

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Muslim Youth in Canadian Schools: Education and the Politics of Religious Identity

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Muslim Youth
Religious Identity
Education

POPULATION GROUPS

Racialized Youth
Youth Workers

STEPPING UP THEMES

Education, Training & Apprenticeships
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario

SOURCE

Academic

“In this way, religious identification and the coalescence of Muslim students within schools served to anchor their sense of identity and provided a framework for resisting social pressures that threatened to rupture their distinct lifestyles” (p. 420).

1. What is the research about?

This research examines the experience of Muslim youth in secular public schools. The guiding question was how Muslim youth are able to maintain their religious identity despite pressure to adhere to social norms of Canadian culture. The article draws from the experiences of Muslim students to show how they maintained their religious identities in the face of various challenges. The schooling experience of these youth provides insight into the ways that education is differently experienced for religious and racial minorities.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in Toronto, Ontario, at two high schools. Toronto is one of the most multicultural cities in the world, and high schools were chosen as a site for observation because they give a small snapshot of the diversity of the city. Despite this diversity, however, public education continues to be based on Eurocentric values that are often in contradiction with Islamic ones.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about Muslim youth. The youth interviewed included current high school students, recent graduates, and university students. The youth came from various backgrounds, including South Asian, Caribbean, Arab, and Somali. Most students were Canadian-born or had lived in Canada for a number of years, and came from low- and middle-income families.

4. How was the research done?

The article is based on a previous study that examined education and the religious identity of Muslim high school students. Eight students and five parents were interviewed as case studies over a six-month period, and 10 of these narratives are featured in the article.

5. What are the key findings?

The schooling experiences of the youth interviewed reveal that their religious identity intersects with other experiences of social difference, including race, gender, and linguistic difference (p. 419). The common themes in the narratives presented included peer pressure, gender interaction, racism and discrimination, and academic streaming:

- **Peer Pressure**

Peer pressure could be both negative and positive; the former was understood as coming from Muslim students who adhered to mainstream cultural norms and non-Muslim friends, while the latter was understood as coming from social networks within the Muslim community. Negative peer pressure from classmates resulted in the need for Muslim students to find spaces within or outside of their schools that offered positive peer pressure as a counterbalance. For example, students reported finding comfort in Muslim Student Associations, where they were surrounded by fellow Muslims and encouraged to follow Islamic norms.

- **Gender Interaction**

The common practice of “mixing” – of casually interacting with the opposite gender – contradicts Islamic customs that limit socializing and physical contact between males and females. This was more of an issue for female students, who felt that they needed to devise strategies to avoid physical contact with males in school.

- **Racism and Discrimination**

All of the participants interviewed recalled experiencing racism and discrimination at some point in their schooling experience. The negative perceptions of Islam held by non-Muslim classmates and teachers were manifested in patronizing attitudes. The stereotype that education is not valued for Muslim women was particularly damaging for female students, who felt that they were often not taken seriously by teachers.

- **Academic Streaming**

Participants reported being placed into lower academic streams despite academic success. The youth understood this to be a result of low expectations from teachers and guidance counsellors, who had negative perceptions of Muslim students. Academic placement based on negative perceptions reproduces systems of inequality by placing racial and religious minority students into streams that may limit their opportunities for success in the future.

Despite these challenges, the youth interviewed were able to maintain their Islamic identity based on the **interplay of ambivalence and role performance**, and **strategies of inclusion and isolation**. Youth are able to negotiate ambivalence about their identities by **using religion as an “anchor”** (p. 419) to stay grounded and committed to an Islamic way of life, finding a balance between welcoming new customs without compromising their religious beliefs. These young people **resisted conformity through interaction, rather than isolation**: “Through their interaction in the arena of public education, the boundaries of religious practice were further marked and defined, though these boundaries were more challenging to maintain” (p. 419). These challenges were **balanced through positive peer pressure** and the maintenance of close ties with fellow Muslims, both outside of school and through school groups, such as Muslim Student Associations.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

The findings in this research show that students’ experience with the public education system is greatly impacted by various identity markers, such as race, religious identity, and gender. For Muslim students, the negative stereotypes of Islam held by teachers and guidance counsellors had damaging effects on their education.

Youth workers should be mindful of the multiple barriers that Muslim youth face in different contexts, and should include these youth in the planning of programs, based on their own experiences. Providing opportunities for social interaction with non-Muslim youth *and* opportunities for social distance – to facilitate solidarity with other Muslim youth – are important strategies to support Muslim youth in negotiating their religious identity.



Zine, J. (2001). Muslim youth in Canadian schools: Education and the politics of religious identity. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 32(4), 399-423.