



Integrating Muslim Representation in Children's Literature for Special Education: A Critical Literacy Approach

*Sadia Warsi, National Louis University
Shabana Mir, American Islamic College*

Abstract

This article examines the intersection of Muslim representation in children's literature and special education through a critical literacy lens. Drawing on contemporary research in culturally responsive teaching, disability studies, and Islamic cultural studies, I explore how educators can create more inclusive learning environments that honor both religious identity and diverse learning needs. Through systematic analysis of current literature, teaching methodologies, and instructional case studies, this paper provides a comprehensive theoretical and practical framework for implementing critical literacy approaches that support Muslim students with disabilities while enriching the educational experience for all learners. The findings suggest that intentional integration of diverse literature, combined with critical literacy approaches, can significantly enhance educational outcomes for Muslim students with disabilities while fostering greater cultural understanding among all students. This article addresses a critical gap in educational research by connecting three traditionally separate domains: Islamic cultural representation, special education pedagogy, and critical literacy theory to create an integrated framework for inclusive practice that respects the multiplicity of student identities and learning needs while promoting educational equity and social justice.

Keywords: *Muslim representation; children's literature; special education; critical literacy; cultural responsiveness; inclusive pedagogy; intersectionality*

Introduction

American classrooms today look dramatically different than they did twenty years ago. Walk into any public school in a major metropolitan area and you'll encounter students speaking dozens of languages, practicing various faiths, and bringing rich cultural traditions from around the world. This transformation has been particularly pronounced in our growing Muslim student population, which now includes families from Somalia, Syria, Bangladesh, Morocco, and countless other nations, alongside American-born Muslim families whose roots stretch back generations (Zong & Batalova, 2017). Yet despite this beautiful diversity, something troubling persists in our educational materials. Muslim students, especially those with disabilities, rarely see themselves reflected

in the books that fill classroom libraries and guide reading instruction. When they do appear, Muslim characters often serve as cultural ambassadors rather than fully realized individuals with complex personalities, dreams, and challenges (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008).

This disconnect appears consistently in special education settings where diverse student populations navigate educational spaces that seem designed for someone else entirely. Their prayer times conflict with testing schedules. Their cultural communication styles get misinterpreted as behavioral problems. Their rich linguistic backgrounds become viewed as deficits rather than assets (García & Wei, 2022). The legendary scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) gave us the metaphor of books as "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors," arguing that all children need to see themselves reflected in literature while also gaining windows into other experiences. For Muslim students with disabilities, however, both mirrors and windows remain frustratingly scarce. They experience what might be called a "double invisibility" where neither their religious identity nor their disability status receives authentic representation in classroom literature (Connor et al., 2016).

This invisibility carries real consequences for both academic achievement and identity development (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). When students never see their experiences validated in the books they read, they begin to question their place in the broader narrative of childhood and learning. When teachers lack access to literature that authentically represents their students' experiences, they struggle to create meaningful connections between home and school cultures (Gay, 2018). But what if we could transform this landscape? What if children's literature became a powerful tool for building bridges rather than reinforcing barriers? This article explores how educators can integrate Muslim-themed children's literature into special education settings through a critical literacy approach that honors the full complexity of student identities.

This exploration begins by examining the unique experiences of Muslim students with disabilities, considering how cultural, religious, and disability identities intersect in often challenging ways. Then it explores how critical literacy frameworks can revolutionize the way we select and use Muslim-themed literature in special education contexts. Finally, it provides concrete guidance for choosing, evaluating, and implementing such literature while offering a framework for developing truly inclusive literacy practices.

The Intersection of Special Education and Muslim Student Experiences in Children's Literature

Muslim students with disabilities navigate complex intersections of identity that create unique challenges within educational systems (Crenshaw, 1991; Annamma et al., 2013). These challenges are rarely reflected in children's literature, creating significant gaps in representation for students managing both religious and disability identities. Research on intersectionality in special education demonstrates that students from marginalized communities face compounded discrimination when disability status intersects with other identity markers including race, ethnicity, language, and religion (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013; Connor et al., 2016). For Muslim students, this intersection manifests in multiple ways that children's literature could address but rarely does.

A student with autism may thrive on routine while simultaneously needing to accommodate prayer times and religious observances that disrupt typical schedules. A student with dyslexia from an immigrant family may excel in mathematical reasoning while struggling with English text, yet teachers may misinterpret brief prayer pauses as attention deficits rather than religious devotion. Research by Blanchett et al. (2009) demonstrates how cultural misunderstandings frequently lead to inappropriate special education referrals, particularly for students whose home cultures differ

from dominant school expectations. For Muslim students, these misunderstandings might involve interpreting religious practices as behavioral problems, viewing multilingualism as language delays, or misreading cultural communication styles as social deficits (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Ferri & Connor, 2006).

Religious observances often create the first layer of complexity that requires culturally sensitive understanding (Abu El-Haj, 2015). The five daily prayers, while flexible in timing, can coincide with crucial instructional moments or assessment periods. Ramadan brings changes in energy levels, eating schedules, and family routines that inevitably affect classroom participation. Eid celebrations might conflict with school calendars, creating difficult choices between religious observance and academic requirements. For students with disabilities, these religious practices can interact with their learning needs in unexpected ways that require nuanced understanding rather than deficit-based interpretations (Zehr, 2012).

Language adds another layer of complexity that children's literature could address more effectively through authentic multilingual representation (García & Wei, 2022). Many Muslim students grow up in multilingual households where Arabic phrases pepper everyday conversation, even when the family's primary language might be Urdu, Somali, or French. These linguistic riches can be misinterpreted as language delays or communication disorders when viewed through a monolingual lens (Artiles et al., 2010). Research demonstrates that cultural-linguistic diversity is often pathologized in special education contexts, leading to overrepresentation of multilingual students in disability categories (Skiba et al., 2008).

