Racialization of Muslim Students in Australia, Ireland, and the United States: Cross-cultural perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative cross-cultural case study was to better understand how Muslim students living in Australia, Ireland, and the United States navigated racism to identify ways in which school leaders and teachers can better address the structural, historical, and socioeconomic roots of racial injustice, discrimination, and ongoing oppression. Data collection was guided by a shared interview protocol that asked questions regarding family background, personal interests, identity, and friendships with a focus on their experiences of anti-Muslim racism in secondary schools. Findings suggested that Muslim students navigated racialization by (de)constructing their Muslimness, seeking voice, navigating between inclusion and exclusion, and responding to hate. This paper contributes to the bourgeoning literature exploring anti-Muslim racialization and makes a foundational empirical cross-cultural contribution with its identification of essential practices for anti-Muslim racism in schooling.

The global community is currently experiencing a rise in far-right White supremacist nationalist and pseudo-fascist movements that advocate and practice hostility, violence, and hate towards Muslims living in Western contexts (Sardar, Serra, and Jordan 2019). This upswing in anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim prejudice (Obaidi et al. 2018) adversely affects young Muslims who are in the process of forming their identities in societies often hostile to their Muslimness (Aalberg et al. 2016; Brooks 2019; Sirin et al. 2008). In addition to societal manifestations of racism, young Muslims often encounter intolerance, sexism, and dogmatism within their communities of faith (Rashid 2017) and at their local schools (Apple and Buras 2012; Ezzani and Brooks 2015; Sanjakdar 2018). Given the structural contexts of discrimination and inequality, how young Muslims experience and internalize racism shapes not only how they perceive safety (Brooks and Brooks 2013; Shah 2018) but influences the outward presentation of their Muslimness and the development of their intersectional identities (Ali and Sonn 2017; Khosravi 2012; Mason-Bish and Zempi 2018). Whether these experiences are shared cross-culturally remains unclear, thereby necessitating an exploratory study of anti-Muslim racism in three Western contexts. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was

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to better understand how Muslim students living in Australia, Ireland, and the United States navigate racism so as to identify ways in which school leaders and teachers can better address the structural, historical, and socioeconomic roots of racial injustice, discrimination, and ongoing oppression.

Racism is embedded systems of power and exploitation that advantage one group over others based on race and ethnicity (Bryan 2012). It manifests at multiple levels in society simultaneously and can be both overt and covert, regardless of intent (Brooks and Watson 2018). Recent theorization of racism ranges from critical race theory (Crenshaw 1995; Khalifa 2018; Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006) and critical multiculturalism (Banks 2009) to anti-racist education (Dei 1993; Epstein 1993; Jean-Marie and Mansfield 2013; Kendi 2019) and Whiteness studies (Boucher, Carey, and Ellinghaus 2009; Harris 1993). Undergirding these critical theories is the perspective that racism, historically rooted in slavery, oppression, and violence, is omnipresent in society and must be addressed through problematizing Whiteness and White supremacy, engaging critically with ideological frameworks that maintain oppression, and disrupting accepted policies and practices that reify these hegemonies.

Education is long-acknowledged as complicit in perpetuating racial inequality through curricula and pedagogy (Banks and Banks 2019; Gay 2018; Merry and Driessen 2005), resource allocation (Dantley and Tillman 2006), disciplinary policies (Fabelo et al. 2011), student tracking (Blankstein, Noguera, and Kelly 2016), and teacher expectations (Liou and Rojas 2018), amongst other discriminatory practices, customs, and policies (Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken 2012). As a result, minoritized students are often provided with less access to educational opportunities and resources (Boykin and Noguera 2011); are taught culturally inappropriate and/or hostile curriculum (Ladson-Billings 2008); have lower expectations from teachers and school leaders (Ezzani and Brooks 2015; Khalifa 2011); and experience physical violence and/or microaggressions, the commonplace spoken or unspoken slights that communicate hostile, disparaging, or negative attitudes towards minoritized individuals and groups (Brooks and Brooks 2013; Solórzano 1998; Sue 2010). Consequently, racial inequity in education contributes to minoritized students developing feelings of worthlessness, low self-esteem, and lack of hope (Dee and Penner 2017).

Theoretical framework: racialization of Muslims

Muslim students living in Western non-Muslim majority countries are not immune from subjugation. Like other racialized groups, they experience the hostility of normalized discourses that position Islam as inferior and Muslims as 'others' adverse to Western, democratic values (Abo-Zena, Sahli, and Tobias-Nahi 2009; Ezzani and Brooks 2015). Glocalized anti-Muslim discourses build on centuries of Orientalist depictions of Muslims in books, film, theater, television, music, and news reporting that position Islam and Muslims as simultaneously dangerous and exotic (Said 1978; Shaheen 2002). These various depictions are manipulated to serve 'the needs of the particular source . . . referring [to Islam] as a religion, a culture, a civilization, a community, a religious revival, a militant cult, an ideology', as it best suits their purposes (Karim 2002, 108–109). Moreover, these discourses typify anti-Muslim bias as a set of tropes and 'visible

archetypes' that racialize Muslims in the same way as other 'brown' or 'foreign' bodies serve to advantage and reinforce hegemonic Whiteness (Considine 2017, 5; Gotanda 2011, 184; Moosavi 2015; Shah 2016; Shaheen 2002; Zine 2009).

