



Reading summary

Memon, N. A., & chanicka, j. (2024). When religion intersects equity and inclusion: Muslim educator affective responses in Ontario public schools. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 32(2), 535–552, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2022.2063365>

Islamophobia in schools is a growing concern in Canada and many Muslim students experience discrimination at school, especially Muslims who are Black, reside in high-poverty neighbourhoods or have refugee backgrounds. Debates about religion in schools in Canada, like in other Western countries, have reflected the complexities of defining the place of religion and religiosity in liberal democracies, and public schools have struggled to respond to the religious identities of learners.

In this context, the Ontario Ministry of Education has developed policies and strategies to promote equity and inclusion. However, debates on religion in schools have continued, mainly focused on accommodation of learners' religious identities, that is, on equity and not inclusion. Recognising the limitations of previous approaches, the Ministry of Education has recently promoted 'culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy', which emphasises that learners' life worlds are 'cultural assets' for learning, encourages the agency and self-expression of learners, and supports educators to facilitate learners' knowledge. This approach empowers learners to know that the ways they see the world, including religiously informed views of the world, are valid and welcome in secular classrooms.

Educators are expected to champion equity and inclusion for all; however, the responsibility commonly falls upon educators from minoritised communities. This study draws on the voices of thirty Muslim educators from two public school boards in Ontario to explore the informal responsibility they carry to champion equity and inclusion policies, particularly when religion intersects with secular spaces.

The theorisation in this article is rooted in two intersecting frameworks: post-secular societies and affect. The data in this study come from semi-structured focus groups with thirty self-identifying Muslim educators from two public school boards in Ontario, Canada. The focus groups were structured around three open-ended questions: (1) Who are Muslim learners in your school context? (2) In what ways are schools 'responsive' to the learning strengths and needs of Muslim learners? (3) In what ways do schools aspire to be more responsive to learners who identify with a religion? The methodology drew from 'advocacy ethnography', with the aim of honouring the voices of participants in an area of shared political concern.

The study found that the teachers recognised that Muslim learners' identities are diverse and complex, but they are also learning assets. They saw that the official commitment to culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy is open-ended and left to the discretion of school leaders, and there is insufficient professional development and accountability around racism and Islamophobia. This lack of accountability places undue pressure on Muslim educators to support Muslim learners. These educators face frustration, fear and ostracism, but remain committed to supporting all minoritised communities of learners. Some participants highlighted that a shift from equity and inclusion to responsive pedagogy is not possible until there is province-wide acknowledgement that religion informs the identities of some learners, and that these identities need to be valued if schools are to embrace responsive pedagogies where life worlds are seen as learning assets.

Take-home messages

Anti-Islamophobia strategy: Ontario needs an anti-Islamophobia strategy, which would address the harms caused by Islamophobia, build awareness and dismantle barriers, and provide the conditions for culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy.

Anti-Islamophobic classrooms: Schools and educators should create learning spaces that recognise the realities of Islamophobia and also aspire for classroom environments free of Islamophobia.

System-wide change: Action to support all learners and to promote culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy should be system-wide to alleviate pressure on individual educators.