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# Examining Islamophobia in Ontario Public Schools

**Nora Hindy**

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### **About the Author**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper is a research-based examination of Muslim students' experiences of Islamophobia in the public school system in Ontario, with a view to identifying actions and policies that can be implemented to improve the educational experiences of these students.<sup>2</sup> I look at both general Islamophobia and gendered Islamophobia, the latter affecting particularly Muslim women wearing the hijab (headscarf).<sup>1</sup> The central question this paper addresses is whether Ontario public schools require the development and implementation of new policies that explicitly address the Islamophobia some Muslim students experience in school settings, or whether existing policies are adequate.

Islamophobia is a relatively new concept, born out of the need to qualify the surge of negative rhetoric and actions directed at Islam and Muslims in the West. Bleich's (2012) proposed definition of Islamophobia encompasses "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims." For Bleich, Islamophobia involves a "broader set of negative attitudes or emotions directed at individuals or groups because of their perceived membership in a defined category (p.182)," and is thus analogous to terms like xenophobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism.

According to the 2006 Canadian census, over half of Canada's visible minorities live in Ontario (where they account for 22% of the province's population), with 2.2 million of those individuals residing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Of these, nearly 425 000 are Muslim, i.e. around five percent (Hamdani, 2015, p. 9). When it comes to Muslims specifically, youth account for 50% of the Muslim population in North America, and more than 90% of them attend public schools (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009).

The 2016 Environics survey of Muslims in Canada found that one in three Canadian Muslims reported experiencing discrimination due to their religion or ethnicity—well above the levels of mistreatment experienced by the general Canadian population. These negative experiences take place in a variety of settings, the most common ones being public spaces, retail establishments, the workplace, and schools and universities (p.3). Arguably, it is in the school setting—where students develop a significant part of their identity—that the effects of Islamophobia (as well as other forms of discrimination) are likely to be most profound, and to have long-term consequences for the students' lives.

Very little data is available on Muslim students' experiences of Islamophobia in either Ontario or

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<sup>1</sup> This policy paper is an abridged version of a Master's Thesis of the same name submitted in 2015 to the Department of Public Policy, Administration and Law at York University, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to Yuliya Barannik for her excellent copy-editing.

Canada specifically. From the existing accounts of Muslim students' experiences in Ontario public schools, three major themes emerge:

1. Feelings of isolation and alienation;
2. Lack of awareness about Islam and Muslims among peers and teachers;
3. Lack of representation of Muslims in teaching and curriculum.

In 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education published a policy document titled *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, the purpose of which was to make Ontario's education system "the most inclusive in the world (p. 2)." The Ministry recognizes that Ontario still has ongoing issues with discrimination, including discrimination based on race and/or religion. As of 2009, only twelve boards had policies specifically relating to religious accommodations, and of those, only three policies were considered comprehensive (2009, p. 9).

In practice, the multicultural education policies set by the government do not necessarily translate into board policies. In this context, and taking into account the Muslim students' experiences with Islamophobia in Ontario public schools, this paper makes the following recommendations:

## RECOMMENDATIONS

#1: Board level equity policies should mention Islamophobia explicitly.

#2: All Ontario Public Schools Boards should offer anti-Islamophobia workshops for teachers. Explicit board policy should require all teachers to attend.

#3: School boards should provide lesson plans and other curricula resources to support teachers in teaching against Islamophobia in the classroom.

#4: There should be a dedicated space within the school setting for Muslim students to express their identity, and at the same time a place for non-Muslim students to learn more about Muslims and ask questions.

#5: More research needs to be done about the experiences of Muslim students in Ontario public schools.

## BACKGROUND

This policy paper is a research-based examination of Muslim students' experiences of Islamophobia in the public school system in Ontario, with a view to identifying actions and policies that can be implemented to improve the educational experiences of these students. I look at both general Islamophobia and gendered Islamophobia, the latter affecting particularly Muslim women wearing the hijab (headscarf). The central question this paper addresses is whether Ontario public schools require the development and implementation of new policies that explicitly address the Islamophobia some Muslim students experience in school settings, or whether existing policies are adequate.

