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ISLAMOPHOBIA STUDIES JOURNAL
VOLUME 7, NO. 2 Fall 2022, PP. 200–214.

Published by:
Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project,
Center for Race and Gender, University of California, Berkeley

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DOI:10.13169/islastudj.7.2.0200
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INTRODUCTION

Growing up as a Muslim in Quebec, Canada, I have many memories of racialized experiences throughout my schooling. However, the instances that stand out most to me were as an educator working within the public school system in the Greater Montreal Region. One such situation was when I was a PhD student seeking approval from a schoolboard to do data collection for my research project. My research project sought to understand the experiences of racialized youth in the school that I worked in. Working as a teacher in this school, I had personally observed instances of racist behavior and microaggressions from students and teachers and wanted to better understand if racialized students internalized this behavior, how they felt towards it, as well as to give them a space and platform to discuss some of these issues from their perspectives (Bakali 2016). I had received ethics approval from the administrative team at the school, from my university, and was only waiting to hear back from the schoolboard for a final decision. Ultimately, the schoolboard rejected my request. Their reasoning was that the nature of my research project was very "sensitive" and that they did not want my research to cause any possible discomfort and tension for students or the school community.

This was one of many instances within schooling contexts in Canada in which I had personally experienced what King (2004) refers to as "invisibilizing knowledge". Invisibilizing knowledge is the perpetuation of a monocultural depiction of the community that employs collective nouns and descriptors to indicate a common interest, while silencing the concerns of culturally and socially marginalized members (Ladson-Billings 2021). Arguably, this research project may have caused individuals from the white majority to feel some discomfort. However, the socially and racially marginalized have lived most of their lives within Canadian schools in discomfort. Empowering these individuals at the expense of the unease of the supposed collective “school community” was considered too much of a violation. As such, efforts were made to silence these voices. I begin this article outlining my experiences because it is emblematic of the racialized logics embedded within practices and curricula in Canadian schools (Bakali 2016; Montgomery 2005; McAndrew 2010).

This article examines systemic bias present within the French-Canadian context, giving particular attention to fantasies of the French-white supremacist ideologies of interculturalism and laïcité that are entrenched in educational curricula in Quebec. This will be accomplished by exploring aspects of the Quebec Education Program (QEP), the officially mandated curriculum used and promoted in Quebec secondary schools. Beyond the curriculum, fantasies of French-white supremacy are reinforced and manifested through the everyday interactions and lived experiences of Muslim students and teachers within schooling contexts in Quebec. This article begins with an exploration of white supremacist logics embedded in the Canadian and Quebec fabric through immigration and social integration policies, as well as historic schooling practices. Thereafter, the article examines how white supremacist logic
persists in contemporary educational curricula within settler societies, specifically focusing on the French-Canadian province of Quebec. This most prominently manifests through the state-sponsored dogma of “interculturalism”, which underscores Quebec’s integration model and is promoted throughout the educational curricula, as well as the notion of French secularism, also referred to as laïcité. The article concludes with a discussion of some experiences of Muslim teachers and students, whose lived realities demonstrate an operationalization of white supremacist logics infused within the schooling system that aim to keep these spaces uncontaminated by the presence of the Muslim “Other”. The article turns now to discuss the racialized logics of Canada as a settler society.

