

The Experiences of Muslim High School Students in the Public School System in British Columbia

by
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Ethics Statement

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Abstract

It is important for Muslim students to be heard and feel understood by their teachers, administrators, and peers. Academic research has overlooked the experiences of Muslim students in the public school system. There are a few Canadian studies on this topic from the perspective of the administrators, teachers, and parents. Given this limitation in the literature, the focus of this research was to directly engage in conversation with recent Muslim high school graduates to understand their experience with discrimination. I used semi-structured interviews with five recent graduates in British Columbia. Each person shared their overall experience in high school and whether they had experienced discrimination by their peers and/or staff members. Once I analysed the data, I found five major themes around the topic of discrimination. Furthermore, recommendations were provided by the participants on how best to combat these issues and provide better accommodation for future generations of Muslim students.

Keywords: accommodation; experiences; Muslim students; high school; discrimination

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List of Acronyms

BC	British Columbia
PE	Physical Education
SFU	Simon Fraser University
USA	United States of America

Glossary

Hijab	A head and neck covering worn in public by Muslim females
Hijabi	The Muslim female that is wearing the Hijab

Introduction

As a racial and religious minority, I am not a foreigner to the concept of discrimination. As an immigrant student, I have suffered a great deal of discrimination growing up within the K -12 public school system in British Columbia (BC). Discrimination has become a normal part of life for me, as I have seen it present itself in many different forms. In Canada, I was exposed to much more religious discrimination than anywhere else before. The name, Mohamed, that I carry brought many unfavourable nicknames and slurs. It was an easy target used as a means to attack my faith. Especially as a young student being exposed to that really made me question many things, including my identity and who I am. I initially thought that it was an issue that I alone was facing until I realized otherwise; based on discussions with various youths from my community it appears to be an issue that many of them have encountered.

For the purpose of this study, discrimination can be defined as the unjust treatment of individuals based on observable differences (Fish & Syed, 2020). The existing research on anti-Muslim discrimination in the K-12 school system is quite limited. The existing research contains several insightful studies that illustrate the experiences of Muslim parents, student teachers, and administrators in the public-school system. There is a clear gap in the current literature, particularly in Canada. The main discrepancy in the research is the clear oversight of Muslim Canadian students' perspectives and lived experience with anti-Muslim discrimination.

For example, Gou's (2011) study of Muslim parents in Calgary provides vivid examples of the discrimination experienced by students and their families, expressed by the parents. Gou interviewed multiple Muslim parents, many of whom were well educated and were also involved within the community. These parents described discrimination that they or their children had experienced from various teachers and even administrators. One parent mentioned that their child's principal refused to accommodate a place for students to pray, stating that the school "is not a place for religion, it's a place for education" (Guo, 2011, p. 5). Another parent mentioned that a teacher perceived her as "dumb" because she was wearing a hijab during the parent-teacher conference.

Some parents in Guo's study had asked for some exemptions to be made for certain classes, such as those that required swimwear clothing or sex education classes (Guo, 2011). Some teachers were willing to accommodate different swimwear and even have a separate swim time where possible. In contrast, other parents were alright with their children partaking in these classes as set out. This diversity in approach is influenced both by religion, but sometimes more so by culture (Guo, 2011). The diversity of requests made by families, exemplifies the diversity in acceptance among the educators as well. Given the diversity that exists, one suggestion made was to have mandatory education of the different prominent religions for teachers. However, one student teacher felt that it is very difficult to study religions, as there are many of them (Guo, 2015). Besides accommodation requests, there are direct discriminatory acts that Muslim students encounter. For example, in the United States (USA) there was a situation in which students witnessed a female Muslim student who wore the hijab being physically attacked and having her hijab ripped off (Dupper, et al., 2015). Unfortunately, Muslim youth face difficulties of this nature, including being physically and verbally attacked, even in places such as a school setting in which all students should feel safe. This can stem from lack of accommodation and understanding.

Just as the parents in Guo's study expressed a range of viewpoints, student teachers had varying stances. Student teachers are students training in public school classrooms to become certified teachers. Some student teachers believed that schools should stay secular and not involve religious practices nor should there be explicit discussions about faith. Student teachers with this viewpoint were adamant that since religious practice is not part of the school curriculum then there should be no accommodation and that parents should find "a school that can accommodate their wishes" (Guo, 2015, p.10). This stance is not unique to the teachers in Guo's study: Dupper et al.'s (2015) study of experiences of students in public schools in the USA found that teachers refused to accommodate minority students wanting to write their exam earlier or later due to a religious holiday. In contrast, other teachers in Guo's study embraced and accommodated any religious practices they could, to promote diversity in their own classrooms. They believed that differences should be "celebrated and not hidden" (Guo, 2015, p. 197).

Charter Rights and Policies

Direct discrimination is where one is explicitly denied a right or freedom, whereas indirect discrimination is when an action has an uneven effect on the recipient. This can be based on physical characteristics, religion, ethnic background and so forth (Bosset 1989; Ledoyen 1992, as cited in Helly, 2004). Within the Canadian context, we have the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that guarantees fundamental freedoms of conscience religion, thought, belief, and opinion (Canadian Charter of rights and Freedoms, 1982). This is quite broad, and the degree of implementation varies across the country (Jacquet, & D'Amico, 2016). For instance, in Quebec we have very direct policy implemented that is discriminatory in that they banned all religious symbols. This disproportionately impacts Muslim women who observe wearing the hijab which is a display of religious affiliation and should be allowed under our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Jacquet, & D'Amico, 2016).

