7]

The purpose of this research was to better understand one Texas school district's efforts to promote cultural competency and explore how and in what ways this may or may not have improved school leaders' religious proficiency toward Islam. The data for this article is taken from a larger study centered on a Texas school district's efforts to develop cultural proficiency, which included training on religious expression. In order to better understand the complexities of cultural competency in relation to minority religious understanding, we chose to focus on the perceptions leaders and teachers had about Islam. This study was led by the following research question: How do district leaders, principals, and teachers perceive Muslim students, Islam, and religious difference in one large suburban school district in Texas?

This article begins with a brief overview of Islam in the United States followed by a review of the literature discussing Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell's[8] cultural proficiency

framework, which guided the study. We then present an overview of the school district in Texas where data collection occurred. After a reporting of the key findings related to the conceptual framework, the article concludes with a discussion of how these findings help us understand the way school leaders view Islam and their Muslim students, while also seeking to untangle the complexities of developing a culturally proficient school district.

<div align="center">ISLAM IN AMERICA AND IN ITS PUBLIC SCHOOLS</div>

Today about 35% of the American Muslim community is comprised of African Americans and roughly the other 65% consists of immigrants to America and their children.[9] Negative images of Muslims as the 'other' intensified after the September 11th attacks; yet, anti-Muslim stereotyping in literature, film, theater, and mass media is not new.[10] The attacks did, however, spark an increase Islamophobia, which asserts Muslims to be anti-American and anti-Western even though the majority of Muslims in the United Stated identify as citizens.[11] As a consequence of fear mongering, a chasm in how Americans understand the religion of Islam and Muslims is expanding, exacerbating intolerance and hate.[12]

This bigotry toward Muslims and unfamiliarity with Islam is not left at the schoolhouse door. The majority of teachers have little understanding of Islam and the unique needs of their Muslim students.[13] Even when public school teachers were given information regarding Muslim beliefs and practices, Ahmad and Szpara found that little changed in regards to teachers' sensitivity toward their Muslim students and families.[14] In a study by Niyozov, teachers did not reject the idea of including Islamic culture and history in the curricula; however, the teachers questioned what information would be appropriate to include.[15] Other studies found that absent or biased curricula about Islam when coupled with unreceptive and uncaring instruction made learning difficult for Muslim students.[16] Jackson emphasized the need for educators to challenge the picture of Islam by providing 'thematic, analytical, and

critical media literacy as part of a critical multicultural social studies education'.[17] Kassam stressed the need for teacher trainings to be inclusive in their approach while also being analytical of histories, religions, and cultures.[18] To this end, this study focused on one Texas school district's cultural proficiency training in order to better understand the influence this may or may not have had on teacher and administrator views of Islam and Muslims.

CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

Cultural proficiency is the ability to understand and have the necessary skills and behaviors to interact effectively with individuals from a variety of cultures and backgrounds.[19] A culturally proficient educator holds difference in high esteem, values the growth that occurs from increasing knowledge, and understands the importance of "collective[ly] learning about culture and families of the students and that [teachers are] not solely about imparting subject content to students".[20] Institutions of education are obliged to be culturally proficient, having policies and practices that support those within and outside the organization. Terrell and Lindsey[21] describe a culturally proficient institution:

(1) assesses culture – understands how organizational culture affects others;

(2) values diversity – recognizes differences as diversity rather than inappropriate responses to the environment;

(3) manages the dynamics of difference – learns effective strategies for resolving conflict among people whose cultural backgrounds and values differ;

(4) adapts to diversity – changes the way things are done to acknowledge differences;

(5) institutionalizes cultural knowledge – incorporates adaptations through professional learning opportunities, e.g. curriculum delivery reflecting an understanding of cultural diversity.