**CANADA AS A SETTLER SOCIETY AND THE SYSTEMIC PERPETUATION OF WHITE SUPREMACY**

The land mass referred to as Canada was colonized by the British and French empires in the 1500s and was constructed as a settler society. Settler societies in this article refers to nations that were intended to be permanent European settlements through imperialist encounters. The formation of Canada as a settler society was predicated on the killing and dispossession of Indigenous communities, an injustice which continues to this day. Throughout Canada’s early history, strident efforts were made to keep it as a white settler society. This was reflected in early immigration policies established in the 1800 and 1900s, which prevented non-white migrants from settling in the land. Some of these measures included the Immigration Act of 1910, which prevented people of African descent from immigrating to Canada on the basis of “climatic unsuitability” (Williams 1997), the Chinese Head Tax (1885 to 1923), which effectively discouraged and prevented Chinese migrants from settling in Canada (Chan 2016) and the Continuous Journey Clause, which prevented Asian immigrants from settling in Canada if they did not travel directly from their home nation on a continuous journey to arrive to Canada (Hawkins 1989). When these policies were relaxed and various non-white ethnically diverse communities were able to migrate to Quebec, there was a severe cultural disavowal of these communities in the aftermath of the Quiet Revolution; a period in Quebec history where there was a reinvigoration of white-Quebecois language and culture (Bakali 2016). More recently in Quebec, in the early 2000s, racialized minorities, particularly Muslims were marginalized through public and political discourse on reasonable accommodation (Mahrouse 2010). These debates centred on the extent to which the French-Quebecois majority needed to accommodate religious “Others.” The stigmatization of religious and racialized minorities was further cemented in Quebec through the passing of Bill 21in 2019, which banned religious clothing and symbols from being worn by public employees in positions of “authority.” The racialized logics undergirding white supremacist laws and policies governing Canada have also been present in educational projects of erasure and assimilation of Indigenous communities.

Through residential schooling, the Canadian government forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families and required them to attend schools administered by the church with the purpose of erasing their heritage and assimilating them to European-Canadian religion, culture and ways of living (Hanson 2009). Indigenous children were severely punished if they spoke their native languages or acknowledged their Indigenous culture and heritage. Beyond this, the children attending these schools were subjected to many other forms of psychological, physical, and sexual torture (Hanson 2009). The horrid conditions Indigenous children were subjected to in these schools resulted in the deaths of untold numbers of children. In 2021, over 1,300 unmarked graves in proximity to residential schools across Canada were discovered, which were believed to be the remains of children who attended and died in these
schools (Gilmore 2021). The racialized violence experienced by Indigenous communities through these spaces have been traumatic and have had enduring effects. In Robina Thomas’ (2014) study of Canadian residential schooling policies, she notes that not only did these schools contribute to the cultural genocide of Indigenous communities, but also inflicted sexual, physical, mental, and spiritual abuse on Indigenous children, which have affected generations. Though residential schools are no longer in operation and have been widely condemned by most echelons of Canadian society, the persistence of white supremacist logics continue to underscore many of the integration and social policies governing Canadian provinces, particularly in Quebec.

**THE FRENCH-CANADIAN APPROACH TO MANAGING DIVERSITY THROUGH INTERCULTURALISM**

The territory of what is now Quebec was originally a French colony that was taken over by the British and administered as a part of what eventually became the nation state of Canada. Quebec is one of ten Canadian provinces in Canada along with three territories. It is the only province in Canada that is predominately francophone and maintains French as its official language. Quebec society was traditionally influenced by Catholicism and by extension the Catholic Church (Wong 2011). Catholicism continued to be instrumental in Quebec until the 1960s. However, as time went on, in the place of religion “there evolved a robust secular mentality characterized by, among other things, a marginalization of religion to the periphery of personal and public life” (Rymarz 2012, 297). This transformation of Quebec identity being strongly linked to Catholicism and then shifting to secularism and French language is a period in Quebec history called the Quiet Revolution. The Quiet Revolution was between 1960 and 1966 when Quebec Liberal Premier Jean Lesage introduced many political reforms, transferring several key responsibilities from the Catholic Church to the government, including education (Wong 2011). The Lesage reforms brought a fundamental shift of Quebecois identity that was “closely linked with the culture and language of the majority” (Karmis 2004, p. 85). The neo-nationalist shift asserted that immigrant populations should be assimilated, adopting the culture and language of the francophone majority, regardless of their country of origin. This program of assimilation, asserting white French-Canadian superiority, has been codified through the state-sponsored integration model of interculturalism.