Cultural communication patterns present yet another area where misunderstanding frequently occurs and where authentic literature representation could support teacher understanding (Gay, 2018). In many Muslim cultures, children learn to show respect through downcast eyes and quiet voices, particularly when interacting with authority figures. Teachers unfamiliar with these cultural norms might interpret such behavior as withdrawal, depression, or defiance rather than respect (Zehr, 2012). Similarly, the communal nature of many Muslim cultures might influence how children approach individual versus group work, how they seek help, and how they express disagreement or confusion.

The research of Harry and Klingner (2014) has powerfully demonstrated how cultural misunderstandings can lead to inappropriate special education referrals and placements. Building on work by Artiles et al. (2010) on the cultural construction of learning disabilities, we see that for Muslim students, these misunderstandings might involve interpreting religious practices as behavioral problems, viewing multilingualism as language delays, or misreading cultural communication styles as social deficits. The intersection of Muslim identity and disability status receives virtually no attention in children's literature, creating what Annamma et al. (2013) term "multiply marginalized" student experiences that remain invisible in educational materials.

Perhaps most significantly, this representational gap has real consequences for educational practice that aligns with research on culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). Teachers lack models for understanding how Islamic values around community, perseverance, and divine will might influence how Muslim families understand and respond to disability. They miss opportunities to connect with Islamic concepts of diversity as divine blessing or to understand how religious practices might support students with different learning needs.

Critical Literacy: A Framework for Integrating Muslim Representation in Special Education Literature

Critical literacy provides a transformative framework for addressing representational gaps while simultaneously supporting the academic and social development of students with disabilities (Freire, 1970; Luke & Freebody, 1999). When students encounter critical literacy concepts, the approach reveals how texts shape understanding of ourselves and others, how they reflect and construct power relationships, and how they can either reinforce existing inequalities or challenge them. Paulo Freire's (1970) groundbreaking work on critical pedagogy laid the foundation for this approach, arguing that education should never be neutral but should actively work toward justice and liberation. When we apply this lens to children's literature in special education settings, particularly literature featuring Muslim characters and themes, we unlock tremendous potential for transformation while supporting evidence-based special education practices.

Connecting Critical Literacy to Special Education Evidence-Based Practices

Critical literacy approaches align powerfully with established special education principles while offering unique benefits for students with disabilities (Souto-Manning, 2010; Rogers et al., 2016). The multimodal nature of critical literacy supports Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles by providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (CAST, 2018). Students with reading difficulties can access texts through audiobooks while still participating fully in critical discussions about representation and power. Students with intellectual disabilities can use visual supports to analyze character portrayal and identify patterns of inclusion or exclusion. Students with autism might excel at detecting inconsistencies or gaps in cultural representation that others miss, turning their detail-oriented thinking into an analytical strength.

Research demonstrates that critical literacy approaches enhance engagement and comprehension for students with disabilities by positioning them as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of predetermined messages (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). This positioning proves particularly powerful for Muslim students with disabilities, who often experience marginalization in multiple contexts. Rather than viewing these students through deficit lenses, critical literacy invites them to become analytical thinkers capable of challenging dominant narratives and creating new ones that better reflect their experiences and perspectives.

The evidence base for critical literacy in special education contexts continues to grow, with studies showing improved reading comprehension, increased engagement, and enhanced critical thinking skills when students analyze texts for bias, representation, and perspective (Beach et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2016). These outcomes align with individualized education program (IEP) goals around reading comprehension, social skills development, and communication enhancement while providing meaningful content that validates student identities.

Critical literacy asks fundamentally different questions than traditional literacy instruction while supporting skill development across multiple domains. Instead of simply asking "What happened in this story?" we might ask "Whose perspective is centered in this narrative?" Rather than focusing solely on character motivation, we explore "What assumptions does this text make about its readers?" Instead of accepting representations at face value, we investigate "How might this story be different if told by someone else?" For Muslim students with disabilities, these critical questions become particularly powerful because they shift the focus from what these students might be lacking to what perspectives and insights they bring to their reading (Muhammad, 2020).

Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model in Special Education

Luke and Freebody's (1999) four resources model provides a practical framework for implementing critical literacy with Muslim-themed literature in special education settings that aligns with evidence-based reading instruction. This model identifies four roles that effective readers assume: code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst. Each role can be systematically supported through special education accommodations and modifications while maintaining high expectations for critical engagement.

As code breakers, students work to understand the basic mechanics of texts, including unfamiliar vocabulary, sentence structures, and visual elements. When reading Muslim-themed literature, this might involve learning Islamic terminology, understanding Arabic phrases, or recognizing cultural symbols and practices. For students with disabilities, this code-breaking work can be extensively supported through visual aids, word banks, picture communication symbols, or assistive technology while maintaining high expectations for critical engagement. Research demonstrates that explicit vocabulary instruction combined with cultural context enhances comprehension for all students, particularly those with language-based learning disabilities (Beck et al., 2013).

As text participants, students make meaning by connecting texts to their personal experiences, emotions, and prior knowledge. Muslim students might connect deeply with characters navigating similar cultural experiences, while students from other backgrounds develop empathy and understanding. Students with disabilities often bring unique perspectives to this meaning-making process, drawing connections that others might miss (Connor et al., 2016). The personal connection aspect of text participation proves particularly beneficial for students with autism, who may struggle with abstract concepts but excel when connecting literature to their own experiences and interests.

The text user role involves understanding how texts function in social contexts, recognizing their purposes and intended audiences. When analyzing Muslim-themed literature, students explore questions like: Who is this book written for? How might Muslim readers respond differently than non-Muslim readers? What social purposes might this text serve in different communities? This analytical work supports social skills development goals commonly found in IEPs while engaging students in meaningful cultural analysis.