Darder describes a culturally proficient institution as one whose ideology is founded on a pedagogy, which is critical, considers cultural democracy, and incorporates it in their educational practices.[22] Such institutions, considered culturally proficient, advocate for life-long learning to best serve the educational needs of everyone, no matter their difference. On the individual level, Terrell and Lindsey developed a cultural proficiency continuum specifically for schools. This continuum provides language to define harmful and beneficial values and behaviors, from those that are most destructive to those that are most beneficial. Used as an assessment training tool, schools can directly apply this cultural proficiency continuum to the organization and to themselves.

Table 1

Yet, many school leaders lack the cultural competence necessary to lead socially just schools.[23] Consequently, the impact of race, religion, age, ability, ethnicity, class, and other variances of difference are overlooked and negatively affect school culture and learning. To this end, Terrell and Lindsey's Leadership and Cultural Proficiency Continuum guided this study as it provided a framework to analyze the attitudes and behaviors teachers had toward Islam and Muslims.

<center>BIG STAR SCHOOL DISTRICT AND RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION</center>

Big Star School District (BSSD)[1] educates 55,000 Pre-K through grade 12 students. Over the last two decades the district experienced rising numbers of ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse students. The ethnic distribution revealed that more than half of the student population was of diverse ethnic background: 11% African American; 22% Hispanic; 42% White; 21% Asian; 3% of two or more races; and less than 1% American Indian and Pacific Islander. Religious diversity within the district indicated various denominations of

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[1] All names in the study are pseudonyms.

Judiasm, Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam. In response to the increased diversity in its student population, the district engaged in diversity round tables, conducted simulations and role modeling of expected behaviors in principals, and created a diversity advisory committee which included members of the community. These initiatives met varied success and in 2010 the district committed to a 3-year professional learning program centered on cultural proficiency training, which included modules on religion. The district identified principals and teachers to attend the trainings.

This study focused on the Religious Expression in the Workplace trainings[2], which were organized around two modules. Module one explored cultural proficiency as it related to instructional scenarios and module two addressed scenarios relevant to classroom instruction, students, families, the district, and school policies. The training also included an overview of major world religions, a discussion of religious diversity locally and in the United States, and an exploration of how religious diversity informs their work in schools and with their community. Specific language was introduced and used throughout the training to help clarify concepts for the participants. They also worked through scenarios that focused on differences in perspectives, misunderstandings, trust and distrust, lack of effective communication networks, and micro-aggressions. The goal of the Religious Expression in the Workplace Training was to help administrators and teachers better understand difference as it related to religion generally and Islam specifically.

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[2] Religious Expression in the Workplace training along with other cultural competency modules were developed by district professional development personnel and funded by the district's education foundation. It was part of a multi-year school board initiative designed to enhance cultural competency among employees and improve relationships with students, parents/community, and colleagues.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This qualitative case study took place over one year and included 14 semi-structured individual interviews, 7 focus group discussions, a review of district documents, 8 professional learning observations, and 7 classroom walk-throughs.[24] Qualitative methods were viewed as the best way to obtain the "lived experiences"[25] of school leaders and teachers in order to better understand the district's efforts to promote cultural proficiency and explore how and in what ways these may or may not have improved their religious proficiency of Islam.[26] Data analysis used *a priori* coding procedures grounded in Lindsey, Robins and Terrell's Leadership and the Cultural Proficiency Continuum. We used line-by-line coding to further guide data collection and identify emergent themes.[27]

Table 2

We also conducted member checks with the participants to ascertain internal validity.[28] Lastly, as codes became theoretically saturated and data became increasingly redundant, themes were identified.[29] Findings presented in this paper were consistent with both our interpretations and participant perspectives.

FINDINGS

This research yielded three themes that detail the range of competencies held by administrators and teachers after the district-wide religious expression trainings. The three categories are: district-wide actions, attempts toward inclusivity, and continued misperceptions of Islam.