In BC, there is an absence in policies and guidelines to deal with religious accommodation (Jacquet & D'Amico, 2016). This shows the lack of cohesiveness within the district and ultimately from the Ministry of Education, in which there is a lack of clear guidelines leading to situations being dealt with in a case-by-case basis (Jacquet & D'Amico, 2016). This allows for bias as this allows each administrator to act based on their own beliefs and understanding. In addition, the school districts usually do not collect religious affiliations in their data of their students, which can also influence the information presented in the studies (Jacquet & D'Amico). This means that similar situations will be dealt with differently at different schools even within the same school district. The vagueness in policy can also put the administrators in difficult and challenging circumstances as they must make ethical decisions that could potentially backfire on them (Jacquet & D'Amico, 2016). Discrimination can be indirect or subtle in that there is a lack of clear policy implemented to protect religious minorities. For example, if we look at the Burnaby School Board's policy on "multiculturalism and race relations" there is no section on religious discrimination or accommodation, and this policy was last created and updated in 1985 (Board of Education Burnaby School District 41, 1985). This appears to indicate the lack of seriousness the school board has regarding this topic in which no updated policy has been made since its creation.

Differences Across Canada

Some consistent findings across the studies show that even though Canadians are proud to be part of a multicultural society, religious acceptance or tolerance within the school setting is still a highly debated and contested issue. As some administrators in the study indicated that schools should be secular to ensure there is no faith supported more than another (Jacquet & D'Amico, 2016). This principle leads to various interpretations adopted differently across the provinces. For example, in Quebec they have disallowed religious symbols in public sectors including schools, while BC generally does not focus on one faith over another. Jacquet and D'Amico (2016) suggest that one reason Quebec might be different than BC in terms of secular policies is that in BC, the local level, such as administrators, have the influence in the matter of interaction between parents, teachers and students. It is understandable that the district and administrators do leave room for flexibility to deal with the diverse religious practices.

Discrimination at the Administrative level – BC Example

This leads me to examine how the administrators handle religious diversity and discrimination. The BC Ministry of Education (2017) defines diversity as “taking into account the different beliefs, customs, practices, languages” and so forth of individuals and cultural groups. This is to ensure acceptance and inclusion amongst various groups to allow the space for mutual respect. The role of the administrators is to make ethical decisions and to acknowledge and implement values in the school to protect students and allow for all students to feel safe (Jacquet & D'Amico, 2016). This will lead to ensuring inclusion is implemented within their school (Jacquet & D'Amico, 2016). In the study by Jacquet and D'Amico (2016) the administrators were interviewed to understand their values and perspectives following their decisions in particular matters. While, in the Guo (2011) study, it showed the point of view of the parents following certain decisions that administrators and teachers made regarding families that identified as religious minorities. These two papers helped the reader see both sides of the story.

The administrators interviewed within the lower mainland indicated that the policies from the BC government are “clear, broad and flexible” (Jacquet & D'Amico, 2016, p. 9). They deal with situations on a case-by-case basis. However, based on the response from the participants in the study, it shows that they each interpret the policies

differently, it is not just about dealing with matters on a case-by-case basis. A participant in the study indicated that they appreciated the flexibility as it allows the leader, the administrators, to work with families to come up with the best decision possible for each individual situation that may arise. While another administrator clearly stated that the BC policies are secular, and on that basis that they should not “deal with religious stuff” (Jacquet & D’Amico, 2016 p.10). Secularism in BC was initially meant for no one Christian denomination over another being promoted in schools (Jacquet & D’Amico, 2016). However, some administrators acknowledged that it is difficult to separate religion from an educational setting, as multiculturalism exists and from those different religious values - “they are intertwined” (Jacquet & D’Amico, 2016 p.10). Also, other administrators note that it is not just the students’ cultural and religious values but the “values, beliefs or religious identity” of an educator within the system that too needs to be accounted for. When guidelines are broad, they allow for school leaders to interpret and deal with a situation as best as one can, however, that can also lead to controversial decisions based on one’s stance and beliefs (Guo, 2011). These individuals are future teachers and leaders of the school system, so this reflects on the diversity of thought within the leaders and teachers that are in the system. While Jacquet & D’Amico (2016) do not explicitly mention the differences in ways of dealing with religious diversity, there is a consensus that religious diversity exists and it creates conflicts for students, teachers as well as parents, and it is the administrators that must find the middle ground. It is important to discuss the impact these issues have on students’ identity as these conversations may lead to common respect and acceptance of one another (Jacquet & D’Amico, 2016). The question that arises is how should one then deal with diversity and multiculturalism of the community they serve?