Accordingly, 'Muslim' has shifted beyond religious categorization (Breen 2018) to one that is a 'combination of race, immigrant status, gender and other factors [that] work together to influence religiously-based claims in the public sphere' (Yukich and Edgell 2020, 3). As religions are socially embedded phenomena that shape and are shaped by cultural hegemonies of privilege, power, race, and class (Yukich and Edgell 2020); then religions are incontrovertibly racialized. This is exemplified by the U.S. 'Muslim Ban', the prohibition of religious adornments in France, and other restrictions placed on Islam and Muslims in Western contexts, such as the banning of the face veil, *niqab*, in Austria, Belgium, France (Fekete 2004; Shah 2018; Yukich and Edgell 2020). Given extant racialization of Islam and Muslims in Western contexts, it is therefore critical to better understand how Muslim students living in minoritized contexts actively perceive, personalize, and respond to anti-Muslim racism.

Racism in Islam

Before the advent of Islam in the sixth century, polytheist tribes ruled throughout the Arabian Peninsula through kin groups and clans whose racial and ethnic lineages, wealth, and military accomplishments shaped political rivalries and formed temporary alliances and federations (Berkey 2003). In 609 CE, Prophet Muhammad received the first of a culmination of divine messages compelling him to challenge tribalism and disavow racism and injustice in all its forms and manifestations (Azeez and Ishola 2019). In spite of this message and his teachings, the fledgling Muslim community experienced unrelenting public denunciation and discrimination for a period of thirteen years before fleeing for safety by migrating to Medina.

Notwithstanding the hostility this growing Muslim community experienced, Prophet Muhammad continued to teach peaceful coexistence, adhering to the Qur'anic message, 'O humankind! We have made you ... into nations and tribes, so that you may get to know one another. The noblest of you in God's sight is the one who is most righteous' (49:13). Upon relocating his community to Medina in 622 CE, Prophet Muhammad created The Charter of Medina to ease longstanding grievances and establish a federation amongst the different religious and tribal groups. Through this charter, Prophet Muhammad emphasized the values of acceptance and reciprocity in community while developing one's inner spirituality. He taught that all are 'the children of Adam' and 'Adam came from dirt' (al-Tirmidhi). Emphasizing this shared and humble ancestry, Prophet Muhammad stressed that the only distinction between humankind is piety and God consciousness (Azeez and Ishola 2019). This message was again reiterated at the end of his life in his Farewell Sermon:

> There is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, or of a non-Arab over an Arab, and no superiority of a white person over a black person or of a black person over a white person, except on the basis of personal piety and righteousness (Muslim 98).

This significant human rights declaration reaffirmed racism, prejudice, and discrimination as wholly unacceptable and counter to the welfare of humanity. Still, racism, such as anti-Black racism, persists within and external to the faith (Breen 2018; Brooks 2019; Said 1978). For Black Muslims living in minoritized communities, their experience with racism contributes to their forming a double consciousness, or the ability to see oneself through the eyes of an oppressive other (Du Bois [1903] 2007; Saeed 2014). This fundamentally shapes the way they see themselves and how they perceive their agency in the Muslim community and the wider world (Ezzani and Brooks 2019; Sabry and Bruna 2007).

Muslim students in three contexts

Whether residing in Australia, Ireland, or the United States, the reality of anti-Muslim racism axiomatically impacts the day-to-day lives of Muslim students, thereby suggesting a familiar experience.

Australia

Islam is the second largest and fastest growing religion in Australia, with Muslims comprising 2.6% of the Australian population (Rane et al. 2020). The Australian Muslim community mirrors other minoritized communities with difference in histories, interpretations of Islam, language, nationality and ethnicity, economic status, and faith tradition (Kabir 2005). Despite Australia's celebration of cultural diversity (Multicultural Affairs 2020), Muslim are the most vilified minoritized group in Australia (Mason 2019). Assaults, prejudice, stereotyping, harassment, verbal abuse, property damage, and over-policing, amongst other offenses, serve to alienate and reify Muslims as 'the other' in Australian society (Mason 2019, 49). Although the total number of hate crimes and hate incidents are not held at the national level, offenses against Muslims are rising as a response to global violence done in the name of Islam (Mason 2019).