Finally, as text analysts, students examine how texts position readers and construct particular views of the world. This critical stance becomes particularly important when analyzing how Muslim characters and communities are represented. Students might investigate whose voices are privileged, what perspectives are marginalized, and how these representational choices affect readers' understanding of Muslim experiences. For students with disabilities, each of these roles can be supported through appropriate accommodations while maintaining rigorous expectations for critical thinking.

Selecting and Evaluating Muslim-Themed Children's Literature for Special Education

Walking into the children's section of most bookstores or libraries, you'll find thousands of books lining the shelves. Yet finding high-quality literature that authentically represents Muslim experiences while also being accessible to students with disabilities requires systematic evaluation that considers multiple factors simultaneously. Cultural sensitivity, defined by Sue and Sue (2019) as "the ability to be aware of, understand, and interact effectively with people from cultures or belief

systems different from one's own," becomes crucial in this selection process, particularly when combined with accessibility considerations for students with disabilities.

Authenticity and Cultural Sensitivity

Authenticity stands as the cornerstone of effective selection, requiring evaluation beyond surface-level accuracy to encompass deeper questions of whether Muslim characters are portrayed as fully realized human beings rather than cultural ambassadors or educational tools (Bishop, 1990; Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008). Books written by Muslim authors often provide the most authentic representations, drawing from lived experience and cultural understanding that non-Muslim authors might struggle to achieve. However, cultural sensitivity extends beyond authorship to encompass respectful portrayal that acknowledges the diversity within Muslim communities while avoiding essentialist representations (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Research on multicultural literature evaluation emphasizes the importance of #OwnVoices narratives—stories written by authors who share the same marginalized identity as their characters (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2020). For Muslim-themed literature, this means prioritizing books written by Muslim authors who can draw from authentic cultural knowledge and lived experience. However, non-Muslim authors who demonstrate substantial cultural competence through extensive research and community consultation can also produce valuable literature when they approach the task with humility and respect.

Cultural sensitivity requires understanding that Islam is practiced by over 1.8 billion people across every continent, representing countless ethnicities, languages, and cultural traditions (Esposito, 2016). Effective literature acknowledges this diversity rather than presenting monolithic representations of Muslim identity. Books should represent the breadth of Muslim experiences, including different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic levels, family structures, and levels of religious observance.

Literary Quality and Accessibility

Literary quality cannot be sacrificed for cultural representation, requiring attention to strong narrative structure, well-developed characters, and engaging storytelling that creates the foundation for meaningful reader engagement (Bishop, 1990). Age-appropriate content ensures accessibility while challenging students to grow in their understanding and critical thinking skills. However, special education contexts require additional considerations that extend beyond traditional literary evaluation.

Physical aspects of books including font size, line spacing, page layout, and binding can significantly impact accessibility for students with visual processing challenges, fine motor difficulties, or sensory sensitivities (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Digital formats offer expanded accessibility options through features like adjustable text size, background color modification, text-to-speech compatibility, and interactive elements that support comprehension. For students with dyslexia, books available in formats compatible with reading software can provide crucial support without compromising content quality.

Linguistic accessibility deserves particular attention when selecting Muslim-themed literature for diverse learners. Sentence complexity, vocabulary demands, and text organization all affect comprehension for students with language-based learning disabilities or those developing

English proficiency (August & Shanahan, 2006). However, this doesn't mean selecting only simple texts, but rather ensuring that challenging content is appropriately supported through visual aids, glossaries, or digital enhancements.

Evaluation Framework Application

To demonstrate how these evaluation criteria work in practice, consider the application to specific texts. "The Proudest Blue" by Muhammad and Ali (2019) exemplifies authentic representation through Muslim co-authorship and culturally specific details that ring true to community members. The book's focus on hijab represents one form of religious expression without suggesting universality, acknowledging diversity within Muslim practice. The narrative structure supports emerging readers while addressing complex themes of identity and belonging. Visual elements accurately represent contemporary Muslim family life while the emotional themes resonate across cultural boundaries.

In contrast, books that present Islam primarily as exotic difference or focus exclusively on explaining religious practices to outsider audiences often fail authenticity tests despite surface-level accuracy. These texts position Muslim readers as cultural ambassadors rather than complex individuals navigating universal childhood experiences. The evaluation framework helps educators distinguish between authentic representation that honors Muslim experiences and tokenistic inclusion that merely checks diversity boxes.

Similarly, "Planet Omar" by Mian (2019) demonstrates effective integration of Islamic elements within universal themes of belonging and adjustment. The protagonist's Muslim identity appears naturally throughout the narrative without dominating the story, allowing readers to connect with Omar's experiences of starting a new school while learning about Islamic cultural elements. The book's accessibility features, including clear illustrations and straightforward language, support students with various learning needs while maintaining literary quality.

Building Comprehensive Collections

Building effective collections requires systematic attention to thematic diversity within Muslim representation, ensuring that collections include books portraying Muslims experiencing joy, achievement, creativity, and everyday adventures alongside stories that address social challenges (Bishop, 1990). This thematic balance ensures that Muslim students encounter positive reflections of their identities while all students develop nuanced understanding of Muslim experiences.

The selection process should also consider how individual titles work together to create comprehensive representation. A single book cannot represent the full diversity of Muslim experiences, but a carefully curated collection can offer multiple perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and narrative approaches that collectively provide rich representation. This systematic approach requires ongoing evaluation and expansion as new titles become available and as student populations evolve.

Implementing Muslim-Themed Children's Literature with Critical Literacy Approaches in Special Education

Effective implementation of Muslim-themed literature through critical literacy approaches requires thoughtful pedagogical planning that addresses the diverse learning needs of students in special education settings while maintaining focus on critical analysis of representation and power (Souto-Manning, 2010; Beach et al., 2016). This integration creates opportunities for authentic learning that validates student identities while developing analytical skills essential for democratic participation.