Some administrators have raised the issue that some students might use the religion card to get out of certain classes or activities and they would not know if it were for legitimate reasons or otherwise (Jacquet & D’Amico, 2016). There are four main categories “in which religious diversity created tensions” and they include: curriculum, interpersonal conflict, celebrations, and structures (Jacquet & D’Amico, 2016 p.11). While these concerns are brought up, the participants were confident that the leaders can handle any issue that arose. Their focus is to work with improving the relationship with the families and to find a middle ground for everyone to be satisfied with. However, it is recognized that “it’s a very fine line that principals follow” knowing that each case

would be different (Jacquet & D'Amico, 2016, p.14). Understanding the mindset of leaders and the decisions they must make for all parties involved will help in creating a harmonious environment within our diverse society.

Research Question

There is a gap in the research in that it is lacking the perspective and lived experience of students, especially here in BC. I focused on this aspect and attempt to fill the gap by understanding the experiences of Muslim students in the public school system in BC. I seek to answer this question: how do former Muslim high school graduates describe their experiences of religious discrimination by their peers, teachers and/or administrators in the high school, public school system, in the Lower Mainland of BC?

Methodology

In exploring high school graduates' experiences, I used the qualitative approach, as the aim of this research is to explore meaning through experiences (DeCarlo et al., 2022). As Duffy (1987) explains “[a] qualitative approach is used as a vehicle for studying the empirical world from the perspective of the subject, not the researcher.” (cited in Carr, 1994, p. 716). However, quantitative studies are used to “test pre-determined hypotheses and produce generalized results” (Marshall, 1996, p. 522). Hence, for the purposes of this study a qualitative approach is the best method to completely understand the target populations experiences which aligns with the aims of this research.

Researcher Role/Positionality

I take on an emic (insider) perspective for this research. An emic perspective is when the researcher is part of the community they are researching (Wilson et al., 2022). In this research, I am not only a Muslim, but I am also involved in the community that my participants are a part of. I have volunteered and worked with them at a community level where we are able to build good relationships, and I am someone they trust. Based on this, an insider, such as myself, can collect data from participants who are less guarded (Wilson et al., 2022).

Research Site/Participants

This study is focused on the Muslim community within the Lower Mainland. This is an important topic as these issues are usually only discussed in safe circles. This research may shed light on potential problems that some students within a religious minority group appear to be facing.

I have interviewed five students who are recent high school graduates, who are between 18 and 22 years of age. I have reached out to males and females equally within that age group that happen to be from a youth organization in my community. I chose this community because I have volunteered with them in the past. Having done that made it easier for me to interact with them and pitch my research to the leaders to get

their permission before obtaining participants. I received permission from the community leader to announce during weekly Friday programs to recruit participants for the research. During my announcement I indicated that I was looking for males and females to participate in my research. I was initially going to send out a community text message to recruit participants, however, it was not necessary because after a few public announcements I managed to get participants. To align with ethical research practices, I have taken participants based on a first come first serve basis, with no preference to any individuals. In addition, it was made clear throughout the process that this will be confidential and that they had the ability to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, I required a consent form to be given that went over all the details including their right to withdraw at any time (see Appendix B). As a thank you for their time I provided each participant with a \$25 Starbucks gift card.

Students in this age group will have a relatively recent memory of discriminatory incidents. In addition, this age group may be more conscious of the different forms of discrimination including aggression and microaggressions against them. The reason I interviewed graduated students is because they had time to reflect about what happened with them in the school years and may be better able to explain their struggle in retrospect.

Data Collection

The interviews were semi-structured, which means I had some open-ended questions prepared; however, there was space that allowed the conversation to flow into related topics if the participant decided to expand on a particular topic. After making the announcements only five participants volunteered. Therefore, I interviewed five former students. Four of the interviews were conducted virtually, and one was in-person. The main objective from these interviews was to “obtain description of specific incidents by asking respondents to particularize” (Weiss, 1995, p. 71). I was able to gather a conclusive understanding of their experience(s) by asking specific questions which included follow-up questions. The approach taken in this research focused initially on asking them about their current state/experience with anti-Muslim discrimination. This set the tone of the interview, while also getting them to be comfortable. For a full list of the questions please refer to Appendix A. I chose these questions based on my personal experience, but they were also guided by the literature. For instance, Weiss (1995)

discussed how to formulate and ask questions to get more information on experiences. Besides the listed questions, I probed as required to get more details. For example, if more detail was required, I requested them to walk me through the incident (Weiss, 1995). Alternatively, if I wanted to identify actors, I explicitly asked, “was anyone else there when that was happening?” (Weiss, 1995, p. 75). Since this was a series of interviews that were recorded and then later transcribed, I ensured any gestures or expressions were conveyed verbally. To capture that I asked questions similar to “what were the feelings you had?” (Weiss, 1995, p. 76). This is the general approach I took within the allotted timeframe of approximately 45 minutes for each interview. For the in-person as well as the virtual interviews, I used the Zoom application to record and transcribe the interviews. All the content was securely saved on my SFU OneDrive.

