

# Student Knowledge and Perceptions of Islam and the Arab and Muslim World

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**Abstract:** Students' knowledge and perceptions of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world were assessed at three schools to evaluate the effectiveness of the current pedagogy and curriculum. Results show that students have little knowledge of the subject, say that they get most of their information from their teachers, have fairly positive perceptions of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world, and have suggestions to improve the curriculum.

To evaluate the understanding of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world in Miami-Dade public high schools, we assessed students' knowledge and perceptions in this area. The main question explored in this research is, "What knowledge and perceptions do students in selected Miami Dade County high schools currently have about Islam and the Arab and Muslim world?" In order to answer this question, we considered the following sub-questions: (a) What are students' knowledge of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world? (b) What are students' perceptions of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world? (c) Is there a correlation between students' knowledge and perceptions? (d) What sources within the school and outside of school do students articulate as principal contributors to their knowledge of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world? (e) What recommendations, if any, do students have on how to change the pedagogical content in order to increase their knowledge of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world?

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study derives from Said's (1979) critical analysis of the "Other" as a predominant cultural and historical construct, as defined in his critically acclaimed book *Orientalism*. Viewing the prevalent use of "Other" within the context of power and authority, Said (1979) defines "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 5). Most importantly, Said rejects modern discourse that attempts to define the world post-9/11 using a similar paradigm. In a recent article, Said criticizes Huntington's (1993) "*Clash of Civilization's* thesis as better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time" (2001, p. 13).

Nevertheless, categorical representations of the world have been intertwined with human interactions throughout history. From the analytical accounts of "Others" in the New World to the politically charged "evil Others" of the Cold War and today, a division between those who fight against terrorism and those who stand by and watch, a bifurcated mechanism of defining human and cultural relationships has prevailed, "a world divided among people who live inside and outside history" (Willinsky, 1998, p. 251). This study evaluates these mechanisms in Miami-Dade County public high schools, in order to determine whether the current content and pedagogy employed confers a "critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time" (Said, 2001, p.13).

## Methods

This is a multiple-case study in which a mixed methods approach was used to examine students' knowledge and perceptions of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world at three public

high schools in Miami-Dade County. This study was conducted in eight ninth-grade World History classes, and one Advanced Placement (AP) World History class, which consisted of 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders. The classes were divided as follows: at two schools (High School #1 and High School #2), the study was conducted in two “general” World History classes, and one “honors” class; at the third school (High School #3), the study was conducted in one “general” class, one “honors” class, and one AP class.

These schools were chosen for the composition of their student populations. The majority of students at High School #1 are from a middle class background and most representative of the ethnic makeup of Miami, where over 55% of the population is of Hispanic background. The majority of students at High School #2 are from a lower-middle-class background. At this school, there are many children of migrant workers. At High School #3, the majority of students are from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds.

Data collection took place during a four-week period in May-June 2004. Each student was given the opportunity to fill out a survey consisting of twenty-seven perception-based questions and fifteen knowledge-based questions concerning Islam and the Arab and Muslim world. Knowledge scores were derived from the ten multiple-choice questions in this survey. Additionally, students were given the opportunity to participate in a focus-group interview where each group of 5-6 students was asked the same set of questions to further assess their knowledge and perceptions of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world. Furthermore, each individual teacher was interviewed with a specific set of questions in order to gauge his/ her thoughts about his/ her students’ knowledge and perceptions of Islam and the Arab and Muslim World. Finally, the World History textbooks used in each classroom were collected for analysis. All the “regular” classes used *World History: The Human Experience* (1997) by National Geographic; all the “honors” classes used *World History: The Human Odyssey* (1999), by Spielvogel and Jackson; the AP class used *The Heritage of World Civilizations* (2000), by Craig.

### **Key Questions**

In order to measure students’ perceptions of Islam and the Muslim world, we used the following six Likert-scale questions from the “Islam and Muslim World Survey”: (a) Islam is intolerant and opposes religious freedom (Intolerance); (b) Islam promotes tolerance and is accepting of peoples from different faiths (Tolerance); (c) Islam advocates violence (Violence); (d) Islam is a religion of peace (Peace); (e) Islam allows Muslim women to be oppressed by Muslim men (Oppression); and (f) Islam promotes gender equality and preaches that women are every bit as human as men (Equality).

These specific questions were taken from a survey sponsored by the Ethics & Public Policy Center, a non-partisan think tank, and Beliefnet. The survey was based on a national sample of leaders of Evangelical organizations, ranging from churches and missionary associations to relief agencies and political group, conducted in the fall of 2002, and supported by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

To analyze the students’ perceptions of Islam, we converted the aforementioned six Likert questions into individual and aggregate scores. In order to calculate an aggregate score, we inverted the scores of the “negative” perception questions (Violence, Intolerance, Oppression). Therefore, the higher the aggregate score, the more positive the perception.

To determine where students say they are getting their knowledge of Islam and the Muslim world, we asked students to rank the following sources of knowledge, from 1 (highest) to 6 (lowest): Media (TV, internet, radio, etc.); Teachers; School Materials (i.e., textbooks); My Friends; Family/At home; Muslims.

The knowledge score was based on the number of multiple-choice questions answered correctly. The ten multiple-choice questions from the Islam and Muslim World Survey were utilized in order to measure students' knowledge of Islam and the Arab and Muslim World. Specifically, seven of these questions were derived from the World History textbooks used in the classroom; the other three multiple-choice questions were obtained from readily available popular media sources. The questions from the student focus-group interviews and the individual teacher interviews were constructed in order to parallel the questions from the survey. This was done in order to elicit responses with greater depth and clarity, and to ensure reliability and internal validity. To look for significant correlations between perception and knowledge, and significance in students' source of knowledge, we used a variety of SPSS tests, including nonparametric tests, compare means tests, descriptive tests, and correlation tests.