According to the 2006 Canadian census, over half of Canada's visible minorities live in Ontario (where they account for 22% of the province's population), with 2.2 million of those individuals residing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Of these, nearly 425 000 are Muslim, i.e. around five percent (Hamdani, 2015, p. 9). In 2011, there were over 1 million Muslims in Canada, with that number projected to grow to more than 2 million by 2030 (Pew, 2007). Contrary to some popular generalizations about the community, Muslims in Canada display tremendous ethnic and denominational diversity. In Ontario, the majority of Muslims (130,000) are of South Asian background (Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian), followed by Iranians (80,000), Somalis (70,000), Afghanis (56,000), and Arabs (25,000) (Elton, 2006, Niyozov, 2010). Eight in ten Canadian Muslims describe themselves as proud to be Canadian—slightly higher than the national average of 73% (Environics, 2016, p. 7).

Fifty percent (50%) of Muslims in North America are youth, and more than 90% of Muslim youth attend public schools (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). Studies by Cristillo (2008), CBC (2007) and Pew Research Center (2007) indicate that Muslim students in the U.S. and Canada hold positive attitudes towards public schools and institutions (Niyozov, 2010). Nonetheless, a recent dramatic increase in the number of private Islamic schools opening in Canada may suggest a degree of dissatisfaction with public schools in the Muslim community (Niyozov, 2010, Zine, 2008). Whether Islamophobia and negative experiences of Muslim students in the public school system is a significant factor in this increase requires further research.

## Defining Islamophobia

Islamophobia is a relatively new concept, born out of the need to qualify the surge of negative rhetoric and actions directed at Islam and Muslims in the West. There remains much resistance to the concept of Islamophobia in both the academic world and the public sphere. Authors Rushdie and Manji argue against the term, saying that they “refuse to renounce our critical spirit out of fear of being accused of ‘Islamophobia’, a wretched concept that confuses criticism of Islam as a religion and stigmatization of those who believe in it” (Kincheloe, Sternberg and Stonebanks, 2010). Zine (2004) claims that within educational discourse, the notion of “Islamophobia” does not have any currency at all, and is “not a part of the language or conceptual constructs commonly used by educators, even by those committed to multicultural and anti-racist pedagogy (p. 112).”

Bleich's (2012) proposed definition of Islamophobia encompasses “indiscriminate negative attitudes

or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims.” For Bleich, Islamophobia involves a “broader set of negative attitudes or emotions directed at individuals or groups because of their perceived membership in a defined category (p.182),” and is thus analogous to terms like xenophobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. As with those related concepts, when negative feelings ranging from aversion, fear, and anxiety to disdain, disgust and rejection are directed towards someone who is, or appears to be, Muslim, this constitutes Islamophobia.

The 2016 Environics survey of Muslims in Canada found that one in three Canadian Muslims reported experiencing discrimination due to their religion or ethnicity—well above the levels of mistreatment experienced by the general Canadian population. These negative experiences take place in a variety of settings, the most common ones being public spaces, retail establishments, the workplace, and schools and universities (p.3. See also: Adams, 2007; Helly, 2004; Jamil, 2012.)

Muslims, in addition to their religious affiliation, have also become a racialized group: those who appear South Asian or Arab are frequently perceived as Muslim, and this has resulted in Hindus, Sikhs and Arab Christians being subject to Islamophobic attacks (Hoang, 2011, Lumb, 2014). A tragic example of this is the December 2012 incident in New York, in which a Hindu man of Indian descent was pushed to his death from a subway platform, by a woman who later claimed to have done it out of hatred towards Muslims (National Post, 2015).