Strategic Implementation Framework

Strategic text selection and sequencing create the foundation for meaningful engagement that builds both cultural knowledge and critical literacy skills (Muhammad, 2020). Beginning with books that introduce basic concepts about Islamic culture and practices before progressing to more complex narratives exploring identity, social justice, or challenging experiences proves effective for students with disabilities who benefit from scaffolded instruction and gradual release of responsibility (Gradual Release of Responsibility model; Fisher & Frey, 2013).

This scaffolded approach aligns with evidence-based special education practices while supporting critical literacy development. Teachers might begin with "Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns" by Khan (2012), which introduces Islamic cultural elements through accessible color descriptions and beautiful illustrations. Students with various learning needs can engage with the book's repetitive structure and visual supports while developing familiarity with Islamic terminology and concepts. The predictable format particularly supports students with autism who often thrive on routine and pattern recognition.

From this foundation, teachers might progress to "Lailah's Lunchbox" by Faruqi (2016), which explores a Muslim girl's experience observing Ramadan at school. The personal narrative format allows students to make connections between their own experiences of feeling different and Lailah's navigation of religious practices in a school setting. For students with social communication challenges, this book provides concrete examples of how to navigate cultural differences while maintaining personal identity.

Critical Questioning Strategies

Explicit instruction in critical questioning strategies helps students develop independent analytical skills they can apply across diverse texts while supporting language development goals commonly found in IEPs (Janks, 2010; Rogers et al., 2016). For students with disabilities, these questioning strategies benefit from visual supports, sentence starters, and guided practice that scaffold critical thinking while maintaining high expectations.

Effective critical questions might include: "Whose story is being told here, and whose perspectives might be missing?" "How does this author want us to feel about this character, and what techniques create those feelings?" "What assumptions does this text make about its readers' backgrounds and beliefs?" "How might this story be different if told by someone else?" These questions can be adapted for different learning needs and developmental levels while maintaining analytical rigor.

Students with intellectual disabilities might focus on concrete elements of representation, identifying how characters look, act, and interact with others. Visual support charts can help these students organize their observations while developing analytical thinking skills. Students with autism might excel at detecting patterns in how Muslim characters are portrayed across multiple texts, turning their preference for systematic analysis into an academic strength. Students with language processing challenges might benefit from visual supports that help them organize their critical observations before expressing them verbally or in writing.

Collaborative Learning Formats

Literature circles provide powerful formats for collaborative critical analysis that can be adapted to support diverse learning needs while fostering peer interaction and communication skills (Daniels, 2002; Beach et al., 2016). Different students might take on various roles analyzing cultural representation, examining character development, or investigating author assumptions. Role assignments can be differentiated to match student strengths while ensuring meaningful participation in critical discussions.

For instance, in a literature circle discussing "Planet Omar" by Mian (2019), one student might serve as the cultural connector, identifying Islamic elements and their significance with support from visual aids or cultural reference materials. Another might focus on character development, tracking how Omar changes throughout the story using graphic organizers that support executive functioning needs. A third might analyze the school setting, considering how the environment supports or challenges Omar's adjustment.

Students with communication challenges might contribute through alternative formats like drawings, digital presentations, or collaborative writing tools. Assistive technology can provide voice output for students with speech difficulties, while visual communication systems support those with significant language impairments. The key lies in maintaining rigorous expectations for critical thinking while providing multiple ways for students to express their insights.

Technology Integration

Technology integration expands possibilities for engagement and expression in meaningful ways that align with assistive technology goals in special education (Rose & Meyer, 2002; CAST, 2018). Digital storytelling tools enable students to create their own narratives exploring Muslim experiences or responding to the literature they've read. These creative projects position students as cultural producers rather than passive consumers while supporting communication and literacy goals.

Multimedia presentations can showcase student analysis of representation patterns across multiple texts, allowing students with diverse learning needs to demonstrate their understanding through various modalities. For students with significant communication challenges, assistive technology can provide crucial access to both consuming and creating literature-based content. Text-to-speech software, communication devices, and adaptive keyboards ensure that disability status doesn't limit participation in critical literacy activities.

Assessment and Documentation

Assessment of critical literacy development requires creative approaches that accommodate diverse learning styles and communication methods while documenting growth in analytical thinking (Beach et al., 2016). Traditional written responses might not capture the full range of student understanding, particularly for students with disabilities who might excel at verbal analysis, visual representation, or hands-on demonstration of their insights.

Portfolio assessments can document growth in critical thinking through diverse artifacts including written responses, artistic interpretations, multimedia presentations, and collaborative projects. These portfolios should capture not only what students understand about specific texts but how their critical literacy skills develop over time across multiple reading experiences. This approach aligns with IEP goals around communication, social skills, and academic achievement while honoring diverse learning styles.

The most meaningful assessment occurs through ongoing observation and documentation of student participation in critical discussions, collaborative activities, and creative responses to literature. This formative assessment approach provides ongoing feedback that informs instructional decisions while honoring the diverse ways students demonstrate their learning.

Resources and Notable Books: Applying Bishop's Framework in Practice

Bishop's (1990) framework of "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" provides invaluable guidance for implementing Muslim-themed literature in special education settings. This framework conceptualizes literature as serving three essential functions: mirrors that reflect readers' own experiences and identities, windows that provide insights into others' experiences, and sliding glass doors that invite readers to step into new worlds and perspectives. However, applying this framework effectively requires understanding how different books function for different students and how pedagogical approaches can maximize their impact while supporting diverse learning needs.