Data Analysis

In analyzing my data, I kept a reflexive journal which allowed me to take manual notes as the interviews were conducted. This helped provide context to the interview as well as the opportunity to note key observations throughout the interview process (DeCarlo et al., 2022). As mentioned earlier, I used the Zoom application to record and transcribe the audio from my interviews. I then used the website Otranscribe.com to be able to slow down the audio so that I was able to go over the transcription rigorously to ensure that I accurately captured the participants conversations. This website kept all the data on my desktop, and nothing was saved or kept on the cloud. Since this was a solo process, I went over this process twice to ensure accuracy in the content that I had. I also tried to include nonverbal communication (where possible) which included laughter, sighs or pauses; in order to better capture the experience and to better relay the information (Gubrium & Holstein 2001). Following this process, I used the application Quirkos 2.5.3 which assisted me to further process the conversations by coding each participants transcript to be able to analyze and later identify themes. I checked across the recordings to ensure that the transcription was accurately captured. The data remained on my desktop computer and was never uploaded to the cloud.

I went through each transcript and tried to identify the themes that were related to my research question. I used the inductive method to look for repetition of words, and theory related material which focused on managing and dealing with social relationships, cultural differences as well as similarities and differences (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Based on that, I started comparing the codes that were created for each transcript. Coding helped me break down my individual transcripts into more meaningful parts (DeCarlo et al., 2022). Based on the codes that I developed, I was able to see potential themes and categories. The themes that I identified based on my analysis were the following: identity, discrimination, assimilation/conformity, accommodations, solutions, and recommendations.

Trustworthiness

I have received my ethics certificate from SFU. I do acknowledge the existence of bias since I have personal experience in this area, and that as a Muslim myself, I interviewed participants from within my community. To mitigate this, I refrained from sharing my own inputs and thoughts when interviewing my participants. Additionally, even during the analysis process I ensured that only the participants wording was used when I was referring to their contributions. This was done to ensure that I am not leading my participants to a particular response or my research to a particular outcome that was not directed by the participants (Weiss, 1995 p.74). I focused on the questions and did not sway the discussion in one way or another to guarantee that the participants were sharing their own stories as is. In addition, both, before and after the data collection phase I would regularly check in with myself to confirm that my own biases were not interfering with the results and conclusions that I drew from the data. The main approach to this was for me to only interpret and discuss responses within the extent that the participant provided. For example, only their language was used, and if any clarification was required, I asked for it then (in a non-leading manner) so that I refrain from reading into their content with my own biases and interpretations.

Participants happened to be graduates from different secondary institutions and different districts, this was unintentional. However, this gave me an opportunity to have a better representation of anti-Muslim discrimination that may be happening across various districts within BC. To protect the participants, the transcriptions and any information were stored on my SFU OneDrive. At every step in my research, I have ensured that confidentiality is maintained. I recognize this may be a sensitive topic, for that reason there is full transparency that the participant can withdraw at any point, even after the interview. Data can only be accessed by the principal investigator, Dr. Rebecca

Cox, as well as the student lead, Mohamed Assad. Data will be erased by December 2025.

Participants have verbally consented before the interview. In addition, they were clearly informed that they can withdraw at any point throughout the process, with no penalty or repercussions.

Findings

In the following sections I will delve into some of data that was collected in my research and present the important themes. As mentioned, there were five participants, I will introduce the five participants using their pseudonyms. All five of my participants were between the ages of 18 and 22 years of age and they all identified as Muslims. I interviewed two females (Yusra, and Marium) and three males (Maher, Musa, and Zaid). Furthermore, in this section, I will discuss the main themes that emerged from the analysis.

Muslim Identity

Muslim identity was one of the main themes that naturally emerged from my analysis. As mentioned earlier, all five of my participants identified as Muslims. The female participants, Yusra and Marium, both wore the hijab and to them that certainly conveyed to the public that they are Muslim. Yusra spoke at length about the impact that had in her interactions with people. The hijab that is worn by Muslim females is a way for them to distinguish themselves, as well as a form of self-identity (Syed, 2013). Yusra emphasized that people will “automatically know” that she is a Muslim. Marium further expanded on this point by mentioning that whatever judgement people had on Muslims as a whole group will be at the forefront of her interaction with them well before she “even gets a word in.” Yusra also indicated that because of wearing the hijab she “wouldn’t be like the cool kids.” Although Muslim females who wear the hijab might be expressing pride in their identity, there is also the alternative of being an easier target to experiencing discrimination (Syed, 2013). Another observation she mentioned is that people “censor themselves around” her and treated her as an outsider by treating her “differently than they do other people.” This point was further reiterated by Marium, when she voiced that although she identifies as a Muslim, she does not want to be outcasted because of her religion. She just wants to be treated like everyone else.

The experiences of the male participants were quite different. Two of the three males that participated mentioned that they looked “fairly white” as Zaid put it laughingly. While Musa indicated this by saying he is “more fair skin than the typical Arab.” Both Zaid and Musa indicated that other students (and people) would not know they were

Muslim just by looking at them. Muslim men do not have any identifiable articles of clothing they need to wear, which means that they are not easily identified as Muslims. This sentiment was echoed by the third male participant Maher, who said that he was usually asked his origin or name before his religious identity was assumed. Though he did not shy away from having a Muslim name and would identify as a religious minority. It does appear that the participants apparent religious identity (or lack of) certainly contributed to whether they were discriminated against or not, and to what extent.