In educational spaces, Islamophobia could affect not only Muslim students, but their non-Muslim peers as well. For example, recent debates in Toronto surrounding Muslims praying during school hours on public school property resulted in proposals to end the rental of facilities to Jewish groups for after-school religious activities (Bromberg, 2012, p. 63). Discrimination against one minority group easily leads to discrimination against other minority groups.

The focus of this paper is Islamophobia in the public school setting. School is the site where students develop a significant part of their identity, and thus, it is also the site where the effects of Islamophobia (as well as other forms of discrimination) are likely to be most profound, and to have long-term consequences for the students’ lives. Given the prevalence of Islamophobia in North America, understanding Muslim students’ experiences in the public education system can help pinpoint practices that all teachers can use to combat this specific type of discrimination. In addition, one can envision practices that create fair and equitable classrooms for students of all faiths and backgrounds (Lumb, 2014).

## **Multicultural Education in Ontario**

Public education represents the commitment to democracy in our society: a society where everyone is equal and all can succeed (Jackson, 2014, p.11). Canada sought to realize this vision in 1971, when it was the first country to establish a national policy on multiculturalism (Joshee and Johnson, 2007, p.137). The policy was meant to foster an inclusive and respectful society by acknowledging

and promoting cultural diversity. Although Canadian multicultural policy has won praise, many argue that it does not go beyond lip service. Faltis (2013) points out that creating “awareness” of different cultures by focusing only on food and celebrations makes multicultural education very tokenistic. Antiracist theorists advocate the need to move beyond recognizing diversity and towards discussing the imbalance of power relations and the dominant structures embedded throughout our society.

Ideally, multicultural education has five facets (Banks, 2001a): (1) content integration; (2) knowledge construction process; (3) prejudice reduction; (4) an equity pedagogy; and (5) an empowering school culture and social structure. Students of all races, religions, creeds, and sexual orientations would be represented in all areas of education, and school culture would empower them to feel proud of their identities. These five elements provide a useful framework for what an inclusive school in Ontario could look like—yet, for the most part, multicultural education policy initiatives only go as far as broad school board policy statements, committee formations, and brief reviews of curriculum documents. Furthermore, multicultural education initiatives receive very little teacher and administrative support in schools, and at times are also met with resistance (Dlamini, 2002).

## **Muslim Students’ Experiences as Religious Minorities in Ontario Public Schools**

Very little data is available about Muslim students in Ontario, or even Canada, experiencing Islamophobia. Muslim students’ experiences in Britain and the U.S. have been fairly well documented, and while there may be differences due to dissimilar national contexts, these accounts may offer some insight into the kinds of challenges Muslim youth in Ontario may be dealing with in a public school setting.

Islamophobic incidences against Muslim students in public schools have been steadily on the rise since 9/11, with a disturbing spike after Donald Trump was elected as the Republican presidential nominee. In 2015, a Florida teacher repeatedly called a 14-year old Muslim student a “raghead Taliban” in front of his peers (Afshar, 2015). A 2015 report by the California branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations found that 1 in 5 students experienced discrimination by a school staff member. A student surveyed reported their teacher telling them “You’re not American enough to understand (CAIR-CA, 2015).” On December 15, 2006, National Public Radio aired an episode recounting the story of a young girl who was ridiculed and taunted after her teacher used a textbook that claimed Muslims want to kill Christians. The trauma devastated the girl and led to the eventual breakdown of her family.

Anecdotal evidence suggests Ontario Muslim students face similar incidents. Scholars have just begun systematically documenting and evaluating these experiences (Sensoy and Stonebanks, 2010). Zine (2001a) analyzes the schooling experience of Canadian Muslim youth who are committed to following and maintaining an Islamic identity despite the social pressures to conform to the dominant culture (p. 399). Through the narratives of seven Muslim students and three parents, Zine explores experiences of peer pressure, racism, and Islamophobia. Although this study was

conducted pre-9/11, the experiences and the findings of this study are worth exploring, as negative perceptions towards Muslims have only increased since 2001. The students in Zine's study talk about dealing with negative perceptions towards them from both peers and teachers; they also feel peer pressure to let go of their Muslim identity. One student, Zeinab, feels that although she is being treated fairly by her teachers, problematic assumptions are sometimes made about her:

Basically, most of them, when they first see me like on the first day of school, or maybe a supply [substitute] teacher or something, they just look at me and their initial reaction is just shock, like "My God you're allowed out of your house." And then they tend to talk to me like in slow English and I just answer back in proper English, and then they think, "OK fine, she's been born here, she knows English (p. 405)."