Australian Muslim students are not immune to these negative experiences. Their lives are shaped by political attitudes and national policies, with a 'politics of mis-recognition' being a central experience (Lam and Mansouri 2020, 1). Extant anti-Muslim rhetoric places a 'burden' on Australian Muslim students to work towards recognition and gain social acceptance (Meer 2012; Modood 1997). This situates Muslim students as having to explain, de-mystify, and de-stigmatize Islam and Muslims to non-Muslims in Australian society (Harris and Hussein 2020). However, these issues are not new, as evidenced by the first Islamic school opening in 1983 in Sydney as a response to discrimination experienced by the founder's daughter (Ali 2018). To date, there are 35 private Islamic schools in Australia–all experiencing a rise in enrolment (Ali 2018). Parents are in search of an 'authentic Islamic' schooling experience, wanting their children to 'not only learn about their faith, but learn about it in a school where Islamic values and practices permeate the whole curriculum' (Ali 2018, 43; Sanjakdar 2014). By and large, Australian Islamic schools provide students with moral and spiritual development, along with safe learning environments where they can be proud to be Muslim in Australia (Abdalla, Chown, and Abdullah 2018; Sirin and Fine 2008).

Ireland

Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in Ireland. The Irish Muslim population grew exponentially from 4,000 in 1991 to over 63,000 in 2016 (Carr and Haynes 2015; Central Statistics Office 2016). The growth in population coincided with an increase in diversity within the Muslim community, with at least 35 different nationalities represented (Carr 2011). Article 44.2 of the Irish Constitution allows individuals the right to freely practice their religion of choice. Accordingly, the Muslim community established mosques, charity organizations, and two state-funded primary schools, both located in Dublin (Hogan 2011; Sai 2018a). Yet, most Muslim students attend government schools that range from multi-denominational (mixed faith), interdenominational (Protestant and Catholic), or schools that are singularly Catholic (Hogan 2011). Irish schools welcome and accommodate Muslim students; however, 'reasonable' accommodation is widely defined and varied in practice (Hogan 2011, 567).

Given the changing landscape of increased populism and divisive identity politics worldwide, anti-Muslim hostility and discrimination are likewise present throughout Ireland (Carr and Haynes 2015). Long held tropes of the immigrant Muslim 'other' are perpetuated alongside reaffirmations of Irish identity as White, heterosexual, Irish, settled, and Catholic (Carr and Haynes 2015). For Muslim students attending school, derogatory remarks such as 'black monkey', 'chocolate', 'terrorist', the n-word, and other forms of racism, such as bullying and initiation, are common (*The Irish Times*, 7 July 2020; McGinnity et al. 2020). As of 2021, hate crimes fall under the Incitement to Hatred Act 1989, which has 'proven particularly ineffectual in combating online hate speech' (Haynes and Schweppe 2017, 51). Currently, new landmark legislation specifically targeted at expanding and strengthening hate crime laws, namely the General Scheme of the Criminal Justice (Hate Crime) Bill 2021, has gained momentum and is expected to receive governmental approval.

United States

The 11 September 2001, terrorist attacks irrevocably shaped the experiences of Muslims in the United States and brought a once peripheral religion to the forefront of American consciousness. For Muslim American students born post 9/11, their day-to-day lives have been shaped by discourses situating Muslims as untrustworthy 'others' who are threatening American values and prone to violence and terrorism (Bonet 2011, 46). Federal legislation, Title I of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, makes engaging in hate speech, intimidation, injury, interference, or otherwise discriminating against anyone because of race, colour, religion, or national origin, a federal offense. However, this has not prevented the forming of 72 anti-Muslim hate groups across the United States which peddle in conspiracy theories about Islamism, Shariah law, and extremism (Southern Poverty Law Center 2011). As a consequence of these essentializing perceptions, American Muslims often struggle with their emotional wellbeing, feelings of belongingness, and mixed identities (Abu El-Haj 2007). Over the last two decades, a rising number of private primary and secondary Islamic schools have been established by local Muslim communities. These schools offer Muslim American students with safe, supportive, and caring learning environments along with quality academics (Haddad, Senzai and Smith

2009; Zine 2009; Brooks and Ezzani 2017). In addition to schools, there are also increasing numbers of interfaith movements that focus on building positive community relationships through authentic dialogue to correct misconceptions (Brooks 2019). With President Biden's reversal of the Muslim ban (*Washington Post*, January 23, 2021), there is renewed hope that the United States is moving towards a direction of unity amongst diversity and a brighter, more hopeful future for America's Muslim students.

Design of the study

This study builds on qualitative research that explores the lives of Muslim students in Western school contexts (Abo-Zena, Sahli, and Tobias-Nahi 2009; Brooks 2019; Duderija 2007; Shah 2016). These studies present detailed findings for cohorts of Muslims bounded by geographical location, which may serve to reduce transferability to other contexts. This study extends the efforts of these inquiries to identify commonalities and differences of anti-Muslim racism that traverse geography. To this end, this qualitative case study was guided by two research questions. The primary question asked: *How do Muslim students experience racism in schools across Australia, Ireland, and the United States?* The secondary question dealt with the critical application of these findings: *How might these cross-cultural experiences of Muslim students inform the work of school leaders and teachers seeking to counter anti-Muslim racism?*

The research team came together out of shared interest in Islamic schooling, leadership, critical pedagogy, and social justice. Two of the women were raised Muslim and the first author reverted to Islam. The male team member was born into a mixed family and possesses a traditional and academic Islamic studies background. The balance of emic and etic positionality of the researchers due to faith perspectives and geographical locations encouraged dialogue and debate, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of anti-Muslim racism in each context. The team established the research questions, interview protocols, and met once a month over the course of a year to discuss and analyse the data. This dialogic process served to strengthen this study's findings.