Understanding Bishop's Framework

Rudine Sims Bishop's seminal work emerged from her analysis of African American representation in children's literature, but the framework has proven applicable across diverse cultural contexts (Bishop, 1990). Mirrors help children see themselves and their experiences reflected in literature, supporting identity development and validating their place in the literary world. Windows allow children to see beyond their immediate experiences, developing empathy and understanding for others. Sliding glass doors invite children to enter new worlds, transforming their perspectives and expanding their sense of possibility.

For Muslim students with disabilities, this framework becomes particularly significant because they rarely encounter literature that serves any of these functions authentically. They need mirrors that reflect both their religious identity and their disability experiences, windows into how others navigate similar intersections, and sliding glass doors that invite them into worlds where their complex identities are valued and celebrated.

Mirrors: Reflecting Muslim Students' Experiences

Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns by Khan (2012)

For Muslim students with visual processing challenges or intellectual disabilities, this book offers clear, concrete representations of Islamic cultural elements through an accessible color-based structure. The repetitive format "Something blue, something gold" provides predictable patterns that support students with autism while introducing Islamic cultural concepts. Teachers can enhance its mirror function by creating tactile versions using fabric swatches that correspond to different colors mentioned in the text, supporting students with visual impairments or those who benefit from multisensory learning.

Students with motor planning challenges might benefit from adaptive activities where they sort classroom objects by colors mentioned in the book, connecting each color to its Islamic significance. For students using communication devices, picture symbols can be paired with each color concept, ensuring access for non-verbal learners or those with significant language impairments. The book's structure particularly supports students who benefit from repetition and visual organization while building cultural vocabulary.

Amina's Voice by Khan (2017)

For older Muslim students with learning disabilities who may struggle with complex text, this novel provides powerful mirrors reflecting experiences of identity development, family expectations, and finding one's place in diverse communities. The protagonist's navigation of Pakistani-American Muslim identity while dealing with friendship challenges and mosque vandalism offers authentic representation of contemporary Muslim adolescent experiences.

Teachers can support comprehension by breaking the narrative into manageable chapters with graphic organizers that track character development and plot progression. Students with social cognition challenges might benefit from character relationship maps that visually represent the complex social dynamics portrayed in the book. These visual supports help students track interactions and understand motivations that might otherwise remain unclear.

Windows: Providing Insights into Diverse Experiences

Four Feet, Two Sandals by Williams and Mohammed (2006)

This powerful story of friendship between two refugee girls provides windows into refugee experiences while highlighting resilience and human connection. For students without refugee backgrounds, the book offers insights into displacement and adaptation. For non-Muslim students, it provides perspectives on Islamic faith within challenging circumstances without exoticizing or othering the characters' experiences.

Teachers can support comprehension for students with autism by using visual supports that help them understand the emotional components of leaving one's home. Abstract concepts like displacement and loss become more accessible through concrete visual references and graphic organizers that sequence the journey described in the text. Role-play activities with modified scripts accommodate students with language processing difficulties while allowing them to physically experience and internalize the emotions and experiences described in the story.

The Librarian of Basra by Winter (2005)

This true story of courage and cultural preservation provides windows into experiences of protecting knowledge and heritage during conflict. The narrative focuses on intellectual courage rather than victimhood, offering important perspectives on Muslim communities during wartime while emphasizing universal values of education and cultural preservation.

Teachers can create simplified versions with pictorial supports for students with more significant cognitive disabilities, ensuring that the core message of cultural preservation remains accessible despite text complexity. Hands-on activities about preserving important items make abstract concepts of cultural heritage tangible and meaningful for concrete learners. Video supplements about libraries around the world enrich understanding for students who benefit from multimedia approaches.

Sliding Glass Doors: Inviting Entry into New Worlds***The Proudest Blue by Muhammad and Ali (2019)***

This picture book invites all readers into the experience of wearing hijab for the first time, creating sliding glass doors that help non-Muslim readers understand this important Islamic practice while providing mirrors for Muslim girls who wear or will wear hijab. The book's focus on sisterhood and family support creates universal themes that all children can connect with while learning about Islamic traditions.

For students with social communication challenges, the book provides concrete examples of how to respond to teasing or questions about cultural differences. Social scripts based on the book's dialogue can support students in developing appropriate responses to similar situations they might encounter. The book's positive portrayal of difference supports self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities who also experience othering or exclusion.

Planet Omar series by Mian (2019)

This series invites readers into Omar's world as he navigates starting a new school in a new country, providing sliding glass doors into immigrant and Muslim experiences while addressing universal themes of belonging and friendship. The protagonist's creativity and resilience offer positive role models for all students, particularly those who feel different or excluded.

The series' focus on making friends despite differences provides valuable social learning opportunities for students with autism or social communication challenges. Teachers might use Omar's strategies for connection as models for developing social skills, creating visual supports that help students apply similar approaches in their own social situations.

Implementation Considerations

Successful application of Bishop's framework requires understanding that the same book might serve different functions for different students. "The Proudest Blue" serves as a mirror for Muslim girls while functioning as a window or sliding glass door for non-Muslim students. Teachers must be intentional about helping students identify how texts function for them personally while also exploring how the same text might affect others differently.

This awareness becomes particularly important in diverse special education classrooms where students bring varied cultural backgrounds and learning needs. Discussions about how books serve different functions for different readers support perspective-taking skills while validating diverse responses to literature. Students learn that their personal connections to texts are valid while they also develop empathy for how others might experience the same stories differently.

Professional development support helps teachers implement Bishop's framework effectively while accommodating diverse learning needs. Teachers need cultural knowledge about Islamic traditions and practices to facilitate meaningful discussions about representation and authenticity. They also need pedagogical skills for adapting critical literacy approaches to support students with various disabilities while maintaining high expectations for analytical thinking.