Zeinab believes that the teachers hold a set of assumptions about her because of her appearance, and that if she does not defend herself, she will be perceived as the stereotypical, oppressed Muslim female.

Khan (2007) explores Muslim student narratives of youth identity formation and adolescent development, and finds similar experiences. Madeeha feels that she is cast as an "other" by her teachers and classmates: "People ask you, "In other cultures, [do] they do this?" and then he [the teacher] will be like, "Right?" I mean, I'll be like, "I was born here all my life. I don't know (p. 30)."

Rehan relates a similar form of "othering." Rehan, a Shi'i, expressed frustration over always being presumed to know everything about Sunni Islam: "Why would I know [about the five pillars] and everybody else doesn't know? ... cause like she [the teacher] sees a brown guy and she assumes that I'm Muslim so I should know (Khan, 2007, p. 30)."

Zine argues that these negative perceptions have resulted in Muslim students being streamed into lower academic placements on the basis of lower teacher expectations. She points to students who are born in Canada, with English as their first language, being placed in ESL programs based on the assumptions made by educators and school administrators.

Muslim identity in schools was not always perceived by the students as negative. Some felt their Muslim identity was beneficial for those around them. Ansar relates how his friends and peers behave better when they are around him because of his Muslim identity: "They'd be like 'Oh, I'm not going to do this around you, you're Muslim (Khan, 2007, p. 33).'" Ali's (2012) study of six Muslim girls in Ontario high schools found similar ambivalences between negative and positive experiences related to their Muslim identity. While some of the participants reported being called "terrorists" and experiencing Islamophobic attitudes, they also reported keeping to themselves and thus not feeling strongly affected by their peer's prejudice. These girls said they were comfortable answering questions about their faith and felt most questions were inquisitive rather than insulting. Now, one cannot expect all Muslim students to be able to handle being called a "terrorist"—neither is self-segregation the desirable response to Islamophobia in public schools. Ali concludes that while her participants did not feel particularly marginalized or targeted, Islamophobia should still be explicitly mentioned in equity policies as something to monitor and teach against (p. 213).

Zine's (2008) later study of the experiences of female students in Islamic schools seems to confirm the self-segregation trend. Many of the students Zine examines attended public school prior to



transferring to Islamic schools, seeking a better sense of belonging. Some of the students reported feeling isolated and excluded from their public school peers because of how they dressed. Because Zine's study focuses on students who have left the public school system, it is understandable that most participants expressed negative views of their public school experience. Still, we must ask: how representative are those experiences? Are Muslim students leaving public schools as a coping strategy in response to Islamophobia in public schools—and if so, what would be the implications for broader Muslim integration? Ramadan's (2004) concerns about ghettoization are relevant here. Multicultural education benefits minority and majority students alike; students who are exposed to a variety of cultures have a richer educational experience and are ultimately more understanding and tolerant of those different cultures (Niyozov, 2010).

For the Muslim students who remain in the public system, forming a Muslim Student Association in their school provides them with mutual support in the various challenges they faced. Zine (2001a) finds that the students in her study resisted the pressure of conformity within the public school settings by building a strong peer support system with other Muslim students. She argues that the support groups of fellow Muslim students were vital in helping the students maintain their Islamic values as well as develop a sense of camaraderie with each other (Zine, 2001a, p. 406). Zine speaks of the need for more inclusive schooling practices that address the concerns of minority youth.