The case for this study comprised Muslim students aged 13 to 18 years old, of which 16 resided in Australia, 8 in Ireland, and 8 in the United States for a total of 32 participants. All the participants interviewed attended state funded or private Islamic primary schools and were enrolled either in middle or secondary government or faith-based schools. The participants reflected the wide diversity of the Muslim global community (*ummah*), with backgrounds ranging from multi-generational established families to new arrivals with deep connections to their birth cultures. All the participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

Data collection was guided by a shared interview protocol that asked questions regarding family background, personal interests, identity, friendships, and experiences of anti-Muslim racism in secondary schools. The interviews began in a conversational tone to build rapport by asking each participant to introduce themselves and their favorite subject in school or hobby (Creswell 2009). From there, the interview questions prompted free-flowing discussions which ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length. All interviews were recorded and later professionally transcribed. In Australia, two focus group interviews took place at a private K-12 Islamic school in Melbourne that

comprised a total of 16 students. In Ireland, focus group interviews took place in Dublin. Participants were 8 Muslim students, all alums of a primary (elementary) state-funded Islamic school. The boys were interviewed separately from the girls to facilitate open dialogue, a norm expected in this context. The spouse of an author facilitated the girls' interview. In the United States, focus group data, taken from a larger study, occurred at a private K-8 Islamic school in Los Angeles with 8 students who were recent alums (Brooks 2019; Ezzani and Brooks 2019).

Data analysis occurred collaboratively among the four researchers, over 12 hours of face-to-face meetings via a video conferencing platform. Guided by the theoretical framework, we began data analysis individually and wrote notes, observations, comments, and questions in the margins. We met monthly to cross check in order to compare our independently derived coding (Creswell 2009). When the same passages of text were coded differently, intercoder agreement was reached when three or more researchers arrived at consensus (Miles and Huberman 2019). This served to mitigate researcher bias, check against over or under emphasizing sections of data, and clarify unclear statements or contradictions in the data (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). We used the literature review along with the theoretical framework to contemplate, question, and conceptualize (Saldaña 2015) how Muslim students in Australia, Ireland, and the United States navigated racism. Through this process, we were able to extrapolate ways in which school leaders and teachers could better address the structural, historical, and socioeconomic roots of anti-Muslim racism. We established trustworthiness through our co-construction of emergent themes, authentic dialogue, and through the honest reporting of the lived experiences of the Muslim students.

As in all qualitative inquiry, this study is limited around matters of generalizability (Merriam 2009). However, the themes that emerged from this study are transferable (Merriam 2009) and applicable to other contexts. While this research is limited to student perceptions of racism, we cannot speak to its causal effects. We acknowledge this limitation and encourage follow-up research that quantitatively measures Muslim experiences of racism. Lastly, our analysis and interpretations are shaped by our position as critical Muslim scholars, each residing in the respective countries. To this end, our collective in-depth probing of personal biases during the data analysis process helped us to interpret the data and construct meaning cognizant of our multiple perspectives (Saldaña 2011).

Findings

The presentation of the findings is organized around four themes that emerged from the analysis of the data, specifically: (de)constructing Muslimness; seeking voice; navigating inclusion and exclusion; and responding to hate. Each is discussed below.

(De)constructing Muslimness

Muslim students in Australia, Ireland and the United States actively constructed and deconstructed what it meant to be Muslim in light of anti-Muslim discourses. In Australia, female Muslim students identified strongly with the headscarf (*hijab*) as part of a positive and confident expression of their Muslimness. Jasmine stated: 'If you are

wearing a headscarf, people know you are Muslim. If you carry yourself in a manner that is positive and you look like you respect yourself, then a headscarf is a good way of representing your religion'. Similarly, Aaliyah saw her *hijab* as integral to her Muslimness. She questioned the French movement to ban headscarves. She asked, 'Is stripping away a person's cultural background really freedom? I want to preserve who I am and where my family comes from. Taking away a part of me is losing my freedom to be who I am'. The wearing of headscarves as an outward appearance of Muslimness was customary in Australia. For Zaina, both her wearing a headscarf and her identity as a Muslim superseded her identity as an Australian citizen. She commented, 'I know that being a Muslim comes first, and not being Australian'. Identifying as Muslim in the first instance was a strongly held identity for the students interviewed. Indeed, most Australian Muslim students identified as singularly Muslim, even if they were born and raised in Australia.