Professional Development and Community Engagement

Effective implementation of Muslim-themed literature through critical literacy approaches requires comprehensive professional development that addresses both cultural competence and special education pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Harry & Klingner, 2014). Teachers need opportunities to examine their own cultural assumptions while developing practical skills for facilitating critical discussions about representation and power in literature.

Cultural Competence Development

Professional development must begin with cultural self-awareness, helping educators examine their own beliefs, assumptions, and potential biases regarding Muslim communities and disability (Sue & Sue, 2019). This examination proves particularly crucial given research demonstrating how unconscious bias affects special education referrals and placement decisions for students from marginalized communities (Skiba et al., 2008; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013).

Cultural competence extends beyond superficial knowledge of Islamic practices to encompass deeper understanding of how religion intersects with family life, educational values, and responses to disability (Zehr, 2012). Teachers need opportunities to learn about Islamic perspectives on diversity, community support, and perseverance that might influence how Muslim families understand and respond to their children's educational needs.

Collaboration with Muslim community organizations provides authentic learning opportunities while building sustainable partnerships that benefit students and families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Guest speakers from local mosques, Islamic cultural centers, or Muslim professional organizations can share insights about contemporary Muslim experiences while helping educators develop more nuanced understanding of community diversity.

Pedagogical Skill Development

Beyond cultural knowledge, teachers need explicit instruction in adapting critical literacy approaches for students with disabilities while maintaining rigorous academic expectations (Beach et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2016). This pedagogical support includes learning to scaffold critical questioning, facilitate inclusive discussions, and assess analytical thinking through diverse modalities that accommodate various learning needs.

Coaching and mentoring programs provide ongoing support as teachers implement new approaches in their classrooms (Knight, 2007). Experienced practitioners can model effective techniques while providing feedback and problem-solving support as teachers navigate challenges. This sustained support proves essential for deep implementation rather than superficial adoption of new practices.

Learning communities focused on inclusive literacy practices create opportunities for collaborative reflection and shared problem-solving (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Teachers benefit from sharing successes and challenges while collectively developing solutions that honor both cultural authenticity and special education best practices.

Family and Community Partnerships

Muslim families bring valuable insights about their children's cultural and religious needs while often possessing deep knowledge about effective support strategies (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2014). However, engaging these families requires cultural sensitivity and recognition that past experiences with schools might influence their comfort level with educational partnerships.

Family engagement approaches must account for diverse comfort levels with various texts or topics while respecting religious and cultural preferences (Zehr, 2012). Some families might prefer books that focus on universal themes rather than explicit religious content, while others might seek out literature that strongly affirms Islamic identity. Respectful dialogue and flexible approaches honor these diverse preferences while maintaining educational goals.

Community cultural wealth perspectives recognize that Muslim families and communities possess valuable knowledge and resources that can enhance educational programming (Yosso, 2005). Rather than positioning families as recipients of school expertise, effective partnerships recognize parents as educational collaborators who contribute essential cultural knowledge and advocacy skills.

Conclusion

This exploration of integrating Muslim representation in children's literature for special education through critical literacy approaches reveals both the urgent need for such work and its transformative potential. As our analysis demonstrates, Muslim students with disabilities face "double invisibility" in educational materials. Muslim students rarely see authentic representations of their intersectional identities in classroom literature. The absence of representation has real consequences for academic achievement, identity development, and a sense of belonging in educational communities.

The framework presented here offers a systematic approach that addresses representational gaps while supporting evidence-based special education practices. By combining authentic Muslim-themed literature with critical literacy approaches adapted for diverse learners, educators can validate student identities in inclusive learning environments while developing essential analytical skills. The evaluation criteria and implementation strategies included in this approach provide practical guidance for selecting and using literature effectively while the professional development recommendations ensure sustainable change.

In this approach, critical literacy is particularly powerful for students with disabilities because it positions them as analytical thinkers rather than passive recipients of predetermined messages. When students examine how Muslims and people with disabilities are represented in literature, they develop critical consciousness while building skills transferable across academic domains. This approach aligns with special education principles of strength-based instruction while fostering the critical thinking essential for democratic participation.

The implications extend far beyond Muslim students with disabilities to encompass broader questions of educational equity and inclusion. The integrated framework demonstrates how attention to intersectional identities can enhance educational programming for all students while challenging systems that perpetuate marginalization. As demographic shifts continue reshaping American classrooms, approaches that honor complex identities while supporting diverse learning needs become increasingly essential.

Several areas demand our continued attention. We need children's literature that authentically portrays Muslim characters with disabilities, representing the full spectrum of learning differences and physical abilities. Current gaps in representation limit educators' ability to provide meaningful mirrors for students navigating these intersectional identities. Publishers and authors are responsible for expanding representation and maintaining high standards for literary quality and cultural authenticity.

Educators need more professional development opportunities than are currently afforded them to develop both cultural competence regarding Muslim communities and expertise in inclusive special education practices. Since teacher preparation programs rarely address these intersections systematically, educators are often unprepared to serve increasingly diverse student populations effectively. Universities, professional organizations, and school districts must collaborate to create comprehensive preparation programs that address the needs of students and teachers.

Research investigating how these approaches affect student outcomes, family engagement, and school climate remains limited but is badly needed for demonstrating impact to stakeholders who influence educational policy and resource allocation. While the theoretical framework is strong, ongoing investigation will help refine practices and build the evidence base necessary for widespread adoption. Studies examining academic achievement, social-emotional development, and identity formation among students experiencing these interventions would provide valuable insights for continued refinement.

The challenges are real and significant. Limited representation in current literature, insufficient professional development resources, and systemic barriers to inclusive education all impede progress. However, growing recognition of these problems and increasing commitment to educational equity provide reason for optimism. Individual educators can begin implementing these approaches immediately, starting with careful selection of available literature and thoughtful application of critical literacy principles.