District Actions

The Religious Expression in the Workplace trainings were positively received by both administrators and teachers. Principals stated that their teachers were "wanting to know when they were going to do more." Part of the reason for its acceptance, according to the Director of

Diversity, was due to the superintendent providing clear direction. She explained, "The superintendent expects that everyone will participate because he introduced it. He set the expectation. Because of this, we won't have principals who are not on board." Principals also conveyed the importance of the religious proficiency trainings to their teachers. One principal explained, "These conversations force us to look at issues and lay it on the table." Even though principals verbally supported the religious proficiency trainings, their attendance was not required and instead most sent two teachers to the training. The superintendent stressed that everyone was 'on board;' yet, he and other district administrators were not present at the district-wide trainings either. The actual attendance compared to the verbal inclusive statements was a clear discrepancy.

To accompany the trainings, one school-based teacher curriculum group worked to develop a library of resources to be housed at the district office for teacher use. The Assistant Superintendent of Academics explained the purpose of this library: "We try to provide different perspectives, and everything being created includes aspects of tolerance and fairness. Yet, sometimes there isn't time to provide different perspectives." Although the Assistant Superintendent recognized the limitations of the library's curricular resources, he did not offer any plans to further the effort. His description of the effort fell short of inclusivity, stopping at 'tolerance and fairness'.

Further, two associate superintendents from BSSD visited the local *Jamat Khana*, or Muslim gathering place where a large number of Muslims in their community attended prayer. This visit was positive and the *Jamat Khana* later hosted the mandatory monthly principal meetings – one session for elementary principals and the other for secondary principals. The content of the monthly meetings was not for religious professional learning; although, hosting the meetings in *Jamat Khana* brought about awareness. One principal explained, "The *Jamat*

Khana is in my neighborhood and I drive by it hundreds of times. I never thought that this was a place my students go." Albeit limited, it was evident that the leaders of the district were willing to place effort to create awareness, address bias in the curriculum library, and make the trainings mandatory for at least two teachers per campus. These attitudes fall on the continuum's right side -- transformational change toward equity, albeit at the beginning stage of cultural pre-competence. This indicates an awareness of what schools don't know about working with diverse groups; however, non-attendance at the trainings by the district cabinet and principals convey a message of unimportance, which could cause regression in the effort toward cultural proficiency.

Use of a Common Language

The trainings also focused on developing a common language as a way to communicate and understand issues of diversity. Words such as micro aggressions and specific religious terminology helped shed light on how communication worked in the schools and what changes needed to be made. The Director of Professional Learning emphasized, "We want to create a culture that brings about conversation. Now they're aware, which is positive. The language doesn't eliminate skepticism, but it makes them think." Additionally, the Director hoped that school principals and teachers felt more comfortable talking about issues of diversity. For example, if a principal or teacher struggled with starting a conversation, the Director stated that he was pro-active and asked them directly, "What conversation do you need to have and I will be a resource?" The Director felt that problems shouldn't be ignored. He commented, "If there is a problem with a teacher, principals need to address it." He was aware that conversations could be challenging. He said, "Conversations have a way of surfacing some of those deeper questions we want to hear. Those questions come out because something is happening. If you don't surface the stuff, you are not doing it right." The Director of Professional Learning

reinforced the idea that the trainings could help principals and teachers possess the language skills necessary to engage sensitive topics.

One high school assistant principal provided an example of how she asks questions if she doesn't understand a particular religious practice. She commented,

> We have a group of students who pray at the end of fifth period every day. I actually asked Uzma about the rules of Islamic prayer. I felt comfortable asking a staff member before the training, but now I'm also comfortable asking the students. I feel ignoring the difference is an act of prejudice.

This assistant principal had the language and the skills to ask appropriate questions, and felt the training increased her confidence to ask students as well. A teacher also discussed how her school addressed the issue of food for an overnight camping experience:

> Before, none of our Muslims students went on the camping trip. It wasn't until the training that we thought to ask. The problem was the food offered. Now, we include *Halal* food and parents allow their children to go. The district has also changed the way they offer food and include vegetarian dishes every week.