For Muslim students in Ireland, concerns were raised about outwardly presenting oneself as Muslim. Faizah felt a strong need to be with other *hijabi* women to feel confident and safe. She reflected, 'I always feel I have to be with someone who also wears a *hijab*. I don't like being the only one because it feels so weird. If I'm the only one wearing a hijab, I won't go out.' This trepidation countered Zahra's confidence in her Muslimness. Zahra stated,

> No one should stop me from practicing my religion. It would be like telling a Christian not to pray to Jesus. That is their religion and it's my religion to pray five times a day. So, it is my right to do this.

Irish students also spoke of having a strong Muslim identity despite harassment from non-Muslim peers and teachers. Maira confidently recalled,

> I fell out with two girls last year. They constantly were at me for the fact that I don't eat pork and that I fast. They just wanted me to change and be like them. There is always going to be something about you that you must change. I am not going to change to be like them.

Like the Australian students, the Irish Muslim participants were proud of their Muslimness, yet acknowledged that their Muslimness brought challenges.

The Muslim students we spoke to in the United Stated echoed Aaliyah and Zahra's confidence. They attended a progressive Islamic school in their formative years that did not impose one sect (*madhhab*) over others, accepted interfaith marriage, and valued differences in family traditions. Currently attending public high schools, students expressed a strong sense of empowerment that propelled them to be proactive in the face of bias and discrimination. Asif shared,

> Fast forward to high school. I had such a strong identity that on the first day I introduced myself to the principal and the assistant principal to figure out where I was going to pray. I will not call myself the most religious person, but it was important to me and I think it's important to other people.

Sofia shifted away from a dichotomous mindset upon her being taught that it is okay for her also to be an American. She explained,

> I never really called myself American. I always thought of myself as Muslim because everything in American culture is rejected by Muslims, so I never was like, 'Oh I'm also American.' It was usually, 'I'm Muslim and I'm this.' When I first attended this school and was taught that I was really an American Muslim, I felt emboldened. I don't have to apologize for being Muslim. I can now say, 'Yeah, I'm Muslim. I'm also American. This is what I am.'

Despite the challenges faced, all participants engaged in the process of developing their own unique Muslimness. For some, feeling at ease with their identity required the camaraderie of Muslim peers. For others, Muslimness developed over time or was explicitly taught. Yet, how much or how little confidence they possessed reflected their ability to speak out against misinformation or harassment experienced in their day-to-day lives.

Seeking voice

The Muslim students interviewed were eager to speak and share their experiences. They understood the importance of good communication, but in Australia and Ireland, they were not provided as many opportunities to speak their minds. In Australia, Eshe reflected on her living in a Muslim majority section of the city. She commented, 'We can have cultural cohesion in our society if we understand each other. Ignoring other cultures and staying segregated leaves room for conflict and misunderstanding'. Kari agreed and added the need for girls to learn to speak to boys. She said,

> In the future, we are going to be with the opposite gender. We must learn how to interact with them and have a normal conversation. It's not like that here, though. We are all girls and I think it would be good for boys to attend this school as well.

The Australian Muslim students were eager to engage with difference. However, school and community norms kept the girls segregated and protected. As a result, they struggled speaking out and wanted opportunities to do so.

In Ireland, Catholic and protestant secondary schools did little to integrate Islam into the religious curriculum. As a result, Muslim students who attended these schools tended to not participate, even though they were required to remain in the classroom during the lessons. Omar recalled an incident where he tried to contribute to class discussion about his Islamic faith. He stated, 'In religion class I sit at the back. Sometimes what they say about Islam is wrong. When I correct the teacher, she doesn't like it. She responds, "Well, I'm the teacher".' When Omar used his voice to contribute information about Islam, he was curtailed. Whether the teacher viewed his comments as undermining her authority or not, the message Omar received was that his voice was unwanted and uninvited.

The American Muslim students attended an Islamic school that facilitated open conversations about difficult issues, such as terrorism, gay marriage, sectarianism, and anti-Muslim racism. Lily explained,

> Because of my education, I know how to react when people ask me rude questions. We practice at school. One assignment was to give presentations on controversial issues. We had to ask and answer difficult questions as part of this task. I have faith in myself knowing that I'm prepared.

American students also recognized the need to advocate for themselves and for others. Yousef shared an incident when he intervened to help a Muslim *hijabi* soccer player. He recounted,

> I was at a soccer match and the referee prohibited a girl from wearing her *hijab*. No one was advocating for her. I went to the referee. I said, 'Listen, no disrespect. There is nothing in the rules that says she can't play. I know the league standards do not restrict headwear, especially a religious garment.' I held my ground against the referee. I didn't want to be disrespectful. In the end, he apologized. He was very upset about the way he handled the situation.

Respectfully dispelling misinformation was important to the American students. When voicing their concerns or responding to questions or hate, they considered the context and the individuals with whom they were speaking. Hannah shared an incident of a teacher stereotyping Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Frustrated by the negative depiction taught in class, she approached her teacher once all of the students left the classroom.