School districts can support these efforts through resource allocation, inclusion-focused policy development, and systematic professional development programming. Publishers must recognize their responsibility for expanding authentic representation while authors from Muslim communities should receive support and resources. At the same time, professional organizations must advocate inclusive practices and providing support during implementation.

The work of creating truly inclusive educational environments requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders. It demands ongoing reflection, collaboration, and willingness to challenge existing practices that may inadvertently marginalize certain students or communities. Yet the potential rewards are immense. When we succeed in creating educational spaces that honor the

full complexity of human experience, we prepare students for meaningful participation in our diverse democracy while fostering understanding and empathy that extend far beyond classroom walls.

This article represents one contribution to an ongoing conversation about educational equity and inclusion. The framework proposed here should be viewed not as a final solution but as a starting point for continued development and refinement. Our approaches must remain dynamic and responsive to emerging needs and insights.

The children in our classrooms today inherit complex challenges that require collaborative solutions. By providing them with educational experiences that honor diversity, develop critical thinking skills, and foster empathy for others, we prepare them to be thoughtful leaders and engaged citizens. The Muslim students with disabilities who inspired this work deserve educational experiences that affirm their identities, challenge their thinking, and prepare them for futures full of possibility.

Through collective efforts to implement the approaches outlined here, we can ensure that all students including Muslim students with disabilities receive the inclusive, empowering education they deserve. The work continues, and the stakes are high. But with sustained commitment to justice, equity, and inclusion, we can transform educational practice in ways that honor the beautiful complexity of human experience as well as prepare all students for meaningful participation in our shared future.

References

- Abu El-Haj, T. R. (2015). *Unsettled belonging: Educating Palestinian American youth after 9/11*. University of Chicago Press.
- Al-Hazza, T. C., & Bucher, K. T. (2008). Building Arab Americans' cultural identity and acceptance with children's literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(3), 210-219.
- Annamma, S. A., Connor, D., & Ferri, B. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 16(1), 1-31.
- Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., Trent, S. C., Osher, D., & Ortiz, A. (2010). Justifying and explaining disproportionality, 1968–2008: A critique of underlying views of culture. *Exceptional Children*, 76(3), 279-299.
- August, D., & Shanahan, T. (Eds.). (2006). *Developing literacy in second-language learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Beach, R., Appleman, D., Fecho, B., & Simon, R. (2016). *Teaching literature to adolescents* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2013). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Best, C. (2015). *My three best friends and me, Zulay*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors: Choosing and using books for the classroom. *Perspectives*, 6(3), ix-xi.
- Blanchett, W. J., Mumford, V., & Beachum, F. (2005). Urban school failure and disproportionality in a post-Brown era: Benevolent racism and the slow death of the African American community. *Educational Foundations*, 19(1-2), 33-49.
- CAST. (2018). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2*. <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>

- Connor, D. J., Gabel, S. L., Gallagher, D. J., & Morton, M. (2008). Disability studies and inclusive education—implications for theory, research, and practice. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 12(5-6), 441-457.
- Connor, D. J., Ferri, B. A., & Annamma, S. A. (Eds.). (2016). *DisCrit: Disability studies and critical race theory in education*. Teachers College Press.
- Cooperative Children's Book Center. (2020). *Publishing statistics on children's books about people of color and First/Native Nations and by people of color and First/Native Nations authors and illustrators*. University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
- Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Stenhouse Publishers.
- DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. National Educational Service.
- Esposito, J. L. (2016). *Islam: The straight path* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Faruqi, R. (2016). *Lailah's lunchbox*. Tilbury House Publishers.
- Faruqi, S. (2021). *Yusuf Azeem is not a hero*. HarperCollins.
- Ferri, B. A., & Connor, D. J. (2006). *Reading resistance: Discourses of exclusion in desegregation and inclusion debates*. Peter Lang.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2013). *Better learning through structured teaching: A framework for the gradual release of responsibility* (2nd ed.). ASCD.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2022). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Harry, B., & Klingner, J. (2014). *Why are so many minority students in special education? Understanding race and disability in schools* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and power*. Routledge.
- Kamkwamba, W. (2012). *The boy who harnessed the wind* (Young readers edition). Dial Books.
- Khan, H. (2017). *Amina's voice*. Salaam Reads / Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.
- Khan, H. (2012). *Golden domes and silver lanterns*. Chronicle Books.
- Khalil, A. (2020). *The Arabic quilt: An immigrant story*. Tilbury House Publishers.
- Knight, J. (2007). *Instructional coaching: A partnership approach to improving instruction*. Corwin Press.
- Luke, A. (2012). Critical literacy: Foundational notes. *Theory Into Practice*, 51(1), 4-11.
- Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1999). Further notes on the four resources model. *Reading Online*, 3.
- Mian, Z. (2019). *Planet Omar: Accidental trouble magnet*. Hodder Children's Books.
- Muhammad, G. E. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic.
- Muhammad, I., & Ali, S. K. (2019). *The proudest blue: A story of hijab and family*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (Eds.). (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.
- Patel, M. (2021). *Priya dreams of marigolds & masala*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Rogers, R., Mosley, M., & Kramer, M. A. (2009). Designing socially just learning communities: Critical literacy education across the lifespan. Routledge.
- Rogers, R., Wetzell, M. M., & O'Daniels, K. M. (2016). Learning to teach, untaught literacies: A study of critical literacy in adult education. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 48(3), 310-339.
- Rose, D. H., & Meyer, A. (2002). *Teaching every student in the digital age: Universal Design for Learning*. ASCD.
- Sensoy, Ö., & DiAngelo, R. (2017). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Skiba, R. J., Simmons, A. B., Ritter, S., Gibb, A. C., Rausch, M. K., Cuadrado, J., & Chung, C. G. (2008). Achieving equity in special education: History, status, and current challenges. *Exceptional Children*, 74(3), 264-288.
- Sotomayor, S. (2019). *Just ask! Be different, be brave, be you*. Philomel Books.
- Souto-Manning, M. (2010). *Freire, teaching, and learning: Culture circles across contexts*. Peter Lang.
- Sue, D. W., & Sue, D. (2019). *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice* (8th ed.). Wiley.
- Ventura, M. (2017). *Kunkush: The true story of a refugee cat*. Harper.
- Waitoller, F. R., & Artiles, A. J. (2013). A decade of professional development research for inclusive education: A critical review and notes for a research program. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 319-356.
- Williams, K. L., & Mohammed, K. (2006). *Four feet, two sandals*. Eerdmans Books for Young Readers.
- Winter, J. (2005). *The librarian of Basra: A true story from Iraq*. Harcourt Children's Books.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.
- Zehr, M. A. (2012). Muslim students navigate tension between faith and school. *Education Week*, 31(32), 1-15.
- Zong, J., & Batalova, J. (2017). *The limited English proficient population in the United States in 2013*. Migration Policy Institute.