In-classroom Discrimination

There were similar responses between the male and female participants in their reactions to experiencing discrimination. In Yusra's case, when she faced discriminatory comments her coping mechanism was to label it as "something minor" which led her to "just brush it off." Sometimes she laughed at some of the discriminatory comments instead of speaking up because she was not sure if they really meant it, or they were trying to make a joke. As Zaid also indicated, students sometimes "aren't very thoughtful" so he too "just let it go." Even if the jokes were inappropriate, he tried not to take it "too badly."

Another common experience among the participants was being labeled as "terrorist" by their peers. It was indicated that among their peers and in their schools the term "terrorist" was very popular. Zaid specifically mentioned that he did not think this term was very problematic because he saw it as a "stereotypical joke." While Musa considered this as playful mocking and he too would insult them jokingly as a coping mechanism.

Despite Yusra indicating that she tried to overlook the discriminatory comments, there were times when she was really hurt by them. One particular incident that she relayed is when one of her classmates shouted in class that Yusra is "gonna call Usama bin Laden on us." She was very hurt by this incident and left the class right away. This incident got her to question why she would even get a comment like that, and if they really thought that she was a terrorist. Yusra indicated that she feels that these remarks are overlooked as to not create bigger issues, but they can only be overlooked to a certain extent. Musa articulated this notion by saying that "they already know that it's inaccurate, but they just choose to say [it]" so they can "get a reaction out of you." These

were examples given by the participants that outline the interactions with their peers, which show explicit examples of discrimination.

These comments came from the students; however, the participants indicated that there were incidents in which their teachers have discriminated against them too. The discrimination that came from teachers were more implicit. The main examples that were brought up occurred physical education (PE) class, this showed up both in middle and high schools for some of the participants. As Musa worded it, practicing Muslim students are not supposed to be “holding hands with the opposite gender.” Maher added to this by saying that as a Muslim, “we don’t dance or listen to this music.” This meant that when it came to the dance unit in the PE curriculum, Muslim students asked to opt-out on that premise and asked for an alternative assignment. In middle school one of Zaid’s teachers made him really uncomfortable because he was being questioned a lot on the matter and he felt that he was being interrogated. While Yusra stated that she did not feel that her teachers understood her and gave her an alternative assignment that was “much more difficult”. She felt like she was being “punished” for not partaking in the dance class. In this particular example, Yusra was assigned to write an essay, as opposed to going for a run or hitting “the weight room” which she felt would have been a more appropriate alternative for a PE class. In addition to that, other students questioned her, and the students did not really understand her and thought she was “totally extreme.”

Maher’s experience was similar to Yusra’s, in which the teacher did not understand his reasoning well. Although he was given an alternative assignment, he did not think the assignment was fair, but the teacher refused to accommodate further, and she basically insinuated that it was his fault for opting out of the dance unit. Maher at that time did not think too much of it, but it was later when he was reflecting on his experience that he felt that he was mistreated by his teacher. The lack of understanding of teachers appears to be very common, and in Maher’s case teachers were clearly perplexed with why some Muslim students were participating in some of the activities that Maher was claiming to not be able to for religious reasons. Maher felt uncomfortable because he felt that some teachers were trying to pressure him to conform to what they wanted, but he stood his ground and simply responded that everyone has their own beliefs.

Marium's experience in middle school was quite different than in high school. Her experience in middle school pertains to the month of Ramadhan, which is the month of fasting for Muslims. When she conveyed to her PE teachers that she cannot be partaking in her exercise classes as usual because she is fasting, they dismissed her concerns and told her to "just continue participating... you'll be fine." That "really invalidated [her] belief" and did not consider her comfort and feelings. She saw that the teachers were unwilling to understand her concerns nor work with her so that she was comfortable. Similar to the previous participants, her teachers were also not very understanding when she wanted to opt out of the dance classes. She indicated that she was the only hijabi at her school, and for that reason she believes she was not given any alternatives as this was probably "unmarked territory" for them. She was compelled to participate in the dance unit with another female, in which Marium had to take on the role of the male. While she did participate, she was "feeling embarrassed, because of the judgment" of her peers, as they did not understand why she was dancing in the role of the male. The issue originated with making her come out of her comfort zone to partake in an activity that goes against her religion, and then further discomfort when she had to take on the "male" role. She felt like the "odd one out" which impacted her morale in school.

Assimilation/Conformity

Among the participants another common theme is that they had to conform to the common standard. Marium indicated this was done to avoid "caus[ing] any problems" and she did not want the situations to go to the administration and create a "whole thing" about it. She stated that she really did not want her "faith be the reason why [she's] being difficult."

In a different context, Musa found that he had to conform to what the teacher wanted in his writing so that his grades would not be negatively impacted. He felt like he had to adjust his assignments to "match more with what she believed...[what] she thought." In addition, he stated that he tried to hide as much of his beliefs and perspective especially on religious matters to avoid getting his grades negatively impacted.