After the training, the teachers knew about *Halal* food. Having an understanding of Islamic dietary preferences helped to solve the problem. Additionally, the training helped teachers develop practices that sought to meet the specific needs of their Muslim students. The trainings did not dictate what to do or what language to use, but they did introduce teachers to a common language that allowed them to be more aware and sensitive. Common language provided the assistant principal and teacher with the wherewithal to ask appropriate questions, which furthered their understanding and acceptance of Islamic practices. District policies, attitudes and behaviors of the assistant principal and teacher demonstrated cultural competence.

Attempts toward Inclusivity

After participating in the training, teachers recognized specific actions they took in their classrooms or with students that addressed diversity. A special education teacher spoke of how she included cultural information when working with a new teacher. She explained, "I told her that in some cultures you don't shake hands with the dad." An elementary school teacher shared ways that she promoted multiculturalism in her classroom,

I had a few students not interested in school and I was trying to motivate them. One way I motivated them was to have them bring in items about their culture. They were so excited and they each shined in a different way. The parents responded positively in allowing them to talk and speak about their culture. In that particular group, I had several students who were Muslim, Jewish, and Christian. Sharing about their religions and their cultures gave them a richer understanding about each other.

For this teacher, bringing to the forefront difference between students in a positive and inclusive way developed greater understanding and acceptance between the students in the class. Meant to be a motivation for disengaged students, acknowledging and valuing difference had a positive influence on classroom learning according to this elementary teacher.

Other teachers felt that they knew a lot about other faith traditions and Islam. One middle school teacher said,

The Muslim kids go to a room to pray in the middle of the day. We have students who leave for weeks at a time to go visit family and go for pilgrimage in Mecca. There are students who come to school and do not eat because of fasting. Some are not allowed to celebrate holidays, listen to certain music, participate in fall festival, or be a part of the music class.

For this middle school teacher, she understood the reasons why Muslim students were absent, what they did when they left the room for prayer, and the importance of fasting during Ramadan. She acknowledged that her school made appropriate modifications.

Another teacher expressed her focus on building relationships. She commented, "We spend a lot of time conferencing, emailing, and calling home as a way to build relationships. It's about getting parents on your side." For this teacher, difference in religion did not hamper these efforts and over 11 years she understood the nuances of when to speak to dads rather than moms. She explained: "With some cultures, their belief system says it is acceptable to communicate only with the child's father. Thankfully, I have never felt spoken down to by a dad. They respect teachers and have a huge respect for education." Teachers reflected positively on their abilities to interact effectively with families, no matter their cultural or religious backgrounds. Others, however, revealed insecurities or ambivalence in communicating with Muslim students or parents.

A principal who worked in the district for 16 years acknowledged that it was difficult for some teachers to talk to Muslim students and their families about their beliefs and practices. Since participation in the training was voluntary for principals, some principals, and as a consequence their teachers, remained biased and didn't care to learn or change their practices. One principal commented:

> Every year we have students of the Muslim faith. We used to see young men, and now we see young women as well, who need to pray during the school day. It is not all the same. From religious center to religious center it is different. Some may only have to pray on Friday. Others may need to pray 3 times a week. This presents challenges to our teachers. If it were all standardized we could handle that beautifully, but it is not.

This principal did not know that Muslim prayer requirements are standardized. Her focus was on the possibility of being unable to control the situation and on students taking advantage.

> What adds to the complication is when students take advantage. We want to be sensitive. We want to meet their needs. Typically, a student will go to a teacher to ask for a pass to pray. Often a teacher will not know how to deal with that. It is one of those areas of awkwardness. If they are taking advantage, then we must intercede.

On one level the principal is making an attempt at inclusivity. She is allowing prayer time for Muslim students. Yet, this special allocation is met with skepticism. This principal stated that she and her faculty were trained on diversity through prior Ruby Payne workshops, and were well equipped. She commented, "I feel our staff is highly competent. This is integral to the success we have in the classroom." Probing deeper and building relationships with the growing Muslim community to further understanding was not a priority for this principal. This reticence or disinterest was also present with an elementary school principal.