Dr. Sadia Warsi is an Associate Professor in the Special Education Program at National Louis University, Chicago, Illinois. She teaches graduate classes in Special Education. Dr. Warsi's research focuses on the special education needs of immigrant and refugee children in the public-school system. She is the author of the book titled *Beyond Labels: Understanding Refugee Students with Disabilities in Educational Contexts*, published by Myers Education Press (2025).

Shabana Mir is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the American Islamic College. She teaches Islamic Studies, Gender Studies, Research Methods, Anthropology, Social Sciences, and Muslim American and Muslim World Literature. She is the author of the book *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity*, published by the University of North Carolina Press (2014).

APPENDIX

Checklist for Evaluating Muslim-Themed Children's Literature in Special Education

Authorship and Creation

- ☐ Author is Muslim or demonstrates substantial knowledge of Islamic traditions
- ☐ Illustrator shows cultural knowledge in visual representations
- ☐ Recent publication date (preferably within last 5-10 years)
- ☐ Publisher has established track record with culturally diverse books

Muslim Character Representation

- ☐ Characters are fully developed with complex personalities
- ☐ Characters demonstrate agency in their narratives
- ☐ Multiple Muslim characters represent diversity within Islamic communities
- ☐ Contemporary settings and modern Muslim life included
- ☐ Characters display full range of emotions and experiences
- ☐ Different ages, genders, abilities, and appearances represented
- ☐ Characters' lives portrayed as normal rather than exotic

Islamic Cultural and Religious Authenticity

- ☐ Religious practices accurately portrayed (prayer, wudu, Ramadan, Eid)
- ☐ Five pillars of Islam represented correctly when included
- ☐ Islamic terminology integrated naturally with appropriate context
- ☐ Diverse Islamic cultural expressions acknowledged (South Asian, Middle Eastern, African, etc.)
- ☐ Cultural dress depicted accurately and respectfully
- ☐ Diversity within Islamic practice represented

Story Elements for Diverse Muslim Narratives

- ☐ Plot is engaging and relatable while integrating Islamic elements
- ☐ Story includes universal themes beyond teaching about Islam
- ☐ Reading level appropriate with consideration for Islamic terminology
- ☐ Cultural/religious elements integrated naturally, not forced
- ☐ Resolutions positive yet realistic
- ☐ Balance between culturally specific and universal experiences

Visual Elements in Islamic Representation

- ☐ Illustrations free from stereotypical portrayals
- ☐ Accurate representation of diversity in appearance
- ☐ Settings include accurate depictions of mosques, homes, community spaces
- ☐ Contemporary Muslim life visually represented

- ☐ Diverse body types and appearances included
- ☐ Islamic symbols and objects depicted accurately

Language and Terminology

- ☐ Text free from biased language and stereotypes
- ☐ Islamic terms explained naturally within context
- ☐ Age-appropriate vocabulary with Islamic concepts
- ☐ Arabic/Urdu terms spelled correctly with diacritical marks when possible
- ☐ Respectful and authentic tone throughout
- ☐ Natural dialogue reflecting authentic Muslim experiences

Content Warning Signs (Items to Avoid)

- ☐ NO savior narratives where non-Muslims rescue/enlighten Muslims
- ☐ NO stereotypical character traits (oppressed women, authoritarian men)
- ☐ NO outdated terminology ("Mohammedan," "Moslem")
- ☐ NO oversimplification of complex issues
- ☐ NO cultural/religious misrepresentation
- ☐ NO exclusive focus on struggle/hardship
- ☐ NO portrayal of Islam as monolithic

Additional Quality Indicators

- ☐ Positive reviews from Muslim readers/organizations
- ☐ Recognition from Muslim literary organizations
- ☐ Recommended by Muslim educators/librarians
- ☐ Includes authentic cultural details
- ☐ Shows contemporary life
- ☐ Fosters cultural pride
- ☐ Promotes cross-cultural understanding

Special Education Context and Use

- ☐ Age-appropriate themes with consideration for developmental levels
- ☐ Clear educational and social-emotional value
- ☐ Addresses curriculum needs related to diversity/inclusion
- ☐ Complements existing diverse books
- ☐ Format suitable for intended use (read-aloud, independent reading)
- ☐ Provides discussion opportunities
- ☐ Includes author's notes or context when needed

Accessibility Considerations

- ☐ Physical format accommodates diverse learning needs
- ☐ Digital formats with text-to-speech compatibility available

- ☐ Visual supports reinforce key concepts
- ☐ Reading level flexibility accommodates diverse abilities
- ☐ Linguistic accessibility considers sentence complexity
- ☐ Provides multisensory engagement opportunities
- ☐ Clear narrative structure supports executive functioning
- ☐ Balances authentic representation with accessibility features