The Muslim identity, as a religious minority identity, is vulnerable to systemic inequality, external labeling, and "otherness" affecting other ethnic and racial groups (Nagra, 2011). Like all identities, Muslim identities can be produced, reproduced and transformed in different social settings (Nagra, 2011, p. 427). Nagra argues that when ethnic groups experience discrimination, they are likely to intensify their ethnic identification, a phenomenon called "reactive ethnicity (p. 428)." After 9/11, many Muslims—including youth—"reacted" and chose to reinforce their identification with a strong Muslim identity. With more Islamophobia, the "reactive" response could mean the demand for accommodating students' Muslim identity will be more pertinent.

## **Teachers' Voices**

A recurring theme touched on by almost all Muslim students was teacher actions, or lack thereof, in situations where the students felt isolation or discrimination. Students remember the situations where teachers either made them feel "othered," or did not interfere when other students did. However, most studies do not examine the teachers' points of view; Niyozov and Plum (2009) are the first to study these missing voices in the education of Muslim students.

As mentioned above, many students held their teachers responsible for their feelings of isolation or discrimination. Niyozov and Plum try to refute the claim that all teachers are ignorant and uncaring toward Muslim students. Through teacher voices, the authors highlight the positive work that teachers do, point out the challenges they face, and the support they require to teach Muslim students. Niyozov points out that there are a growing number of Muslim teachers and

social workers in the public school system in the GTA (where the majority of Ontario Muslims reside). These professionals add valuable support to their colleagues in helping them understand the deeper needs of Muslim students. The authors are careful to point out that they are not denying the existence of discrimination and Islamophobia in public schools; in fact, they acknowledge that some teachers “consciously or unconsciously practice racism and Islamophobia (p. 648)” in the classroom.

## **Curriculum Issues**

A review of Canadian geography and history textbooks found that their portrayal of Islam contains erroneous factual claims, questionable assertions and omissions that reinforce negative stereotypes (Abukhattala, 2004, p. 164). Several books used for literacy in classrooms, such as “Three Cups of Tea” (Relin and Mortenson, 2006), “The Breadwinner” (Ellis, 2000), and “Reading Lolita in Tehran” (Nafisi, 2004) confirm many of the negative stereotypes already perpetuated by the media, where Muslims are either aggressors or are in need of saving by the “white man.” While replacing such books should be relatively simple, it is unlikely teachers will take the time or effort to search for alternative reliable and factual resources to supplement the curriculum, even if they want to. Misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims is likely to continue if new policies mandating curricular changes are not imposed. If boards provided reliable and factual material and resources on Islam and Muslims, Islamophobia would be much more easily prevented in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

Three major themes emerge from the existing accounts of Muslim student experiences in Ontario public schools reviewed above:

1. Feelings of isolation and alienation;
2. Lack of awareness about Islam and Muslims among peers and teachers;
3. Lack of representation of Muslims in teaching and curriculum.

## **POLICY RESPONSES**

Jackson (2014) argues that “public education has an important role to teach students about the social world around them (p. 2).” Schools must teach more than math and language; they should work to debunk dangerous assumptions and harmful stereotypes. Jackson suggests students should

learn about Islam and Muslims at school in order to counter stereotypes present in mainstream media. In *Teaching Against Islamophobia*, a resource book for educators, Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Stonebanks (2010) argue that teacher resources on Islam and Muslims are one of the most effective ways to battle Islamophobia.

In 2012, Ontario passed Bill 13, an anti-bullying law designed to entrench the rights of individuals marginalised because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This paper's evidence suggests that Muslim students also need policies aimed specifically at preventing their marginalization through Islamophobia. Can any of the existing policies fulfill this need?

