

# Say-Walahi Diaspora Youth, Islamophobia and Anti-Black Racism: Implications for Education



JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS  
RESEARCH  
SUMMARY

*“... we must center the idea that cultural, ethnic, and religious identities are an integral part of a student’s personhood, with the understanding that educational experiences can not be fully realized without a complete affirmation of the student identity” (p. 19).*

## 1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research examines how Muslim Black/African youth in Toronto construct a unique cultural identity that merges their Islamic values with their Somali heritage, an identity that the author refers to as *Say-Walahi* – a term that fuses English and Somali, loosely translating as ‘swear to God’.

The article highlights how these youth have built diasporic identities to exercise agency and build community in schools to disrupt imposed *deficit narratives* – educational discourses that label Black Muslim students as “at risk,” academically inferior, or socially problematic. The study explores how their identities are shaped by *Islamophobia* (defined by fear, prejudice, and hostility toward Muslims) and *anti-Black racism*, which together produce unique forms of exclusion, surveillance, and alienation in schools and society.

## 2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place in the community of Rexdale in Toronto, which is described as part of an “intensive urban” educational setting and by the City of Toronto as a Neighbourhood Improvement Area (p. 3). This community was selected for its large and vibrant Somali Diaspora and for the many community hubs, business establishments, and Mosques located in the area.

## 3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

The research is about 32 Black Somali youth, aged 18-22, who self-identify as Muslim and who were all born in Ontario.

## 4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The research was a *qualitative* study (focused on data describing qualities, characteristics, processes, or experiences) carried out over 24 months. The researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews (45-60 minutes each) with each of the 32 participants. All participants gave informed written consent.

The interviews were conducted in English and video-recorded, then *transcribed* (written out word for word) and supplemented with *field notes* (the researcher’s own written observations about participants and settings). Research questions focused on how the youth *internalize* and *present* their religious (Muslim) and racial (Black/African) diasporic identities.

## 5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The study found that Somali-Canadian Black Muslim youth in Toronto have forged a *distinct diasporic identity* that blends Islamic values with Somali heritage and youth popular culture (e.g., memes, slang). This identity, referred to by the author as *Say-Walahi*, functions as both *cultural and social capital* – shared knowledge, networks, and relationships that provide support and a sense of belonging. This identity also operates as a *coded language* – a form of communication understood mainly within a community that builds solidarity, affirms pride, and enables resistance to deficit narratives.

Participants consistently reported experiencing **both** Islamophobia and anti-Black racism in and around school: disproportionate discipline and surveillance (e.g., tension around wearing thobes on Fridays), feelings of alienation, and barriers to academic success. Moments that affirm their identities (i.e., Islamic Heritage Month, access to dedicated prayer spaces) provide belonging, but even these experiences are often policed or questioned by educators. When youth are treated as outsiders for being both Black and Muslim, they face **barriers to learning, higher discipline and dropout rates, and harm to their self-esteem and mental health.**

#### Five key themes emerged:

- i) **Intersection of race and religion:** being both Black and Muslim is “unforgiving” (p. 10), with the youth’s ‘Muslimness’ frequently overshadowing their Black/African identity in how they are categorized by schools.
- ii) **Prayer spaces matter:** protected time/space for prayer fosters spiritual belonging and peer support, yet youth’s requests to pray can trigger suspicion.
- iii) **Gendered experiences:** hijab-wearing girls face a “double gaze” (p. 13)— both external stereotypes of their perceived oppression and intra-community scrutiny— leading to social withdrawal and misrecognition, while some wear the hijab as an action of agency and solidarity.
- iv) **The idea of halal as everyday navigation:** youth use Islamic ethics to set moral and social boundaries (“Muslim space-making,” p. 16) and to negotiate Western cultural pressures. Young Muslims’ struggles with identity are shaped by the interplay of their religious faith, racial background, cultural traditions, and the critical gaze of society.
- v) **Easy targets in political crises:** after highly publicized “terror” events (p. 17), Muslim students become easy targets for microaggressions, sometimes reinforced by educators’ securitizing frames (“not that kind of Muslim,” p. 17).

## 6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This research highlights the critical role youth workers and educators play in affirming students’ racial, cultural, and religious identities as an essential foundation for belonging and wellbeing.

Supporting youth like the *Say-Walahi* students requires recognizing that barriers such as Islamophobia and anti-Black racism **directly affect educational and mental health outcomes.** To address these barriers, youth workers and educators must adopt **anti-oppressive and culturally responsive practices** that not only challenge stereotypes but also promote inclusive dialogue and affirm diverse identities.

Importantly, this includes avoiding **microaggressions** — subtle, often unintentional comments or actions that communicate bias or prejudice toward groups experiencing marginalization. Even seemingly small remarks can have long-lasting effects on a young person’s identity and sense of belonging. By fostering spaces where youth feel **fully seen, respected, and valued**, practitioners can disrupt cycles of exclusion and contribute to **more equitable and supportive educational environments.**



Ilmi, A. A. (2025). [\*Say-Walahi diaspora youth, Islamophobia and anti-Black racism: Implications for education.\*](#) *Urban Education.*