Interculturalism is Quebec’s integration model for managing racial diversity (Leroux 2012). It came about in response to Canada’s implementation of its multiculturalism policies and has been in operational in Quebec since the 1970s (Waddington et al. 2011). The 1990 policy document Au Québec pour bâtir ensemble: Énoncé de politique en matière d’immigration et d’intégration best articulates the policy implications of interculturalism which has three main principles: “French as the language of public life; a democratic society, where everyone is expected and encouraged to participate and contribute; and an open, pluralist society that respects democratic values and intercommunitarian exchange” (Gouvernement du Quebec 1990, 16). One of the cornerstones of interculturalism is the notion of a moral contract between newcomers and Quebec society, which suggests that Quebec’s majoritarian culture is at the forefront (Leroux 2012). The adoption of interculturalism as Quebec’s official stance towards racial diversity instead of multiculturalism was rooted in the notion of self-preservation. As observed by Waddington et al. (2011, 314): “Québec’s opposition to multiculturalism is grounded in the belief that the Canadian government’s policy of multiculturalism is a betrayal of Québec’s historical status within the Canadian federation and undermines Québec’s grounds for seeking greater political autonomy.” As there have been ongoing tensions over safeguarding
language and identity in Quebec, this approach ensured its preservation as a unique minority in Canada while it also offered “a means of partial or limited integration within Canada, releasing the Québécois from the fear of loss of their linguistic culture ... providing a sustainable means of remaining within Canada” (DesRoches 2013, 7). Thus, interculturalism takes a more assimilationist approach to integration of racial minorities to safeguard traditional Quebecois culture (Talbani 1993). In this way, it is a social and cultural expression of the state formulation of French secularism or laïcité. Traces of this integration model are infused in the Quebec educational system.

**EVOLUTION OF THE QUEBEC EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Catherine Larochelle (2021) has argued that the Quebec education system has been a tool of socialization that has perpetuated colonialism and racism throughout the 19th and 20th century. She argues that a variety of discourses have constructed distant “Others” based on cultural and racial characteristics that differ from the white-French Quebecois majority. These representations of the “Other” helped formulate a collective Quebecois identity based on whiteness and “civility” in contrast to the foreign, darker, backwards “Other.” This section explores the genesis of this system, which has facilitated Islamophobia in French-Canadian educational spaces.

The Quiet Revolution brought about major educational reforms, effectively transferring power from the church to the state. In 1961, the Quebec government set up the Royal Commission of Enquiry on Education, also referred to as the Parent Commission, which provided recommendations that drastically changed the Quebec education system (Boudreau 2011). The Quebec government also set up Catholic and Protestant advisory committees for the Ministry of Education, which shared responsibilities with the Ministry in providing confessional education. These committees developed religious educational curricula in Quebec schools (Gouvernement du Quebec 1987). As Quebec identity was reframed around secularism after the Quiet Revolution, there were several attempts to secularize the education system throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Eventually, these efforts took hold and Quebec schools transitioned from being Protestant and Catholic confessional schools to secular/non-confessional schools on linguistic lines with French and English schoolboards.

The Quebec Minister of Education, Pauline Marois, in 1997 established a task force “to examine the place of religion in schools, to define relevant guidelines, and to propose methods for their implementation” (Gouvernement du Quebec 1998, 7). It produced the Proulx Report, headed by Université de Montréal professor of education Jean-Pierre Proulx. The report made 14 recommendations to be implemented. Many of the recommendations involved establishing a secular system for public schooling at the preschool, elementary and secondary levels (Gouvernement du Quebec 1999). The Proulx Report paved the way for educational reform in Quebec and the implementation of the new revised Quebec Education Plan (QEP) along with the Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program. The ERC program is a series of courses throughout elementary and secondary school meant to replace religious and moral education. This program was framed on secularist lines and introduced students to the various religious and cultural traditions in Quebec society (Gouvernement du Quebec 1999).