Another situation that Yusra highlighted was how socially she had to conform or pretend to so that people will like her. She felt like she had to fit in just so that her peers think she is normal. Otherwise, someone can be “shut out” or even be considered a loser. She gave the example of partying to try and conform or rather fake that she liked the same things so that she can connect with her high school friends. In a standard party there would be drinking and other things that are considered forbidden in Islam; alternatively, Muslims usually host parties that do not include those things. So, to fit in Yusra will share that she went to a party but would not disclose any details. Another component of the social life is people being in relationships. In Yusra’s experience, her peers thought it was very odd for someone to not be in a relationship, and she felt that they looked at her as the weird one. Despite her efforts to fit in, Yusra felt that she was “not accepted” because she was unable to assimilate to their way of living. This sentiment was echoed by Musa as he shared an observation of some of his Muslim peers that were initially practicing but began to integrate themselves into western society and acted as if their “values never existed.” It appears that students had to assimilate into western society or pretend to, in order to feel accepted.

Accommodation

Another identifiable theme among the participants is around the topic of accommodation either by their teachers or administrators. In Yusra’s case she continued to think that her high school was not “very accommodating” because when it came to the prayer times which happened to be during the hours she was at school, there was no prayer room. If one requested a prayer room, there was no designated room they can use but rather a random room which made her and her Muslim peers feel uncomfortable because students would just stare at them as they were performing their prayers.

In Maher’s experience he attended two different high schools, in his first high school he had to put in considerable effort and commitment to ensure his teachers would respect his wishes and give him an alternative assignment to the dance unit in PE. There were six other students with him, so he indicated that he felt comfortable to ask and persist to avoid joining the dance unit due to his religious reasons even if the alternative assignment was much more difficult to complete. He did mention that one teacher was very unaccommodating, and he felt disrespected in his interactions with them. Alternatively, when he moved to a new high school, he felt more comfortable

sharing his thoughts and felt “more motivated” because as he said the teachers at the new school were “much more accepting” of him and his religious practices. The reason for this he believes is because the second school he attended was a lot more diverse with a larger Muslim population. Maher brought up his experience in this school during the dance unit in PE and said that the teachers at this second school would bring up the topic themselves and were very accommodating. He did not have to go through the hassle of trying to talk to the teacher and convince them to give an alternative assignment, it was them who had that process in place.

For Marium her experience in high school was better than her middle school because the staff in her high school were much more understanding and this allowed her to be comfortable speaking up. She did mention that a steep learning curve for her was when she had to learn that “you have to be your own advocate.” She learned to advocate for herself and to be outspoken when she required accommodation and to have “pride in [her] faith.” The teachers were supportive of that matter and instead of the dance class she was able to go the weight room or “participate in other activities that the school had.” Her “willingness to stand up for [herself] was the reason why it was a little easier to interact with staff” in high school. This was a similar experience shared by Zaid in that he found his high school environment to be supportive and since they knew he was Muslim they would engage in conversation with him to learn more and to better accommodate.

Recommendations on Improving Circumstances

When asking the participants to reflect on their experience and what advice they would have given themselves Marium said that she would advise herself that her “faith is not a burden to anybody, point, blank, period.” The other participants had similar sentiments, including Zaid who said he would have ensured that he explained himself better so that he was better understood by his teachers. While Yusra said she would have spoken up when she was disrespected.

Following that, the former high school students in my research were asked going back what they would improve in the school system. The participants had various responses to this matter based on their own experience. However, the one main point the majority suggested, and as Zaid implied is to educate the teachers and

administrators on the “various backgrounds and various religions” and practices out there. Maher also mentioned that teachers and administrators should be understanding, and what may help with that is having diversity among the teachers so that there is an overall more welcoming environment.

Marium indicated that she wants to see staff who have “empathy and tolerance and respect” for their students as they are “dealing with fragile people” who need the support to grow. She then says that teachers play a critical role in molding the students into future adults and future members of society. Marium still remembers some of her experiences with her teachers vividly. Marium confidently shared the importance of a teacher by stating the following: “teachers are such a valuable asset to our community because the littlest things make the biggest differences and the littlest actions that teachers do will carry on through somebody’s whole entire life”. Yusra shared a similar outlook and emphasized that is why it is important for teachers to change their mindset so they better treat students.

Yusra and a few others suggested to implement anonymous surveys that will be circulated to students so that administrators would understand their thoughts and experiences to better gauge what is really happening. A concern brought up by Yusra is a lack of anonymity that gets students worried about getting backlash from other students if they speak up. Zaid was one of the people who also suggested this, and he mentioned that this would provide an opportunity for students to have a space to make complaints or suggestions and to feel heard.

To address some of the issues that Muslim students deal with, Maher continuously suggested that Muslims should have a school club so that there is a safe space for those who identify as Muslim and help in adding more school wide programs that relates to Muslims as well. Musa also shared this idea and suggested these clubs can have outreach programs to help educate more students and staff and have them better understand the Muslim students. Musa further indicated that these programs can help clarify some of the stereotypes that are perpetuated by the media and to help raise awareness.

Another common suggestion is for schools to have an allocated place for students to pray. Zaid mentioned that in doing so will allow practicing Muslims to have

the flexibility of joining a sport and other clubs instead of worrying to rush home to complete their prayers or risk losing out on the prayer time.

The recommended solutions made by the participants were quite common ones as mentioned above. These reflect that despite having slightly different experiences with discrimination, common solutions were suggested to create a more conducive and welcoming environment for Muslim students.

