

Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Belonging in an Islamic School



General Information About Islam

- The five pillars of the Islamic faith:
 - Reciting the Muslim profession of faith.
 - Praying five times per day.
 - Giving alms to the poor/charity.
 - Fasting during Ramadan.
 - Pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Islam is called a “deen” in Arabic, which is roughly translated as a way of life. Muslims do not see Islam as confined to prayers and rituals to be practised in private, but as a way to live a healthy, productive, and positive life. As a result, Islam impacts every aspect of a Muslim’s life.
- Muslims see themselves as part of the Judeo-Christian religious heritage. They believe in the prophets of the Bible and believe in one God, and not a “different” God from the Judeo-Christian traditions. They believe in the virgin birth of Jesus and the leadership of Moses in the Exodus. However, they do not celebrate the holidays commemorating these events.
- Muslims have two main celebrations:
 - Eid al-Fitr, after Ramadan (the month of fasting); and
 - Eid al-Adha, during the pilgrimage time.
- The word Islam is derived from an Arabic word that means peace. The violence committed by those calling themselves Muslims is decried by Muslims themselves. Muslims are supposed to fight against oppression and not cause it.

Ramadan dates are different every year. The exact dates for Ramadan are determined by the sighting of the new moon during the ninth month of the lunar Islamic calendar.

Ramadan in 2020 will begin around April 23, and it will be about 10 days earlier each year as we follow a lunar calendar, which is shorter than the Gregorian calendar.

Tips to Ensure a Muslim Colleague or Students are Supported/Welcomed

- ▶ Do not assume all Muslims are refugees or immigrants.
- ▶ Do not assume all Muslim students are EAL students. "When we moved back to Canada from the United States, two of my children were put into EAL classes, although they spoke and wrote perfect English. As I looked into this, it became apparent that they had not been tested but were placed there based on their foreign sounding last names and that they came from another country. Nobody bothered to look and see that country was the U.S." - Sabreena Haque
- ▶ Muslims have diet restrictions. Pork and pork products are the main concerns. Keep in mind items like pepperoni, other cured meats, and some baking can contain pork products. It is always helpful to have ingredients listed for foods at any potluck/staff gatherings. Muslims also do not drink alcohol or eat items cooked with alcohol. Staff gatherings that include people drinking alcohol can be very uncomfortable. It is helpful to let Muslim staff members know ahead of time if there will be alcohol present in order for them to decide whether or not they will attend.
- ▶ Muslims like personal space between the sexes. Islam teaches them to maintain a high level of modesty in all aspects of their lives. This includes both behaviour and style of dress. Men and women do not shake hands or hug members of the opposite sex. In assigning students to groups, keep in mind that some individuals may be uncomfortable being asked to work too closely with a member of the opposite sex, particularly if students are expected to work together outside of class time. Modesty with members of the same sex is also important. Muslim students may request to be allowed to change in bathroom stalls instead of an open change room as this would afford them a measure of privacy.
- ▶ Family is very important in Islam. Getting to know a student or colleague's family and making them feel welcome can be an important way to build relationships.
- ▶ Many, but not all, Muslim women wear a headscarf. It is a choice a woman makes. Do not assume that they do so out of pressure from their families or their communities. The headscarf, a khimar, in Arabic is only one aspect of hijab, the term for the modest clothing and behaviour expected of Muslim men and women. While men do not cover their hair, they are expected to dress and behave modestly as well.
- ▶ Muslims pray five times a day. As winter days are so short, at least one prayer would need to be said at school. All that is required is a small, quiet space (larger if there are a significant number of Muslims in the school). Individuals would need about five to 10 minutes for this prayer in order to do the required ablutions and prayer. These prayers can be done individually or as a group. However, Friday prayer will be longer as there is a required sermon, and the congregational component is mandatory. While it is not treated as a Sabbath, a day of rest and worship, they are required to pray together.
 - ▶ Ramadan is a month of fasting in daylight hours. Muslims do not eat or drink for that time period.No specific accommodations are necessary; however, it would be nice to plan special parties, events, or significant testing outside of this month. While young children do not always fast, students can begin fasting in senior elementary school and even before.
- ▶ Current events, history, and politics are all told from a certain perspective. We all need to be clear on our own perspectives when discussing issues in staffrooms, classrooms, and other spaces. We do not want to shy away from difficult questions but be willing to hear from other perspectives.
- ▶ If unsure or curious about something - ask! Building relationships is the best way to make someone feel welcome and included.

"For example, my children, especially my daughter who wears a headscarf, have often been asked where they're from as there is an assumption that she cannot be Canadian born and wear a headscarf. She says "Winnipeg and Regina." So then they move on to grandparents, a question most other people would not be asked." – Sabreena Haque

THE RESEARCH

Research Questions:

- 1) How can teacher collaboration strengthen relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim teachers?
- 2) How might this collaboration enhance student and staff sense of belonging in the school community?

Main findings include:

- Current use of collaboration between Islamic teachers and STF teachers is very low
 - Obstacles to collaboration include lack of time and power imbalances.
- Colonial discourses influence the spaces of the school.
 - Spaces that do not feel inclusive to Islamic teachers.
 - Exclusion of Islamic teachers from decision-making.
 - English is the dominant language and all meetings, events, and assemblies are held in English.
 - Inequalities between the teachers include lack of space, difference in pay, no union to advocate for them.
- Participating in this action research study increased collaboration between Muslim and non-Muslim participants and positively influenced relationships and feelings of belonging.
 - Meaningful conversations about school policies and issues of inequality were had.
 - All participants agreed that positive Muslim and non-Muslim relationships need to be modeled to enhance both staff and student sense of belonging.
 - Continued research and conversations about belonging are needed, especially for Muslims and other minority groups in Canada.

THE TEAM

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