

Engaging with diversity: A case study of the  
intercultural experiences of Muslim and non-  
Muslim students in an Australian school

RESEARCH CENTRE FOR LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

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## Introduction

Developed countries such as Australia are facing an unprecedented increase in the level of linguistic and cultural diversity due to human mobility (Vertovec, 2007), and as a result people are now increasingly being called on to interact across and between languages and cultures (Kramsch, 2011; Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2012). At an individual level, understanding one's self in relation to others and communicating in the context of such diversity can be consequential for how one can participate and belong (Blommaert, 2013). At a societal level, sustainable diversity involves managing tensions between cohesion and difference (Heugh, 2013) and an understanding of the complex ways in which people orient themselves in their diversity to construct multilingual, multicultural identities and negotiate their participation in society (Blommaert, 2013; Heugh, 2013; Stroud, 2003). Taking into account the multiple perspectives arising from linguistic and cultural diversity, both within and between individuals, can overcome monolingual, monocultural attitudes that maintain one language, one culture and one identity are the norm (Clyne, 2005; Gogolin, 2002).

This is relevant in the context of educational settings, where the experience of students and the broader educational community plays a significant role in developing learners' capabilities to navigate diversity and communicate interculturally (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). In the past decade the presence of students of Muslim faith has increased in many schools in Australia (Hassan, 2015). While some studies have highlighted the negative experiences of Muslim students in Australian educational settings (Mansouri & Trembath, 2005; Poynting & Noble, 2004), little is known about how both Muslim and non-Muslim students and the educational community reflect on and manage their experiences of interaction. This case study has explored how Muslim and non-Muslim students, school leadership, counsellors, teachers and parents reflect on, interpret and manage the experience of engagement and exchange in the context of a high school (Years 8 to 12) in South Australia.

## Context

The school is a Catholic college for girls which is characterised by a high degree of linguistic, cultural and faith-based diversity, including recently, a large number of Muslim students. Located in a suburb of Adelaide which has had a significant migrant and new arrival population for some decades, the school has a history of receiving students who bring diverse languages, cultures and faiths to what was formally an Anglo-Australian Catholic educational setting. The school profiles the diversity of students' cultural backgrounds each year, and a summary for 2015 can be seen in Table 1 below.

This cultural diversity is very much evident in the school's promotional materials including the school's website, and in regular school events such as Multicultural Night, Diwali Festival and the celebration of Eid. Languages offered at the school include Chinese, Italian, Vietnamese and English as an Additional Language, with Persian offered onsite after school hours by the School of Languages. As a faith-based school, the Catholic religion is a central feature of school life, evident in promotional materials, regular school activities (Mass and Retreats) and in the school environment itself (chapel, statues and artwork). The curriculum includes Religious Education for Years 8 to 10 and Studies in Religion for Years 11 and 12 (Stage 1 and 2 SACE), with a focus on students exploring their own faith and the comparative study of world religions.

**Table 1. Cultural groups present in the school**

Cultural background	Total	Cultural background	Total
Afghanistan	142	Malaysia	1
Albania	1	Malta	2
Arabic	1	Myanmar	10
Australia	141	Netherlands	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1	New Zealand	1
Burundi	1	Other-South America	1
Cambodia	10	Pakistan	1
China	15	Papua New Guinea	1
Congo	5	Philippines	13
England	2	Poland	2
Ethiopia	2	Portugal	1
Greece	6	Russia	1
Guinea	1	Serbia	2
Hong Kong	2	Sierra Leone	1
India	40	Somalia	1
Iran	7	Spain	1
Iraq	10	Sri Lanka	2
Ireland (Republic of)	1	Sudan	27
Italy	15	Turkey	1
Japan	2	USA	1
Kenya	1	Uganda	1
Korea (Republic of)	4	Ukraine	1
Lebanon	7	Viet Nam	67
Liberia	13	Zimbabwe	4
Total Students	574		

## Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to research, which focused on the examination of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A single case study allows a close exploration of a phenomenon and attends to the detail and complexity of people's experience and the influence of social factors on their interpretation of their experience (Riessman, 2008). This approach to the design and analysis has revealed how the students and others in the school community interpret, reflect on and manage reflexively the phenomenon of diversity, and the role of languages and cultures in mediating and creating spaces for diverse ways of knowing, learning and being, and ultimately, belonging. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted to elicit the multiple perspectives of the participants' experience of intercultural interaction among Muslim and non-Muslim students. Each group was interviewed once for around 60 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed and all information de-identified. Participation was voluntary and the study was conducted according to the ethics guidelines of the University of South Australia. The participants included eight Muslim students, eight non-Muslim students, three school leaders (including the principal), the school counsellor, fifteen teachers (including one male Muslim student support officer) and two parents.