The QEP is an educational program that is mandated by the Quebec Ministry of Education and is taught across public and publicly subsidized private schools across Quebec (Boudreau 2011). It consists of several subject areas such as English, Math, History and the ERC program. The QEP, which was an outgrowth of educational reforms in the 1990s, prioritized the secularization of Quebec schools (Gouvernement du Quebec 1999). It is important to
note here that secularism in Quebec, also referred to as _laïcité_, carries with it a view of the supremacy of French-white Quebecois culture, as I have discussed in other works (Bakali 2018). This view of secularism aims at erasing any trace of religion which is not in line with the historic French-white Quebecois culture from the public sphere. Consequently, Muslims, particularly Muslim women, have borne the brunt of exclusionist discourses, policies, and practices to relegate displays of religion in Quebec, both in the public domain, as well as in educational spaces (Bakali 2016). A recent example of this could be seen through the Act of Respecting the Laicity of the State, commonly referred to as Bill 21, passed by the Quebec National Assembly in 2019. As discussed earlier, this law prevents individuals working in the public sector who are in positions of authority from wearing religious symbols, on the premise that it would violate the state’s secularist character. Ultimately, this law disproportionately targets Muslim women who wear hijab (Jamil 2022). One such example is Fatemeh Anvari, a third-grade teacher at Chelsea Elementary School, who was removed from her teaching post at the school in December 2021 because of this law. The motto of Chelsea Elementary School is “respect for all, by all” (Coletta, 2021). According to the school and the state, Muslims were not members of this collective “all”, but rather represent an alien “Other” needing to be policed and expelled. In addition to policies and practices that have targeted racialized minorities in schools, educational curricula have also been used as a tool of oppression.

**EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUM AS A MEANS OF PERPETUATING WHITE SUPREMACY**

Educational theorists have discussed how school curricula have been used to maintain and perpetuate dominant ideologies and subordination. For example, Michael Apple (2000) has discussed the notion of schools being sites of explicit and hidden curricula. *Explicit curriculum* refers to the formal teaching of courses and programs offered in schools. *Hidden curricula* are the societal imbalances perpetuated through schooling when teachers are uncritically teaching the curriculum. Hidden curricula exist because of power imbalances or “unequal power” (Apple 1991), which privileges some groups in society to determine what knowledge is “official” and what forms of knowing are marginalized or deemed unworthy. Without questioning or challenging power relationships, critical and responsive educational curricula are elusive and white normativity continues to persist (Ladson-Billings 2021).

Policymakers may argue that educational curriculum evolves over time in a rational and progressive manner to reflect societal norms and diversity. However, such perceptions are a means of sanitizing educational curricula, as it assumes they function independently of race and politics (Gillborn 2009). In other words, one must problematize the notion of seeking school-based solutions to school-based problems, as it ignores historical and structural relations of dominance (Gillborn 2009). These structural forms of dominance are reproduced and maintained through what Swartz (1992) refers to as master scripting. Master scripting is a means of silencing various perspectives and voices to reinforce and legitimize white, upper-class male voices as the normative standard of knowing. As such, the stories of marginalized communities are subtly and effectively muted and erased (Ladson-Billings 2021). Marginalized perspectives and accounts are often overlooked from the master script unless they can be operationalized to disempower these voices through misrepresentation (Swartz 1992).

Jay notes that transformative educational curricula threaten the “dominant groups in our society who have a vested interest in the perpetuation of the mainstream academic knowledge that supports the maintenance of dominant structures, long-present inequities, and the current power arrangements … to subordinate racial minorities” (2010, 5). This is not done in
a forceful manner. Rather, as Hall (1986) has argued, this is achieved through ongoing concessions and negotiations to placate subordinated groups through allowances such as “international days,” “multiculturalism days,” and other superficial events which momentarily encourage surface-level cultural exchange and dialogue, while masking structural inequalities (Yosso 2010). Such allowances are exercises in celebrating diversity rather than taking concrete actions towards racial equality. Some of these types of allowances surface when examining Canadian educational curricula.

In Montgomery’s (2005) examination of Canadian social studies textbooks, he notes that some progress has been made in acknowledging various forms of bias and racism as existing in society. However, racism is largely framed as individualized behaviors and assumptions in these texts, as opposed to systemic problems that need transformative change. Within these curricular documents, racism is projected as an aberration or a state of exception, thus creating the perception that it is antithetical to the nation. Such post-racial imaginaries glorify the notion that Canada exists as a multicultural utopia, thus perpetuating the systemic status quo.

I turn now to discuss how notions of white supremacy are perpetuated in Quebec educational spaces and curricula. This approach for managing diversity is instrumental for reinforcing the idea that Muslims are an unassimilable and incompatible “Other” in French-Canadian society and schools.

**EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN QUEBEC AND MUSLIM REPRESENTATION**

The educational landscape of Quebec schools has changed dramatically over the past 30 years due to an increased and diverse influx of immigrants (Larochelle-Audet et al. 2013). Teacher training institutions appeared to have made significant changes to their programs to better equip future educators to manage ethnocultural, religious and linguistic diversity in the classroom. The Centre d’études ethnique des universités montréalaises conducted a study to examine how well Quebec universities were addressing these issues in their teacher training programs. According to the report, there was some progress in the ten years after the educational reforms of 2000, with 40 courses across universities in Quebec that explore how diversity manifests and is taken into account in educational settings (Larochelle-Audet et al. 2013). These courses exposed future teachers to concepts such as integration, prejudice and discrimination. The courses also provided information relating to ethnic relations, immigration to Quebec and how to adapt educational practices for diversity. Additionally, the report mentioned that a growing number of tenured professors were devoting much of their teaching and research to issues relating to ethnocultural, religious and linguistic diversity in educational milieus.

Despite these improvements, the report also identified several shortcomings that these educational institutions needed to address. The most prominent of these issues was that this type of teacher training was developed in an unorganized manner with a lack of collaborative efforts between professors and institutions. This makeshift approach was a result of the ambiguous institutional support for teaching diversity, as there was an absence of clear ministerial requirements and guidelines describing its legitimacy and the objectives it should focus on and target (Larochelle-Audet et al. 2013). The report itself, however, is somewhat flawed, as it did not seek out racialized voices in discussing the efficacy of these teacher training programs. Given that these reforms introduced to teacher training programs were aimed to better equip teachers to understand and effectively manage classroom diversity, it would have made sense to hear from racialized youth who attended Quebec schools to understand if they felt teachers going through these programs were achieving this goal. The assumptions underlying the report
presumed that if teacher training programs offered a mixture of courses and discussed certain concepts, there would be fewer problems in Quebec schools concerning racial tensions, prejudices, and interethnic conflicts.

Another study looked more specifically at issues relating to racism towards Muslims in Quebec school textbooks (McAndrew et al. 2007). Findings from this study demonstrated that Quebec textbooks throughout the 1980s were replete with anti-Muslim bias and prejudice. Furthermore, other studies have found that textbooks during this period had significant misinformation about Muslims and Islam, containing factual errors, perpetuating stereotypes, and viewing Muslims and Islam from an ethnocentric perspective (Dunand 1998). More recently, McAndrew et al. (2007) looked at textbooks used in French secondary schools across Quebec throughout the 2003-4 school year. In total they examined 21 French textbooks to see how they presented Islam and Muslim cultures, the Muslim world globally, which included historical events, events between civilizations, and political conflicts, as well as Muslims in Quebec and Canada historically and contemporarily. The findings of this study, similar to others examining different parts of Canada and the US, found that textbook representations of Muslims reinforced notions of “Otherness” (Ali 2013; Sensoy 2009). In the 117 excerpts that were analyzed, they noted that contentious representations still existed. Specifically, there were problems in the covering of “historical events that largely legitimize[d] Western actions, a strong tendency towards homogenizing and essentializing Muslim cultures, as well as a near-total absence of Muslims as Quebec and Canadian citizens” (McAndrew et al. 2007, 173). As the above points out, Muslim representations in Quebec educational resources and curricula have circulated distorted and biased representations of Muslims for decades. Much of the discourse surrounding Muslims through these master scripts is influenced by the state integration model of interculturalism, which explicitly promotes French-Quebecois language and cultural norms above all others (Bakali 2018). These depictions frame Muslims as “Otherized” subjects through the lack of representation of Muslims as meaningful members of Canadian and Quebec society, as well as being in historic conflict with the “West” (McAndrew et al. 2007). I will now explore the lived experiences of Muslims in schooling contexts to better understand the possible implications of these Islamophobic “Otherized” representations.