Discussion

Based on my findings it appears that the skin tone and overall appearance of a person, determines how they will be treated (or if they will be mistreated rather). As mentioned, both Zaid and Musa indicated that they had a fairer complexion that did not necessarily identify them as a stereotypical Muslim, so they faced less discrimination and judgement. However, for the Muslim female participants, who both wore the hijab, they were easily identified as Muslims and felt that they were judged before they could even get “a word in”.

My research aimed to add to the missing content of the study by Guo (2011) that focused the conversation on student teachers, and Muslim parents. Guo's (2011) findings also had responses regarding how Muslim students' requests were dealt with regarding accommodation for dance class or requesting to opt out of sex education classes (from the perspective of teachers and parents). The perspective of the students highlighted in my research depicted the various ways that students' requests were handled, but the underlying commonality is that in most of the cases students themselves had to learn to become their own advocates. A few of the participants mentioned that they did not get a chance to reflect prior to this conversation and only now that they are thinking of it are they realizing that they faced discrimination and had their concerns undermined. Back then some of the participants coped with these discriminatory situations by trying to brush it off and let it go, but now they recognize that the words used, the lack of understanding, and sometimes belittling of important matters to Muslim students were all acts of discrimination.

The students mentioned that we do live in a diverse society and that the schools, the administrators, and teachers within them should be aware and know how to deal with

the various needs of students. It is not sufficient to label the school as diverse, but ideally the teachers and administrators should be educated on respecting religious diversity. Participants emphasized the importance for students to have the opportunity to create their own space so that Muslim students can support each other where possible and help educate others to help eliminate or at least reduce discrimination. Marium stated that she does not want to see the “revolving door effect happen” to other diverse and marginalized communities either. Towards the end of the interview, Marium noted that she would not want another Muslim student, particularly one who wears the hijab to go through the same experiences as she did.

The main studies I used to research this area included Guo’s 2011, Guo’s 2015 and Jacquet and D’Amico (2016) studies, and as mentioned they did not focus their research on engaging with the student population directly. In the general academic research in Canada that was a major area that was lacking in that there was no research about what the students went through or what their experiences were in relation to discrimination. I recognize that I only interviewed a sample of five students for my research, and that each Muslim student depending on their location in the Lower Mainland and other contributing factors will have a different view on their high school experience, in particular their experience with discrimination. For example, Maher attended two different high school within the same city, yet each experience was drastically different in terms of their approach to his religious accommodation requests.

One of the major limitations to my research is that most of them were conducted online. These sessions were interrupted multiple times due to technical issues, which broke down the flow of the conversations, and constantly requiring me to start over with the question. Another potential limitation to my research is that I did not approach other Muslim communities and only went to the one I personally participate in. Given these limitations I am unable to extrapolate to the entire population, but this does provide some insight into an area that is not largely focused on. I hope there can be more research completed in this area to better understand the diverse experiences of Muslim students within BC. I would recommend administering a survey along with qualitative interviews with students directly across the Lower Mainland to provide more insight and draw better conclusions on action items to help reduce discrimination against Muslim students. Furthermore, I would hope for this kind of research to be expanded to look at how discrimination effected individuals after high school.

Conclusion

Despite my relatively small sample, there were many commonalities related to discrimination that the students shared. The participants in my study indicated that they had to be their own advocates and that was not always met with understanding from their teachers or peers. It is only after leaving the high school system that some of the participants are now reflecting on their experiences. Overall, they are advocating for more empathy, understanding and tolerance for religious accommodation, as well as creating safe spaces for Muslim students to feel welcomed so they do not need to hide their identities to try and fit in. Additionally, something that was mentioned by Marium but echoed by Johnson (2018), was the significant impact that teachers can play by actively teaching other students to be appreciative, respectful, and understanding of other cultures and religions.

In terms of policy, I hope that the Education Ministry when working on developing the curriculum can implement alternative teaching and assignments for students who require accommodation and cannot partake in the standard class activities for religious reasons. Implementing this within the curriculum and having it directly communicated by the Ministry will provide teachers with the resources and ability to better work with the diverse needs of the students in their classes. Another component that I hope would be addressed is creating a dedicated prayer/meditation room for students of various practices and faiths to use without putting the students in a difficult or awkward situation in having to ask and advocate for themselves in this regard. Lastly as my research participants mentioned multiple times, it is crucial to have some educational campaigns for staff and students on how to deal with students from various faiths and in particular for Muslim students. Muslim student clubs are one of the best ways to achieve these goals, which simultaneously empowers students and gives them the opportunity to advocate for themselves together. Educating administrators, teachers and other students of the diversities that exist within their schools will set precedence against discrimination and hopefully move away from the negative stereotypes that people are exposed to through the media.