## Existing Policies

In 2009, Ontario published a policy document titled *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*. The stated purpose of this document was to make Ontario's education system "the most inclusive in the world (p. 2)." The Ministry recognizes that Ontario still has ongoing issues with discrimination based on race and religion. The document quotes the Supreme Court of Canada's decision in *R. v. Spence*, which states that "racial prejudice against visible minorities is so notorious and indisputable that its existence needs to be treated as a social fact (p. 7)."

What was unique about the 2009 policy document was that it mandated boards to create their own internal policies and provided a timeline for them to comply. As a response to the timeline set out in the 2009 Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) and the Ministry of Education released, in 2014, its *Equity and Inclusive Education: Going Deeper*. Presented in the form of a rubric, this tool establishes a set of policy outcomes. A description of critical performance indicators is provided for each outcome, organized into three phases of development along a continuum: Planning, Effective Practices, and Integration. The purpose of the *Going Deeper* document was to ensure policy was broken down into achievable goals; the continuum helps boards with measuring progress.

According to the Ministry of Education, out of Ontario's 72 school boards, only 43 had some sort of equity policy in place as of 2009. Only twelve boards had policies specifically relating to religious accommodations, and of those twelve, only three were considered comprehensive (2009, p. 9). This highlights the reality that multicultural education policies set by governments are not necessarily translated into board policies.

Hopson (2009) found that, even in school boards with policies already in place for equity and inclusion, the majority of participants admitted to knowing very little about provincial or school board equity policies beyond the fact that these documents exist. Lack of knowledge about existing equity policies among teachers suggests that such policies may not be very effective tools for combatting Islamophobia and creating a more inclusive educational environment for Muslim students. In contrast, we have the example of explicit laws like Bill 13, which seems to have been effective in creating more welcoming spaces for LGBT students.

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Zine (2001b) argues that inclusive policies in education are “too broad,” lumping together all forms of “differences” such as race, ethnicity, faith, gender and sexual orientation. Competition between different minority groups emerges as a result. Instead, Zine advocates for separate policies, as “all forms of difference could not be equated and should be dealt with separately in terms of policy and practice (2001b, p. 240).”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **#1: Board level equity policies should mention Islamophobia explicitly.**

Research into data suggests that while new legislation (similar to Bill 13) may not yet be required to address Islamophobia, teachers need explicit terminology to discuss it. Teachers need to understand how Islamophobia manifests itself, and they need to be made aware of ways to prevent it from affecting their Muslim students. Most importantly, policies should be created to inform teachers on how to prevent other students from harbouring negative and stereotypical views of Muslims (Ali, 2012). Considering the increased violence towards Muslim students in the U.S., safety might become a real issue for Muslim students in the future (Ose, 2015) and require a legislative response.

### **#2: All Ontario Public Schools Boards should offer anti-Islamophobia workshops for teachers. Explicit board policy should require all teachers to attend.**

Razi Education, an Islamic consulting group based in Toronto, has frequently held equity-focused presentations and workshops on understanding Muslims and Islam in public schools. During the presentations, attendees consistently request information and clarification on basic issues, such as women’s position in Islam and Muslim cultures, honour killings, terrorism, fundamentalism, and health and sex education. The thirst for information displayed at these workshops reflects a pressing need for teachers to be more educated about Islam and Muslims. Marginalized groups have different issues pertinent to them, and thus they should be dealt with separately, with specific policies and practices (Zine, 2001b, p. 240).

Some might think this policy would not be relevant in schools where there are no Muslims, such as in northern Ontario. However, Islamophobia is a widespread phenomenon, and it can sometimes be more prevalent in places where there are few Muslims. When there is little opportunity for the rest of the population to have personal interactions with Muslims, misconceptions can arise. Therefore, the above policy recommendation would equally apply to schools with no Muslim students.

### **#3: School boards should provide lesson plans and other curricula resources to support teachers in teaching against Islamophobia in the classroom.**

The following resources are available:

- *Helping Students Deal with Trauma Related to Geopolitical Violence & Islamophobia*, a new guide launched by The National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM), in partnership with The Islamic Social Services Association (ISSA) and the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC). This guide provides support to educators regarding the recent arrivals of Syrian refugees, as well as assisting Muslim students deal with the impacts of Islamophobia and war.