> I spoke to the teacher respectfully. I said, 'Well, to be perfectly honest that's not true. There's several cases where Sunni and Shi'a live together peacefully. War is not inevitable between these two sects.' I wanted to make sure that my class didn't get the wrong impression about Islam. Her comment made it sound like Sunni and Shi'a Muslims hated each other.

In this situation, Hannah's advocacy failed to change her teacher's mind. Hannah recalled, 'She shut me down immediately. She said, "No I studied this. I wrote an essay on this". I said, "Well, people can have different opinions". She didn't listen'. The American students were confident in their abilities to voice their opinions and knowledge. However, they recognized that speaking out was a risk and that few would be receptive and willing to listen and learn.

Navigating inclusion and exclusion

Muslim students in Australia, Ireland, and the United States navigated social complexities based on whether they felt included or excluded. Inclusion was a welcomed feeling of empowerment, care, and belonging. Alternatively, exclusion contributed to feelings of vulnerability and unease.

In Australia, Aisha felt included at her school. She said, 'At school we don't have to be scared to pray. We can pray anywhere. It's comforting.' Amir commented that his school's integration of Islam throughout the curriculum reinforced his feelings of belongingness. He reflected, 'Everyone here is Muslim. Together we learn about Islam in all the subjects'. The Australian students felt included when they were with Muslim friends. However, they did not see themselves as part of a multicultural Australian society. Rohan explained, 'I was born here, but I am not Australian. I am Turkish'. Lalam agreed, stating, 'When I go to the city, I feel that people stare at me. I don't feel that it is my city. I don't feel comfortable there'. Accordingly, the Australian Muslim students did not venture far from their Muslim-majority communities. They preferred to stay where they were comfortable and safe.

Despite being born and raised in Ireland, Layla, who attended a Catholic School and identified herself as 'bi-racial and Irish', stated that her teacher perceived her as 'a foreigner' and being less Irish than her peers. She recalled a 'very embarrassing' incident. She explained,

> The teacher asked the class, 'How many people have been to different parts of Ireland?' I kept putting my hand up saying, 'Yes, I've been here, yes, I've been there.' The teacher said, 'Now girls look, the *others* have been all around Ireland and we haven't.'

In addition to being perceived as 'other', Layla also commented that her classroom was segregated. The White Irish and Black students chose to be seated separately. This resulted in her sitting in the middle of the class. The teachers did little to change the seating arrangement, adding to her feelings of isolation and exclusion. Layla further recalled that she often heard racist exchanges between the two groups of girls. She stated,

> One of the African girls put on a song. The White Irish girls started to make a big deal out of it. The Nigerian girl said out loud, 'Oh it smells like racism in here' and one of the White girls responded, 'Oh, it smells like fish in here.'

Layla spoke matter-of-factly about the racism in her school. Both the teacher and the students positioned her as 'other', and not Irish. Consequently, racism at school heightened her unease, positioned her as different and not Irish, which barred her from being included and accepted. Layla felt little agency to affect any change.

Opposite the Irish experience, the American students were taught to see themselves as belonging in a diverse American society. Hafa said,

> Being around the same people every day is great. It creates a bond. When new students enrolled at our Islamic school, they were welcomed with so much happiness, kindness and love. It made them feel like they were part of the family.

Shadi shared her perspective of having non-Muslim teachers at her Islamic school. She said,

> Ms. Cane was my music teacher. She taught me how to play the piano. She wasn't Muslim, but it didn't matter at all. She introduced me to music. I'm now the leader of my high school band. This definitely would not have happened if I didn't first learn music from Ms. Cane.

Close to 40% of Shadi's teachers at her Islamic school were non-Muslims. Being valued and accepted by non-Muslim teachers eased her transition to a public secondary school.

The Australian, Irish, and American Muslim students easily identified inclusive and exclusive spaces and individuals. The Australian and Irish students recognized a clear delineation of 'us and them'. However, the American students' progressive Islamic school's approach of hiring non-Muslim teachers and offering a curriculum that valued difference provided students with the skills to enter non-Muslim majority spaces without fear or trepidation.

Responding to hate

The Australian, Irish and American students agreed that they experienced Islamophobia in their day-to-day lives. As part of a minoritized community, they often felt stigmatized by extant anti-Muslim discourses. Farah, an Australian secondary school student commented, 'I know that some people think Muslims are terrorists. It makes me feel upset because we are not terrorists'. Noor added, 'When people say bad things about our

religion, it doesn't really affect me. Whether they like it or not, we are going to be Muslim. Their opinion isn't going to get me down. There's not much we can do.' The other Australian Muslim students interviewed agreed with Noor's position of resignation. They did not acknowledge any agency to push back or attempt to change anti-Muslim sentiment in the wider Australian society, but they did choose to hold tight to their Muslim identity.