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Appendix A. Interview Questions

1. Tell me, how was your general experience in high school? /How do you describe your experience in public school?
2. Do you find yourself feeling discriminated against at your job or current educational institution because of your religious identity?
3. Have you experienced any conflict or uncomfortable situation that can be attributed as religious discrimination? Tell me about that experience you remember vividly (if they have mentioned multiple instances or an instance) How did you feel about it?
4. How were you able to differentiate between religious discrimination versus cultural or racial discrimination?
5. What steps or measures did you take to deal with the situation for yourself?
6. Did you feel comfortable reaching out to an administrator or teacher to reconcile the situation? Why or why not?
7. Now thinking back about it, would you have dealt with it differently?
8. At any point when you felt discriminated against, did your academic performance/attendance get impacted? If so, how?
9. Now that you look back, what would you have liked to be implemented to have a better support system for you? (What change do you like to see happen in schools so that the discrimination won't happen or support system available)
10. Is there anything else you would like to add to this conversation before we conclude it?

Appendix B. Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

The Experiences of Muslim High school students in the Public School System in British Columbia

Study number: #30001440

Thank you for considering participating in an interview about your experience as a Muslim student in high school. Before you decide whether to participate, please take time to review the following information. If you have any questions or need additional information, please ask! If, after reviewing this information, you are still interested in participating, then we will go forward with the interview.

I, Mohamed Assad, am conducting this interview as part of a research project exploring experiences of Muslim students who are recent graduates of the public high school system. I am a teacher in the Surrey school district and this project is a requirement for the Masters in Educational Leadership program at SFU that I am currently in. This research is being supervised by Dr. Rebecca Cox, Associate Professor, in the Faculty of Education. I will write up the results of this research in the form of a research report, and I will present them in the form of a public presentation at SFU during the Summer of 2023.

The purpose of this research is to learn more about your experience as a Muslim student in the K-12 school system in BC. If you choose to participate, I will arrange a 45 - 60 minutes interview to explore your perspective and the extent to which you may have experienced discrimination based on your identity as a Muslim. We will abide by the latest provincial health guidelines in relation to the COVID19 pandemic, and depending on your preference we can arrange for the interview via video conference, or we can meet in person (either at Simon Fraser University Surrey campus or at the Fatimia Community service Society of BC in Surrey).

During this interview, I will ask about your experience in the public school system as a Muslim student. I will ask to explore your perspective and the extent to which you may have experienced discrimination based on your identity as a Muslim. You may

choose not to answer any of my questions, and you may also end the interview at any point during the scheduled time. Your decision to participate (or not) will not be shared with anyone. There are no negative consequences for withdrawing your participation, and I will erase/destroy any information already collected from you.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits to you by participating in this research. As a thank you for participating, I will give you a \$25 Starbucks gift card on the day of the interview.

The interview will be recorded. Any information you share during your interview **will remain confidential**. I will ask you to choose a pseudonym for use in the research study. I will transcribe the interview myself, with the help of an online application transcriber using that pseudonym, and the resulting transcript will not include any information that could be traced back to you. Audio-recordings, transcripts, and other information related to this research study will be kept on a **password protected** personal computer and smart phone. The list matching participant information and pseudonyms will be stored separately on SFU OneDrive, and the written consent forms will be stored in a secured drawer in my home office.

In reporting on my findings from this project, I will continue to keep your identity and participation confidential. I will be using the data to write a report for my M.Ed. program. In addition to producing the final report, I will share my findings during a public presentation at SFU in July. The report will be made available upon request and will be sent to them via email. I may also share my findings during one of the weekly Friday programs. Once I complete all of my MEd degree requirements, I will destroy the audio recordings, and I will keep the anonymized transcripts for no more than five years after the completion of the project. If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics (SFU)

Signing this consent form indicates that:

- You agree to participate in this research and to having the interview audio-recorded.
- You understand that you are free to stop participating in this research project at any time.
- You have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

Signature of Participant

Date (MM/DD/YYYY)

Printed Name of Participant

Appendix C. Recruitment Messages

Announcement at Friday weekly programs

Believe it or not, not too long ago I was in high school and what an experience that was. Even though I had a great time meeting new people and making friends, at some points during my experience in high school, I as a Muslim also faced quite a few challenges along the way. So, I took it upon myself that if I ever get the opportunity, I would explore other people's experiences as Muslim in BC public school system in an academic setting ... and here I am. I am working on this for my master's in educational leadership program at SFU. I am looking for participants who are recent high school graduates of BC. The research project is to learn more about the experiences of Muslim students who went through the K-12 public school system in BC. If you choose to participate, I will arrange a 45 to 60 minutes interview to explore your perspective and the extent to which you may have experienced discrimination based on your identity as a Muslim. Your identity and participation will be super confidential, and you can stop participating at any time with no hard feelings! If you are interested and would like to know more about this project, please speak to me after the program.

Community Message

Salamun Alaykum,

Did you go to public high school in BC? There is an opportunity for you to share your experiences as a Muslim student!

There is a research project that br. Mohamed Jawad is working on for his master's in educational leadership program at SFU. He is looking for participants who are recent high school graduates of BC. The research project is to learn more about the experiences of Muslim students who went through some if not all of their K-12 schooling in the public school system in BC. If you choose to participate, Br. Mohamed Jawad will arrange a 45 to 60 minutes interview to explore your perspective and the extent to which you may have experienced discrimination based on your identity as a Muslim. Your

identity and participation will be super confidential! The meeting can be in-person at SFU Surrey or at a preferred location or by video-conference. If you are interested and would like to know more about this project, please contact Br. Mohamed Jawad.