A principal mentioned a problem regarding several students whose religion didn't allow music education. When asked who these students were, she responded: "It's one of the Indian religions." An interview with the local Imam revealed that he wrote several letters to schools on behalf of parents about the reason for their students' exclusion from music. The principal failed to understand why a religious belief, which she identified with an ethnicity, would discourage music and learning about music. There was a clear disconnect between the perception of being inclusive and the reality that inclusivity may not be entirely possible. The district lacked a mechanism for digging deeper, seeing if what they said as an organization matches up with what individuals in the organization actually do, and then weighing that against the specific needs of their Muslim students.

Relationships with Muslims

Relationships were key to solving problems with Muslim families. One English as a Second Language (ESL) middle school teacher described an experience with parents regarding their two children. She shared,

> I have two students who recently immigrated. They arrived very well educated but they had certain religious expectations. Their parents were proactive and let us know immediately about their religious beliefs. Their prayer schedule affected the class' schedule and we had to make sure the modified schedule was okay with all the parents. We also had to make sure the students had a private place to change for physical education class. It was a challenge at first but I felt it was important to honor the unique needs of those parents.

A middle school teacher discussed the importance of building relationships with her Muslim students as well as between students. She explained,

> We've taught the kids to be tolerant of certain people. I believe we have a ways to go. Sometimes students are exposed to racism from parents. For example, a Sudanese student who just arrived at our school refused to work with another student who was Muslim. His reasons stemmed from problems in his country. I had a dilemma. The student indicated the request was like asking a Jew to work with a Nazi. I chose to not have them work together.

Similarly, an elementary school teacher linked the Islamic faith and Muslims immigrating to the U.S. as directly in conflict with patriotism. She explained,

> They don't appreciate our beliefs but they want us to respect them. We tread lightly because of the different religion. We want to be inclusive of everyone, but when you

study to become a U.S. citizen, you take an oath and say you are a citizen of this

country and not of that country.

This teacher's personal values limited relationship building, despite the district's trainings to do otherwise. A teacher, in response to the Sudanese/Muslim scenario, stated: "I believe within the boundaries of public education you don't want to probe or ask that question. We want to err on the side of caution. Sometimes there are consequences for taking that initiative. You may unintentionally say something wrong." This teacher's concern that she may inadvertently say something offensive was contrary to the ideology of the principal who stated, "we draw from our personal experiences, but we don't have all the answers. There are answers out there and we have to be willing to find them."

An elementary teacher characterized herself as being from the Midwest and a "plain Jane." She felt that it was nice to learn and understand about Islam and that having a multicultural night once a year shows parents that they care. Her principal added:

Our multicultural night is so large we hold it at a local church. I am also trying to host a multicultural event in our monthly Fun Friday. I ask restaurants to send foods from other cultures and ask teachers to dress in cultural clothing.

Another teacher said that families include foods and have books about Ramadan at the multicultural night. She admitted that she feels more comfortable asking questions about Islam, "I ask questions and they don't take offense to it." Overall, there were definite attempts to learn about Islam with some adhering to district policy and valuing the religious practices of Muslims and their families. These school leaders and teachers fell on the right side of the spectrum and were found to be culturally competent. The high school principal, with tenure of 16 years, addressed prayer with ambivalence; therefore, allowing teachers the opportunity to demean or trivialize Muslim religious practices through their attitudes of skepticism. Such

behaviors border on cultural incapacity. Inching toward cultural competence, individual

schools hosted multicultural nights to show acceptance of diversity, but this type of learning

was limited. There were many examples of attitudes and behaviors that fell between

transformational change toward equity (on the right) and change mandated for tolerance (on

the left). Data also revealed some attitudes, which fell on the far left.

Misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims

School leaders and teachers were open about their unfamiliarity and inexperience with

Islam. The Religious Expression in the Workplace training increased awareness and

conversation; yet, confidence in what they know about Islam was low and at times manifested

in some choosing to trivialize difference.