### Results

Upon analyzing the data, four prominent themes emerge. First, overall, there is no correlation between students' knowledge and perceptions of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world. Even though we found a substantial difference in the students' knowledge scores among the three schools (Table 1), a Pearson correlation test of total student responses (N=211) revealed no correlation between overall knowledge and overall perceptions of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world ( $r(211) = .080, p > .05$ ).

Table 1  
*Number of Knowledge-Based Questions Answered Correctly Separated by School*

		High School #1	High School #2	High School #3
# of m/c items answered correctly	0			
		2	6	
	1	4	4	
	2	11	19	5
	3	19	16	8
	4	13	13	15
	5	7	8	21
	6	3	2	9
	7	1	1	9
	9	1		

When assessing correlations between students' knowledge and the individual questions used to examine students' perceptions, a Pearson correlation test ( $\rho$ ) demonstrated significance for positive correlations between knowledge and non-intolerance ( $\rho = .155, p = .025$ ), knowledge and non-violence ( $\rho = .265, p = .000$ ), and knowledge and peacefulness ( $\rho = .180, p = .010$ ); concurrently, a negative correlation between knowledge and equality ( $\rho = -.235, p = .001$ ) was found to be significant.

Our second result concerns the perceptions of the students about Islam and the Arab and Muslim world by their school class. In general, the students across all the classes – AP, Honors, and Regular – had fairly positive perceptions of Islam. Using Anova tests, we found the AP mean score for Intolerance to be significantly greater than both the Honors and the Regular class

mean scores for this variable ( $F=6.34$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.002$ ). This means that the students in the AP class disagreed, to a significant degree, with the statement that Islam is an intolerant religion. We also found a similar result for the AP class for the variable Violence; i.e. the AP class disagreed, to a significant degree, with the statement that Islam is a violent religion. ( $F=5.073$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.007$ ).

Using Chi-Square tests, we found that both the regular and honors classes were undecided on the variables of Intolerance and Violence, but both classes agreed with the statement that “Islam allows Muslim women to be oppressed by Muslim men.” The students in regular classes went so far as to disagree, to a significant extent, that “Islam promotes gender equality and preaches that women are every bit as human as men.”

Our third prominent result is that, in all three schools, students stated that they were getting most of their knowledge about Islam and the Muslim world from three sources: teachers, textbooks, and media. In High Schools #1 and #3, students ranked teachers as their most important source of knowledge; in High School #2, students ranked media as their most important source of knowledge. Using a Kruskal-Wallis test, we found that textbooks are a significant source of knowledge for students.

Mann-Whitney tests ranking sources of knowledge across schools show that there is a significant difference between AP classes (in High School #3) and Regular or Honors classes with respect to textbooks. For honors,  $U = 326.000$  and  $p < .05$ , and for regular classes,  $U = 689.500$  and  $p < .05$ . In other words, AP students’ reliance on textbooks explains the significance conferred to textbooks as detailed in the Kruskal-Wallis test. Furthermore, students in Honors and Regular classes designated teachers as their primary source of knowledge about Islam and the Arab and Muslim world. This is particularly interesting, given the fact that, overall, students in High School #3 ranked textbooks third, after teachers and media.

Contrary to where students said that they were getting their knowledge about Islam and the Muslim world, the majority of the teachers interviewed assumed that students were getting their information mostly from sources outside of school. Specifically, of eight teachers interviewed (the ninth teacher could not be contacted for an interview), half believed that their students were getting most of their information from media sources such as television and the news. One teacher in particular stated that her students were integrating their knowledge based on “prejudicial ideas that they already have”; only two of the educators interviewed specifically stated that teachers were a primary source of knowledge for students.

Our fourth prominent result is that students have specific recommendations on how to change the school curriculum and/or classroom practices with respect to expanding their knowledge and gaining a more comprehensive view of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world. Generally, students from each school suggested hands-on activities, cooperative group work, a focus on current events, lesson plans that employ different perspectives, in-class visits from Muslim individuals and community leaders, and more time devoted to the topic. The following represent some of the most revealing student responses upon being prompted to suggest changes in the curriculum: “Stuff that makes you think out of the box. Not just reading and books and answering questions.” “We should have more opportunities to learn more about history and current events.” “I would like to learn some positives and not always the negatives.” “You can’t judge a person without knowing them.” “We want to get their point of view.”

### **Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research**

From the several prominent themes indicated by the data, we can conclude that knowledge follows the arc of the class; specifically, the average of knowledge scores increases from the regular World History classes to the Honors World History classes, and increases from

the Honors World History classes to the AP World History class. Nevertheless, regardless of the class type, students lack significant knowledge concerning Islam and the Muslim world.

More interesting, with the exception of the AP class, students say that they are getting their information from their teachers over their textbooks when they are asked to rank the sources of their knowledge with respect to Islam and the Arab and Muslim world. This places the focus on teachers, whereas previous studies on Islam and the Arab and Muslim world in American schools have emphasized the textbooks (Sewall, 2003; Ravitch, 2003; Douglass and Dunn, 2003). Coupled with students' specific recommendations on how to improve the curriculum and/or classroom practices, the impetus falls on improving the pedagogical content at the teachers' disposal.

Further research must address students' perception of Islam and the Arab and Muslim world in a more comprehensive manner; for example, an extensive survey must be created in which several questions (as opposed to 2) are constructed for each variable, to increase reliability. We will also look further into the sources of media, to get a more nuanced perspective on where students say that they are getting their information about Islam and the Arab and Muslim world outside of school. Finally, we want to compare students' knowledge, using pre-9.11 and post 9.11 textbooks.

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