In undertaking the study it became apparent that there was a problem with the terminology 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim', as the school community does not understand itself in terms of a Muslim and non-

Muslim distinction. For example, many of the non-Muslim student participants were from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and strongly identified with the students of Muslim background through their shared migration experience. In the interviews both teachers and students problematised this distinction as it was not how they understood themselves in relation with each other most of the time. Nevertheless, the distinction is maintained in the discussion of the case study as it was the focus of the investigation. This will be discussed further in the section on the study's findings.

## The phenomenon – linguistic, cultural and faith-based diversity

A summary profiling the students' cultural backgrounds for 2015 reveals that out of a total of 574 students, 141 identify as Australian, while the remaining 433 students identify with 47 other backgrounds representing multiple languages and cultures (Table 1). From the school leadership's perspective there is a relatively straightforward explanation for this, as the school has a long history of linguistic, cultural and faith-based diversity due to its location in a suburb known for its significant migrant population:

So in many ways we're a geographical school that reflects our suburbs, but also the ethos of the school is one of welcome, and people certainly do say in relation to Muslim students being at a Catholic school like "What the hell?", but a Catholic school is, if nothing, a place of welcome. (School leader)

Despite this history of diversity, and decades of multicultural policy in Australia, there is an acknowledgement that adopting an ethos of welcome for students from diverse ethnic, cultural and faith backgrounds has not been without challenges. One challenge for the school has been managing the linguistic diversity of students, and in particular the English language requirements of students from migrant and new arrival backgrounds:

The best example of where it works, so one of their courses is the EAL class, where the majority of students would be Muslim background, but that's not all. So you have a lot of Asian background as well, and they just, they're united in their desire to get it right, to move forward with the language, and so it's a big strength. (School leader)

In managing the linguistic diversity amongst its students, the college offers English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes during school hours, which not only support such students in developing their English language capabilities, but also contributes, from the school leadership's perspective, to 'a culture of acceptance' within the school community.

Yet another challenge has come from attitudes both within and without the school community, generated by the visibility of an increasing number of students wearing headscarves. While perceptions of the broader community tend to lump migrants together according to ethnic, cultural or religious markers, the school community recognises that grouping people together in such a way ignores the complex nature of diversity and can contribute to misunderstandings and stereotyping (Scollon et al., 2012):

You don't talk about the 'Buddhist girls', you don't talk about the 'Hindu girls', you talk about the 'Indians' or whatever, but it's hard work not to talk about the 'Muslim girls'. (School leader)

I think it's, sometimes it might go unrecognised that we might also have diversity within the Muslim population. So I remember when I started and I think it was 2007, I had two students who wore hijab and so they were very visibly Muslim, but I also had a number of students who didn't, and one of the students who didn't, she was from an African background, after about a year of being in the same class, seeing the hijab more, she had used to wear it and then she took it off. Maybe when she came to high school, I'm not sure, and then she started wearing hijab

again, when there were girls that she saw wearing it. But we also, the majority of our Muslim students are from Afghanistan, the majority are Shia, but we do have students who are Sunni as well, and we do have students that we might not know are Muslim because they don't wear the hijab, and they don't share the same cultural background as students from that majority group. So there's a lot of diversity in that, if you can call it a group, in that group. (Teacher)

For school leadership and teachers this diversification of diversity is important to consider, because when students are grouped together in the category 'Muslim', it makes less visible the fact that they come from linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds as diverse as Afghanistan (142 students), Iran (7 students), Iraq (10 students) and the Middle East (1 Arabic, 7 Lebanese students), and they will therefore have quite different ways of practising their faith (Shia or Sunni), different languages and cultural practices, and different circumstances in terms of how they have come to be in Australia. From the school leadership's perspective, it is not helpful to group students together under the label 'Muslims', as it hides the complexity that this creates within the school community. For this reason, they have coined a term, 'AIIME' (students from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and the Middle East), to better reflect the diverse backgrounds of these students and avoid them being understood only in terms of religious differences. This alternative representation is valued by the students who self-identify as Muslim:

So we have this group of AIIME students and it's from year 8 to year 12 you have two AIIME students from each year level and what we do is we come together and we talk about how we can help the AIIME students to feel connected with the rest of the school, college, and feel like they belong here more. (Muslim student)

Here we can see that being recognised in this way is valued by the students, who do not understand themselves, and themselves in relation to others, simply on the basis of religion. On the students' part, there is a sense of being able to participate, connect and belong in diversity. For the school community more broadly, there is a sense of the value of conceptualising diversity in this way, as this excerpt from the parent focus group interview illustrates:

- Parent: They just don't treat the girls any differently. They're all students of this college. It doesn't matter what nationality they are, first and foremost they're students here.
- Parent: That's it. They're here. Therefore they are.
- Parent: So it's just a community. They're all treated the same.
- Parent: And the community spirit is amazing.