Disregard of Muslim Students

The Director of Professional Learning spoke about phone calls he often received from

principals. He explained that principals are often resistant to accommodating Muslim students'

requests based on religious reason alone. He explained,

> Principals call me and ask, 'Do they really get to do whatever they want? Do they have
>
> to do this? Do I have to approve it?' The more we have conversations and walk through
>
> these issues it becomes less of an issue. Principals are concerned with compliance more
>
> than performance.

Rather than working to understand the underlying reasons for these special requests, principals

were bothered by the need to make adjustments or accommodations for Muslim students and

their families. Likewise, teachers also overlooked difference. One teacher said,

> Some kids don't take music because of their religious beliefs. We have two girls doing
>
> that. I don't ask. All I know is that I had six kids bring notes from their religious
>
> leader. It's just one more silly thing.

During a school walk-through with an elementary principal, she pointed out a designated prayer space for a group of students. When asked who those students were, she admitted that she was unfamiliar with who in the school used the prayer space. Although these dismissive actions are not necessarily hateful, the act of dismissing difference and ignoring issues of diversity were not in keeping with the district's goals of cultural proficiency and disclosed attitudes of blindness or cultural incapacity.

Hostility toward Islam

An elementary school teacher, who did attend the training, openly acknowledged the superiority of her culture, and engaged in derogatory remarks to undermine and dismiss Islam and Muslims. This teacher wrote an email expressing her beliefs about Islam to the researchers:

Islam is not a religion of peace. If I'm to be honest, and if you were to look deeply into Islam and the Qur'an, I think we would both have to say this is NOT a 'religion of peace.' I am a Bible-believing Christian who has been saved by grace through the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. It is SO HARD for me to watch this *Jihad* take place against fellow Christians. The U.S. is a nation founded on Judeo-Christian values and beliefs and I'm going to personally do everything I can to make sure this doesn't change [sic].

This teacher believed Islam to be a dangerous religion, having no place in the United States. She went on to say,

I have a few Muslims in my class each year, and both the students AND their parents KNOW how much I love them and want them to have a successful future. I don't try to convert them, and I certainly don't 'bash' their religion. I DO pray for them. I pray they will find the love and saving grace of Jesus Christ, the one and only True God. Am I

intolerant? I don't think so. I see it as standing for my faith, my country, and my

freedom [sic].

Although this elementary school teacher believed she treated all students fairly, she dismissed

any value Islam or Muslims brought to her classroom, school, or community.

The superintendent commented that the school community was largely conservative,

and mentioned that a few parents were uncomfortable with minorities. He said that during a

board meeting, a parent said, "there are subgroups infiltrating our schools." He admitted that

these conservative values were present among teachers as well. Even though BSSD offered

Religious Expression in the Workplace training, some school leaders and teachers continued to

hold misunderstandings and misperceptions about Islam and their Muslim students and

families. A lukewarm effort or indifference by school leaders to nurture and encourage

understanding and valuing of Muslim students and their families emboldened a few teachers to

express beliefs of cultural incapacity or destructiveness which fell on the far left of the cultural

proficiency continuum.

<div align="center">DISCUSSION</div>

The quality of public education hinges on the relationships between school leaders,

teachers, and the students and families they serve, no matter the difference.[30]   Lindsey, Robins

and Terrell's cultural proficiency continuum provides school leaders a tool by which to assess

attitudes, beliefs, and understandings of the larger organization as well as individual teachers.

The purpose of this study was to better understand one Texas school district's efforts to

promote cultural competency, after a Religious Expression in the Workplace training. We

wanted to explore how and in what ways this may or may not have improved school leader and

teachers' religious proficiency in regards to Islam. The findings suggest three areas for

discussion. First, the district actions fell short of achieving organizational cultural proficiency.

Second, teachers and school leaders' beliefs and actions were wide-spread, and third, the trainings did not significantly maximize relationships with students or families of the Islamic faith.