**MUSLIM EXPERIENCES IN QUEBEC SCHOOLS**

In this final section, I will explore some of the stories of racialized Muslims and their experiences in the French-Canadian educational landscape. Some may argue that such narratives or the process of “storytelling” may lack objectivity and amount to nothing more than minoritized groups airing their grievances. However, narratives of racialized communities can be very powerful tools for challenging and dismantling racism and racist attitudes. As Delgato and Stefancic have observed, “well-told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help readers … understand what life is like for others and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world” (2017, 49). Additionally, the power of narrative and stories “can name a type of discrimination (e.g., microaggressions, unconscious discrimination, or structural racism); once named, it can be combated” (51). In what follows, I share the stories of educators and students within Quebec schooling contexts to help construct a vivid reality around how Muslim bodies are abused and maligned in attempts to keep these spaces white and uncontaminated by the Muslim “Other”. For the sake of brevity, I only discuss the experiences of two Muslim teachers, Zaynab and Adam, and two Muslim students, Danial and Sarah. Zaynab and Adam were both of South Asian descent and had parents who immigrated to Canada before they were born. Danial was of North African origins and immigrated to Canada when he was an infant.
Sarah was South Asian but was born in Canada. All names are pseudonyms. A more detailed account of these stories, as well as others can be found in some of my other works.²

Zaynab had been a secondary science teacher just under ten years. Throughout Zaynab’s experiences as a secondary school teacher she wore the hijab and was visibly identifiable as a Muslim. Zaynab had experienced microaggressions and other forms of harassment from students in her school. However, her most intense experiences of aggression came at the hands of a colleague and fellow teacher. She described how this teacher would regularly bully her and confront her with tropes relating to the oppression of women in Islam at the hands of violent and dangerous Muslim men. In one incident, Zaynab described how this woman confronted her and was yelling at her about how Muslims and Islam were fundamentally not misunderstood by society regarding violence and terrorism. She went on to proclaim that if Muslims were not violent and supportive of terrorism, Muslim leaders needed to condemn these actions. Zaynab felt that these comments did not reflect reality, as Muslim organizations regularly publicly condemn such actions (Qureshi 2021). The act of publicly condemning terrorism committed by groups and individuals in the name of Islam is regularly taken up Muslims who have nothing to do with such actions. This practice ultimately reinforces Muslim “Otherness.” When Muslims engage in this act of condemning it implicitly points to the supposed need to clarify that such actions are against their values and beliefs (Qureshi 2021). It would be ludicrous to assume that peaceful members of other communities needed to distance themselves from the acts of fringe extremist elements of their faith. Why is it that Muslims need to engage in such practices to prove their decency and humanity, if not to only reinforce their exceptionality and “Otherness”?²

Zaynab’s colleague also alluded to how “you people need to change yourselves when you come to Canada,” a troubling sentiment since Zaynab was born and spent her entire life in Canada. In line with the state’s conceptions of laïcité and its promotion of interculturalism, Zaynab’s belief system and appearance signaled a type of “Otherness” to this colleague, which prevented her from inclusion as a member of the nation. Zaynab mentioned how this colleague had friends from other ethnic groups, such as an East Asian friend. However, Zaynab felt that her difference was deemed unacceptable to tolerate as her “Otherness” was irreconcilable with this colleague’s conceptions of what constituted the Canadian nation. Zaynab needed to essentially “change herself,” because she was not welcome in what this colleague believed to be her country and society.

