



Reading summary

Memon, N. A., & Chown, D. (2023). Being responsive to Muslim learners: Australian educator perspectives. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 133, Article 104279.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104279>

Key Australian education policy documents call for equity and inclusion, including in the form of intercultural understanding and responsive pedagogy. More research is needed into whether and how this is implemented, particular by teachers in Australian public schools. This article focuses on how innovative pedagogy is enacted by educators, and how such innovation is constrained by neoliberal policy initiatives.

The context of this study is hyper-accountability in education; a public education system that adopts a narrow view of secularism; religious identities being marginalised in public schools; and the prevalence of racism and Islamophobia in Australian society. In this context, previous studies have found that Muslim learners are vulnerable and marginalised in Australian classrooms.

The overarching research question for this study was: In what ways are educators 'responsive' to the learning strengths and needs of Muslim learners? The theoretical framework for this study came from two intersecting lenses: critical faith-centred epistemology and culturally responsive pedagogy. The data for this study came from one case study school located in Sydney, a public boys' school with a majority of Muslim students. The qualitative research methods used were semi-structured focus groups, interviews, and school walk-throughs.

The study found that teachers at this school respected the religion of the students and challenged deficit views. They used religious stories to assist with literacy education; and they encouraged discussions of identity and belonging in the classroom. But they believed

they were obligated to teach the standardised curriculum and did not welcome challenges to this curriculum.

Overall, the teachers at this school did not view religion as a deficit, but neither did they see it as an asset. There was a culture of care but little shift in pedagogy or curriculum. An imam frequently visited the school to provide pastoral care to students, but teachers did not draw on his knowledge to support the curriculum or their teaching. Teachers felt they had to stick to the scripted curriculum and that they had little autonomy over their teaching.

The dichotomy between students' personal religious beliefs and values and the public school curriculum reinforces the message that religious ways of knowing and the life worlds of learners who identify with a religion have only a peripheral place in public schools. As a result, inclusion remains superficial.

Take-home messages

Religiously responsive education: For culturally responsive pedagogy to be equally 'religiously responsive', educators must make use of the religious assets of learners as valid ways of knowing, approaching topics from multiple vantage points proactively as opposed to awaiting student reactions, and showing the courage to extend the mandated curriculum.

Care and relationships are important but not enough: In addition to establishing a culture of care and supportive relationships, teachers should draw on learners' identities and backgrounds as assets for learning.

Learn from learners: Teachers should make use of informal learning opportunities to learn from learners by listening and inquiring.

Be comfortable with not knowing: Recognising the contribution of learners' religious assets goes beyond giving learners a 'right' to their opinion. It begins with a willingness to be comfortable with not knowing and sincerity in wanting to learn.