Similarly, the Muslim students in Ireland recognized the prevalence of anti-Muslim racism in their schools. Muhammad commented, 'Most of us have been called "terrorist" by students at school'. This racism went unnoticed by teachers, and if observed, then it went uncorrected. Uthman added, 'When Irish students see a group of Muslims together, they will scream "Allahu Akbar" while walking down the corridors. This also happens in physical education when playing dodgeball'. The Irish students did not push back against the verbal assaults, preferring to ignore these labels and insults. Like their Australian peers, they were resigned to periodic bullying for identifying as Muslim.

Given the pervasive anti-Muslim rhetoric in the United States, the American Muslim students, like the Australian and Irish Muslim students, were not surprised when their peers or teachers spoke negatively of Islam. Adam recounted an incident in his public secondary social studies class. The teacher began the class presenting an overview of the new unit on Islam. Being raised in a family that practiced Islam, Adam welcomed the opportunity to share his religion. However, as the teacher was presenting the unit, he overheard a classmate say, 'Terrorist unit'. He explained what followed,

> I thought to myself, 'Well, this is not what I was expecting.' I was used to those comments, but I thought that once they learned about Islam, things would be fine. I remember opening my book to begin our first assignment. It said insane things about Prophet Muhammad. I read that he had seven wives and he chose which ones he loved more. I was surprised and thought that this portrayal of Prophet Muhammad contradicts everything that I've learned and all the values that I've been taught. I worried that the students would believe what was written. That scared me and I was upset.

Adam discussed the incident and showed the passage of text to his mother. The next day his mother met with the principal, and they decided that Adam would give a presentation to clarify misconceptions. Rather than ignore the student's comment and the erroneous text, Adam acted. He had an ally with his mother, who helped him respond courageously to hate and misinformation.

Thus, anti-Muslim racism inexorably shaped the day-to-day lives of the Australian, Irish and American Muslim students interviewed for this study. Living in minoritized communities, they held in common the challenge of how and in what ways they identified as Muslim. They wanted to voice their opinions and have the opportunities to do so; however, they were keenly aware of when they were included and excluded because of their faith. Yet, what marked the difference between the Australian, Irish, and American Muslim students was whether or not they had the requisite opportunities to develop their confidence and hone their skills to effectively counteract anti-Muslim racism.

Discussion and conclusion

Anti-Muslim racism is built upon centuries of Orientalist depictions that position Islam and Muslims as an inferior 'other' (Said 1978; Shaheen 2002). These normalized discourses have moved Islam beyond a religious group (Breen 2018) to a visible cultural archetype that is a combination of racial features, immigrant status, religious clothing, and ideological markers that are perceived as both inferior and threatening to hegemonic Whiteness (Considine 2017). As this racism is both taught and learned (Brooks 2012; Kendi 2019), Western education plays a role in perpetuating racist ideologies through discriminatory practices, Eurocentric biased curriculum, and policies that racialize and subjugate Muslims (Breen 2018). Given that anti-Muslim racism spans geographical location, we sought to better understand the experiences of Muslim students in Australia, Ireland, and the United States. Our findings suggest three practices for anti-Muslim racist education that cross geographical borders, namely: (1) establish safety, (2) respect identity, and (3) expand belonging. By engaging in the three practices, school leaders and teachers provide a safe learning space for Muslim and non-Muslim students to think critically and challenge the complexities of anti-Muslim racism and set a non-negotiable anti-racist standard for a school culture grounded in inclusivity, empathy, and understanding.

Establish safety

Muslim students in Australia, Ireland, and the United States experienced racialization subtly and overtly, which heightened vulnerability. Whether attending government or parochial schools, Muslim students endured derogatory language, stereotypes about their identity, criticisms about religious traditions and values, and systemic barriers for support (Aalberg et al. 2016; Brooks 2019; Sirin and Fine 2008). They were subject to microaggressions (Brooks and Brooks 2013), such as Adam overhearing a boy say, 'terrorist unit' and Maira's classmates harassing her for not eating pork. The pervasiveness of racism shaped the development of Muslim students' intersectional identities and at times influenced their resolve toward exerting agency (Ali and Sonn 2017; Crenshaw 1995; Khosravi 2012; Mason-Bish and Zempi 2018). In schooling contexts, racist interactions with students and teachers created a sense of insecurity, as Eurocentric curriculum reinforced racist ideologies about Muslims and Islam (Apple and Buras 2012; Merry and Driessen 2005).

Given their experiences of insecurity and vulnerability, school leaders and teachers are obliged to ensure a safe environment for their Muslim students (Ezzani and Brooks 2015; Shah 2018). Safety extends beyond physical safety and includes psychosocial safety and overall well-being. It is preferable that issues of safety do not arise in the first instance; however, this presupposes school leaders and teachers have the requisite knowledge and skills to be proactive, culturally responsive and anti-racist (Kendi 2019; Khalifa 2018). The findings of this study suggest that Muslim students are not afforded safety in all its manifestations. Rather, their day-to-day experiences include implicit stereotyping, bullying, microaggressions, and blatant racism. This is in keeping with increasing racialized surveillance of Muslim communities by government and law enforcement agencies in Australia, Ireland, and the United States (Alimahomed-Wilson 2018; Carr 2011;

Tittensor and Hoffstaedter 2020). This demands school leaders, teachers, and staff to participate in systemic cultural proficiency training (Ezzani and Brooks 2015). A comprehensive approach will shift mental models through self-reflection, revisioning teaching and learning to anti-racist curricula to counter the structural causes of anti-Muslim racism, both in school and in society.