Adam observed instances where Muslim students at the school he was working in experienced similar practices of bias. He was a Social Studies secondary school teacher for over ten years at a large public school. Adam discussed in detail several instances in which his students, or students that he knew, experienced exclusionary practices because of their Muslim identities. In one story he described how he was observing two Muslim students and one of them asked the other if he was Muslim. The student who was in the presence of some of his friends at the time denied being a Muslim. At a later point, when the two students met again it came out that this student was in fact a Muslim. The student admitted that the reason he denied being Muslim earlier was because he felt a sense of embarrassment about revealing his Muslim identity. Adam further explained how this Muslim student felt conflicted about his Muslim identity when he was around his non-Muslim friends. The student feared judgment and ridicule, and therefore denied being a Muslim. The experience Adam recounted is similar to findings by Abo-Zena et al. (2009, 9) who observed that Muslim students may engage in such behavior “in order to minimize the apparent differences between themselves and their non-Muslim peers. Muslim youth may feel pressured to keep secret, deny or even abandon their Muslim faith in an attempt to blend in”.
Adam recounted another incident where a female Muslim student came to him after being physically and verbally harassed by a student who pulled off her hijab. According to Liese (2004, the action of pulling off a woman’s head veil in a school setting is usually not an isolated incident and is typically preceded by less abrasive forms of abuse over extended periods of time. Adam described how wearing the hijab in his school was a major challenge for young Muslim women. He observed how students would come to school wearing the hijab, then at a point later in the year would stop. Adam felt that this occurred due to the anxieties and social pressures of wearing a signifier of “Otherness” in this secondary school setting. He observed how the hijab made Muslim students “very, very visible”, and made them an “automatic target.” Hence, many female Muslim students who attended his school stopped wearing the hijab and another student had her hijab pulled off. Here we can see the state interpretations of laïcité and the dogma of interculturalism in practice within a school setting amongst students. Though there were no regulations preventing Muslim students from wearing the hijab in the school, nationalist subjects took it upon themselves to make the hijab unacceptable within these laïc spaces, where interculturalism (or French-white supremacy) needs to stamp out any symbols of difference or cultural contamination. As such, the hijab signalled “Otherness”, which was disavowed within the school culture. Adam’s stories and comments pointed to how female and male Muslim students both made attempts to obscure their religious identity in his secondary school by removing the hijab as well as by hiding their “Muslimness” in front of non-Muslim students.

Muslim students also spoke of the struggles they faced. Danial was a senior secondary school student at a French public school. Danial felt there were very strong biases against Muslims in both Canadian society as well as in schooling contexts in Quebec. When describing how he thought Muslims were perceived in society, he used words like “monsters” and “bacteria.” Danial’s comments draw from the racial legacy of Muslims being depicted as monstrous and infectious existential threats (Rana 2011; Shaheen 2001). When explaining his sentiments, he discussed how Quebec is a secular society, so various religions are looked down upon. However, he felt Islam was perceived more negatively than other faiths. Danial’s sentiments aligned with various studies conducted across Canada in relation to perceptions of Canadian Muslims. In one study conducted in 2016 by Forum Research, it was found that 28 percent of Canadians had unfavorable feelings towards Muslims. The most unfavorable feelings coming from Quebec (Bridge Initiative 2019). In another survey from 2012 for the Association of Canadian Studies and Canada Race Relations Foundation, it was found that 52 percent of Canadians distrusted Muslims and 42 percent believed that discrimination experienced by Muslims was mainly their own fault (Bridge Initiative 2019). Danial went on to describe how he felt that Islam was perceived as a threat to the majoritarian culture, which needed to be repelled. He used language implying the faith was viewed as a disease that could infect society. Consequently, being Muslim or adhering to Islam was likened to a sickness which was “untreatable” and therefore “need[ed] to be expelled.” These views expressed by Danial about societal perceptions of Islam were reinforced through his schooling experiences.

Danial described how he attended a very culturally diverse school, where the majority of the student body were racialized minorities and white-French Canadian students were a minority. Amongst students, Danial never had any confrontations or perceived bias treatment. Rather, Danial felt he received discriminatory behavior from his teachers, who were predominantly French-white Quebecois. Danial recounted how his Physics teacher used Danial’s religious identity in mockery when trying to discipline him for his misbehavior in class. In one instance, when he was balancing a book on his head, Danial’s teacher exclaimed, “Danial, stop praying!” Danial was somewhat confused by the comment but assumed the teacher was trying
to make a joke or was trying to be funny while disciplining him. However, it was not surprising or coincidental that this teacher’s microaggression was about prayer.

Danial described how he used to observe his prayers in school. He had to pray outside the school building as there was no designated prayer space in the school. Students would not cause any problems for Danial. They would sometimes ask him questions about the prayer and why he was observing it. Teachers, however, did not appreciate that he would publicly observe his prayers and would give him a hard time regarding this. Danial also felt tension from his teachers when he would speak about his religious beliefs in a positive way. He described how his ERC teacher would consistently miseducate the students about Islam and Muslims. With regards to teaching about other faiths, Danial insisted the teacher would discuss these religious traditions with some sense of neutrality. However, when it came to Islam and Muslims the teacher would present stereotypes and isolated incidents relating to violence and terrorism as normative to his religious beliefs and practices. Danial felt that his teacher would pick and choose what to present about Islam, thus creating a distorted picture of his faith. Consequently, he described how his ERC course facilitated constructing his Islamic faith as “Other.” He felt that his faith was being unfairly presented and if he wanted to get “full grades” he would have to be “with the teacher.” In other words, he was indirectly being forced to accept the teacher’s and state discourses about Muslims within his ERC class. If he did not, he felt that he would be penalized.

