



Reading summary

Memon, N., Schulz, S., Kelly, S., & Chown, D. (2023). Schools, religion, and affect: Unpacking Australian educator discomfort.

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While Australia’s religious landscape has shifted, with fewer Christians and more people of minority faiths or ‘no religion’, within this social mix the acceptance of religious diversity remains contentious. Australian education is in principle secular but also committed to a multi-faith society, and there are minimal regulations and conceptual clarity on how increasing religious diversity is to be supported in schools. Despite increasingly super-diverse classrooms, studies have found that Australian educators are either reluctant or refuse to engage with issues of religion in public schools. Also, teachers are not provided with the tools to be responsive to the religious identities of their learners.

This study explores educators’ discomfort with religion and its implications for teacher education. In particular, it explores educators’ affective responses when religion and the religious identities of learners arise in Australian public schools. The article draws on the notion of ‘pedagogies of discomfort’ to explore teachers’ feelings of reluctance, aversion and indifference when religion, and particularly the religious identities of ‘pathologised’ religious communities, arises in schools.

Data used in this article came from a case study of a multicultural primary school in Sydney, where most students were Muslims. The research methods were interviews with the school leadership, walk throughs of the school site, analysis of school policies and three focus groups with school educators. The study aimed to identify emotional encounters around religion, in particular to see how affect is manipulated to prevent the broaching of the topic of religion, and to formulate an understanding of the dispositions that are privileged and those that are silenced.

The study found that the teachers talk freely about cultural heritage in class but avoid discussing religion for fear of a parental backlash. Teachers reported that it is harder to teach about religion now than it was thirty years ago, and they feel it is safer to stick to the curriculum. The teachers discourage classroom discussion about challenging or 'political' topics, even in students' discussions of their own experiences.

The study revealed that educators' willingness and capacity to be pedagogically responsive are shaped by a complex ensemble of material, discursive, historical and political factors. These include the processes of normalisation of dominant cultures, through which marginalised religious identities are othered, deemed foreign and therefore able to be excluded not only by teachers but also parents.

Teachers revealed a collective crisis of confidence concerning what they could or could not safely teach or discuss. Fear of parental backlash, fear of being politically incorrect or of being reprimanded and 'getting in trouble' inhibited the teachers' willingness to speak openly about religion. The pressures of a scripted curriculum combined with educators' fear of transgressing normative boundaries appeared to reduce learning to that which is validated by the neoliberal state.

Take-home messages

Teacher education for religious literacy: Australian teacher education should acknowledge the roots of racism that underpin teachers' anxiety and discomfort towards religion and the religious identities of learners in public schools. Teacher education courses must include religious literacy.

Freedom of religion in the classroom: Teachers should respect learners' freedom to believe, practice and express their religion as part of their commitment to inclusive and responsive classrooms.

Future research on teachers' anxiety about religion: Future practitioner-led research should begin by acknowledging the historicisation of marginalised religious identities in schools and the ethnicisation of religion, which has fostered fear and anxiety towards religion among teachers.