School districts often use professional development to improve principals' and teachers' abilities to work effectively with diverse groups.[31] The actions district and school leaders take are often viewed as inseparable from the policies, structures, and institutional practices that support or hinder a culturally proficient organization.[32] This study found that although district actions were inclusive and supported cultural proficiency, the limited nature of the trainings fell short of the intended goals. Several teachers spoke of actions they took in response to Muslim students or family's needs, but few referred to their actions as being a result of the training. The cultural proficiency trainings taught principals and teachers specific words and concepts to help foster dialogue and teachers used this language to discuss gender preferences in parental decision-making, Muslim student behavior, prayer during the school day, *halal* food, and led the way to ask more questions to further understanding. Yet, in some cases sharing specific words did not change attitudes and behaviors.

The manner in which leaders or teachers dealt with Muslims varied across the spectrum from culturally proficient on the far right to culturally destructive on the far left. Principals and teachers were willing to learn and interact with Muslim students and their families; however, BSSD's efforts at developing a culturally proficient organization were far from all-embracing. The trainings did not result in wide-ranging advocacy for Muslim interests nor did the trainings identify specific ways for teachers to effectively serve Muslim students and families. It was select principals and individual teachers who chose whether or not to engage and act equitably towards their Muslim students.

On the whole, principals and teachers felt that they were interacting with students on the right side of the continuum, near cultural competence and cultural proficiency. Yet, the ways some acted revealed a discrepancy and locates their proficiency more to the cultural incapacity and cultural blindness area. Prayer space was provided at schools but was considered by several to be a challenge to incorporate. Several principals wrongly stated Muslim prayer requirements. Additionally, teachers accommodated the topic of religion in curricula to motivate students and be inclusive, but others centered on holidays and food rather than more substantial components of their religion and culture. Moving toward the left end of the continuum, members of the community at school board meetings were open with their dislike towards Muslims, seeing them as infiltrators and not American. These statements are more aligned with cultural destructiveness and are reflective of current negative portrayals of Muslims in America.[33] The training failed to develop in teachers and school leaders the critical component of self-introspection.[34] Most teachers and school leaders did not question their actions and chose to see themselves as making good choices and having correct knowledge about Islam. This limited their ability to grow intellectually and instead perpetuated cultural incompetence.[35]

Third, the voluntary nature of the training for principals did not provide opportunity for them to gain the knowledge and develop skills to raise expectations of their teachers with the end goal of maximizing relationships with their Muslim students and families. Several school leaders and teachers were located on the 'change mandated for tolerance' side of the continuum indicating cultural destructiveness, incapacity, or blindness to Islam. These teachers and principals struggled with Muslim student behavior, prayer during the school day, and communication difficulties. This is in line with scholarship focused on the lack of knowledge teachers have concerning Islam and the unique needs of their Muslim students.[36] Such

scholarship indicates that when educators are given information about Muslim beliefs and practices, little change in sensitivity occurs. Thus, questions remain as to the effectiveness of professional development in teaching about Islam. In BSSD's case, the training did not significantly alter relationships between the schools and their Muslim community.

Finally, BSSD's Religious Expression in the Workplace trainings fell short in creating a culturally proficient organization. A few school leaders clearly valued diversity and welcomed their Muslim students and families while others questioned the need to alter schedules and classroom activities for their religious needs. Many teachers and principals were uninformed about religious expression and made decisions grounded in assumptions of what was right.[37] Additionally, other principals and teachers were uninformed about Islam and showed little interest in learning about the religion.[38] This study suggested that Religious Expression in the Workplace training did little to alter BSSD's organizational culture concerning Islam. Relationships with Muslim students and their families were not improved on a district-wide level but were developed on individual levels when teachers were willing to build relationship with their Muslim students, whether or not they participated in the training. In light of this study, it is questionable if districts can be culturally proficient without large reforms in teacher and school leader training.

NOTES

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