Sarah also described how her Muslim identity created tensions and conflicts with some of her peers and teachers. She was a former secondary student, who had recently graduated from a French public secondary school at the time of her interview. When Sarah started high school, she did not wear hijab. However, once she started wearing hijab, her relationship with her peers at school changed dramatically. She was no longer just a regular member of the school community. Once she started wearing the hijab she was bombarded with questions about Islam and Muslims. Sarah mentioned that she would be asked questions relating to oppression of women in Islam, forced marriages, female genital mutilation and a host of other questions that related to stereotypes and tropes often associated with Muslimness. Sarah described a complete transformation in how she was perceived as a person after she started wearing the hijab. She became a mystical and exotic “Other” that now had private access to a realm of “Otherness” that she was not privy to before (Bakali 2019). We see here how Sarah experienced racialization through visual signifiers of her Muslimness (i.e., the hijab). Before wearing this symbol of Muslim “Otherness” it was taken for granted that she was a regular member of her school community. However, Sarah warranted special attention with her peers once she wore the hijab, as she was now one of “them.” Sarah’s relationship with some of her teachers also changed.

In Sarah’s senior year she recalled how she had a History teacher that was always out to “get her”. In one instance, when Sarah was dozing off in class, the teacher berated her with accusations that she was hiding headphones underneath her hijab. Instead of just assuming she was tired, and as high school students often do, was just dozing off, the teacher insisted that the underlying cause of her misbehavior in class had something to do with that mysterious and suspicious piece of clothing on her head. In most instances within a secondary school setting, wearing headphones and listening to music during a lesson would violate school rules and protocols. The accusation levelled by Sarah’s teacher implied that Sarah was using her hijab to break the rules. The teacher viewed the hijab as a type of disguise that was being used to violate the classroom. Shaza Khan (2009) has noted that in circumstances where teachers have concerns with students who wear visible religious signifiers like the hijab, it is best to address these concerns privately with students. Students may feel offence or marginalized in a classroom environment in which the teacher makes a spectacle of their religious attire in front of the class.
When discussed privately, many of these tensions can be de-escalated (Khan 2009). In the case of Sarah, this episode marked a confrontational relationship with her teacher which could have very easily been avoided by speaking with her privately.

CONCLUSION

Within European settler contexts like Canada and Quebec, race has been indispensable for preserving and perpetuating white supremacy and the dominant culture in society. For some in the French-Canadian context, Muslims have been constructed as a threatening “Other,” eroding French-white Canadian culture. Experiences described by Muslim teachers and students related to perceptions of “Otherness” and incompatibility with the state notion of laïcité, as well as the state integration model of interculturalism. Through interactions with members of the dominant culture within schooling contexts, nationalist subjects asserted their perceived sense of power and authority to exclude and repel symbols of Muslimness, like the hijab, as well as religious practices and observances, like ritual prayers.

While the findings and the sentiments of the educators and students discussed in this article should not be considered representative or typical of all Muslims in Canadian schools, the stories of their experiences and challenges echo findings reported elsewhere in the literature on race and racism experienced by Muslims in Canadian educational spaces (Zine 2001, 2006). These experiences speak to the importance of challenging multiple and entwined forms of prejudice. This article provides valuable and important insights as it sheds light on how Muslims may experience race and racialization in Canadian schools. In addition, the stories shared here illustrate the complexity of prejudices that people might harbor, as a web of sentiments encapsulating ideas about race, racism, ethnicity, nationalism, religion, gender, and culture. In Canada, as in many other contexts, the complexities of such prejudices are important to uncover and to investigate, to obtain a better understanding of the need for acceptance of various forms of diversity.

ENDNOTES

1Mandatory attendance for Indigenous children at these schools was from 1894 until 1947, however these schools persisted until the last decades of the 20th century.


REFERENCES