Respect identity

All the students interviewed were proud of their Muslim identity (Abdalla, Chown, and Abdullah 2018; Brooks 2019). Many of the female students wore headscarves (*hijabs*) and viewed the act as integral to their faith and an outward expression of their identity (Sai 2018). Aaliyah, an Australian student, stated that taking away her right to wear a headscarf was akin to erasing her Muslim identity. Zaina claimed her headscarf and identity as a Muslim superseded her Australian nationality (Shah 2018). Yet, this changed in the Irish context where harassment tempered appearance. Faizah chose to stay indoors unless accompanied by her *hijabi* friends. This worry to venture alone did not usurp her right and resolve to be Muslim. American students echoed their Australian and Irish peers. They too were proud of their Muslim identity and were proactively taught to respond to anti-Muslim racism (Ezzand and Brooks 2019).

All the students in the study were developing their intersectional identities (Crenshaw 1995) amongst structural racism (Kendi 2019). In other words, the students' social identities and how they combined (faith, race, national origin, gender, immigrant status, language, and physical appearance), shaped their experiences of oppression or privilege in their respective contexts (Crenshaw 1995). Although all students experienced anti-Muslim racism, they varied in their sense of empowerment and agency. Thus, it is critical that school leaders and teachers understand that Muslim students range in their perceptions of self-worth and inner strength to oppose discrimination, prejudice, and racism (Abo-Zena, Sahli, and Tobias-Nahi 2009). Muslim students should not be burdened with resolving racism and its manifestations (Kendi 2019). Rather, the responsibility lies with school leaders and teachers to create and sustain whole school cultures with practices, policies, and procedures that are anti-racist. To tackle systemic injustice, educators must acknowledge the diverse experiences of Muslims based on their intersecting identities (Kendi 2019; Sirin and Fine 2008) and create cultures of belongingness and safety.

Expand belonging

The Muslim students in each country experienced heightening politicized anti-Muslim rhetoric that positioned Muslims as inferior 'others' incontrovertibly opposed to Western norms and mores (Abo-Zena, Sahli, and Tobias-Nahi 2009; Ezzani and Brooks 2019). These 'othering' discourses affected perceptions of where they belonged in their societies. However, their sense of belonging was strongest in Islamic school settings with culturally and religiously relevant curricula, like-minded Muslim friends, and a sense of unconditional acceptance (Brooks 2019). These amiable sentiments dissipated when entering non-Islamic spaces. For instance, in Australia, Ireland, and the United States school policies and practices reinforced White privilege (Harris 1993) and little attention was

paid to systemically reinforced racial inequities. Moreover, educators did not intervene when overhearing racist remarks or bullying. Muslim students saw themselves as part of an ostracized 'out group' (Shah 2016), cognizant of their minoritization.

Giving Muslim students voice is critical to belongingness, particularly at a time where youth are discovering and developing their identities and struggling to find their place in the world (Zine 2009). Not affording them voice diminishes opportunities for them to express shared values with their non-Muslim classmates. Rather than teachers reinforcing biased curriculum, they can engage in critical pedagogy and religious literacy (Brooks et al. 2020), helping students to think critically about destructive anti-Muslim content in textbooks and media (Levey and Modood 2009; Sabry and Bruna 2007). Discussions about these false narratives can encourage students to examine power structures in their community and their larger society and provide opportunities to dismantle oppressive content. Other avenues to cultivate a sense of belongingness include using primary documents (e.g. notable Muslims such as Linda Sarsour, Lupe Fiasco, Ilhan Omar and others) and discussions on current events, poetry, music, and TEDx videos. Such practices help students to feel accepted, respected, and establishes a safe environment that contributes to an expanded sense of belongingness, a necessary component of anti-racist education (Kendi 2019).

In summary, anti-Muslim racism is omnipresent in Australia, Ireland, and the United States. This reality behooves school leaders and teachers to address racism head-on by problematizing Whiteness and White supremacy and disrupting curricula, instruction, policies, practices, and customs that maintain these hegemonies (Jean-Marie and Mansfield 2013). Ensuring safety, respect for identity, and expanding belonging are three practices fundamental to inclusive schools. By integrating critical pedagogy and religious literacy (Brooks et al. 2021) into curricula, students will learn to question Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments. Critical pedagogy challenges classroom dynamics that reify the negative narratives in media and society, and more importantly encourage social consciousness, activism, and allyship for Muslim and non-Muslim students. Similar to students who are Black, indigenous, and people of color, Muslim youth have the human right to learn in contexts of full acceptance and understanding. Unfortunately, this has yet to actualize in Australia, Ireland, and the United States.

Disclosure statement

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