- *Neglected Voices: Stories of Muslim Youth and Identity*, a curriculum pack developed by Sultan Rana (2016) for the Tessellate Institute, intended to address alienation/marginalisation all students can face, using interviews with Muslim students as a jumping off point for discussion.
- Tanenbaum Center's Elementary Education Program offers resources and curricula to support teachers of younger students in teaching against Islamophobia (Ramarajan & Runell, 2007, p. 92). For example, in their lesson on nutrition, students learn about the different ways to choose healthy foods, and how to manage a healthy lifestyle while adhering to cultural and religious restrictions. Students plan a meal for Olympic athletes from different countries, and the restrictions and preferences include: a vegetarian Hindu athlete who hates bananas, a Jewish athlete who is allergic to nuts and only eats Kosher, and a Muslim athlete who only eats Halal meat. This lesson integrates Muslim practices without singling them out, leading to normalization.
- York Region District School Board (YRDSB, 2004) in collaboration with local Muslim educators in Toronto, developed an anti-Islamophobia resource that includes print and Web site resources, lists organizations in the United States and Canada that provide academic and professional resources on curriculum reform, religious accommodation, and anti-Islamophobia assistance to teachers and students (Niyozov, 2009).
- *Toward Understanding: Moving Beyond Racism and Islamophobia Project*, by MENTORS (Muslim Educational Network, Training, and Outreach Service), the first-ever comprehensive, multimedia resource designed to address Islamophobia at both the primary and secondary school levels (Zine, 2004, p. 115).
- *Who is a Canadian?* A poster, geared for the primary level, where students are presented with an image of men, women, and children of different racial backgrounds, engaged in various activities and roles (police officers, film director, etc.) Some of the women in the poster are wearing hijab. Students are asked to identify those who are "Canadian." In most instances, blonde-haired and fair-skinned people are identified (even in multi-ethnic classrooms) as being "Canadian." Students are then asked to identify the "Muslims." In most cases, it is the darker-skinned people or women wearing hijab who are singled out. Finally, it is revealed that everyone in the picture is both Canadian and Muslim (Zine, 2004, p. 117-118).

**#4: There should be a dedicated space for Muslim students to express their identity, and at the same time a place for non-Muslim students to learn and ask questions about Islam and Muslims.**

Many of the researchers pointed to Muslim Student Associations as safe havens for Muslim students who felt isolated (2001, 2008, Niyozov, 2010). These students found a sense of belonging in these social groups and were better able to maintain and defend their Muslim identity in the face of discrimination and Islamophobia. Schools should facilitate the creation of these associations, on a model similar to the Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA). Similar to GSAs, MSAs in public schools should include some form of cross-religious outreach, to help both Muslim and non-Muslim students better understand each other. It is important to note that MSAs mostly operate in secondary schools, and therefore are not applicable to primary and junior students. An additional function for MSAs would be to raise awareness of Islamophobia at the school level. Muslim students can hold information sessions (akin to Islam Awareness Week events held at higher education institutions), helping to debunk common misconceptions held about Muslims and Islam.

**#5 There should be more research about the experiences of Muslim students in Ontario public schools.**

While some feel that, under the Trudeau government, Islamophobic rhetoric would lessen compared to the Harper years, societal Islamophobia is likely to remain widespread. Regrettably, in spite of equity policies, Islamophobia is alive and well in the Ontario public school system. Not enough is known about how it manifests itself in different schools across the province. It is even possible that the Islamophobia experienced by Muslim youth in Canada will escalate due to anti-Muslim rhetoric generated by Donald Trump's 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, widely covered and discussed in Canada. Therefore, while as of this writing I argue that a strengthening and implementation of existing policies, rather than explicit new legislation, is needed, this recommendation could change in the future.

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