In exploring the various perspectives regarding the phenomenon of diversity, the school community sees itself as just that, a community that conceptualises diversity as normal, at times challenging yet not problematic, positioning itself as a model of best practice in managing the complexities that the mix of multiple languages, cultures and faiths brings.

## The role of language

Language enters into every domain of the lived experience of learning within and beyond the formal curriculum.

At the school there is an overall attentiveness to the role of language. It is manifested in the formal curriculum through the offering to all juniors, a compulsory study of English and for some students English as an Additional Language (EAL), as well as Languages electives whereby students select two from three choices: Chinese, Italian, and Vietnamese of Languages. The focus on English/EAL recognises that literacy in English is crucial for accessing, negotiating, mediating and succeeding in learning across the curriculum. The school offers EAL classes at every level, from Year 8 to Year 12. In



2015, classes included one at Year 8, two at Years 9, 10, 11 and three at Year 12. There are 2.6 dedicated EAL teachers who also provide extensive professional learning to all staff. Languages are offered, recognising, as expressed in the school's curriculum handbook, that they "allow for new opportunities, exciting challenges and an enormous spirit of enjoyment of different languages". As such, the study of languages is strongly connected to the multicultural ethos of the school, inviting students to participate in exploring the international world and to connect with others in diversity. Although it is not indicated in the school's curriculum handbook it offers programs in Persian through the School of Languages, a school of the Department of Education and Child Development in South Australia that offers languages in various locations through out-of-hours provision, generally in one weekly session of 3 hours. It has been offering a program of Persian language at the school since 2009. The school acts as a 'centre' for the Persian program, with the class including students from the school who wish to maintain their home language, as well as students from other mainstream schools. In 2015, for example, students come to the program from twelve different schools. In this way the school is able to provide for the plurality of languages represented in the community of the school. The pattern of languages provision appears to mirror historical patterns of migration to South Australia.

The attentiveness to language is manifested in a number of ways beyond the curriculum. An Afghani Persian-speaking Shia Muslim "school support officer" has been appointed to work in the school. He initiated the AIIME (Afghani, Iraqi, Iranian, Middle Eastern) group which was created to meet the needs of the Muslim students by providing a space for them to meet to negotiate their participation and contribution to the school and to provide mutual support to each other. The teachers appreciate the value of both the school support officer and the AIIME group. At the same time, they recognise the immense linguistic and cultural diversity within the group and the need for them to learn to work with this linguistic and cultural diversity. The worker routinely provides advice to students; as one of the Muslim students stated:

... so I think it's great to have him there because some of the girls who are new arrivals... if they get into trouble or anything, it's easier for them to go to Mr J than other teachers because he would understand them more than the other teachers, like situations and everything. (Muslim student)

The Muslim students appreciate the fact that he understands their culture, including religion (i.e. "situations and everything") which means that they do not have to give explanations about their context or behaviour, as they might need to do for other teachers. He also advises the teachers who appreciate his information about religious observances. They often seek his advice on how to respond to particular questions or needs on the part of students. He also plays a mediating role with parents, often through one-on-one conversations, face-to-face or by telephone.

Translation is a major support measure in communicating with parents in particular. Originally letters and notices were translated and sent home routinely. As the school subsequently found out that not all parents could read these documents, they reframed the process, paying particular attention to wording. For example, at important events such as the subject expo, sessions are provided specifically for Afghani families. A further refinement of the translation strategy has been to send brief messages home the night before events such as parent teacher nights, with very concise wording, essentially focusing only on key words. At parent teacher nights the school previously relied on the students to translate for their parents. In more recent times, as the Principal says, they have been hiring some former students "who can translate to walk around with our families so they can hear the translations (provided by their daughters)". A great deal of attention is also paid to the scheduling of these important school events, so as to avoid potential clashes with important dates in the Muslim calendar.

All the students are developing bilingual (if not multilingual) users of languages. The Muslim students recognise their home language as a mark of their identity and that the availability at school of their home language enhances their “sense of belonging”. They are acutely aware of the relationship between language and their successful participation in the life of the school. They recognise the consequences of ‘limited’ English.

Sometimes.... they come here from a language school where (it) is simpler than here. They have low self-esteem. (Muslim student)

They see the ‘limited’ English as a major problem and participate in peer tutoring, the reading challenge, homework club and other activities to support their English language development. Some students need help at regular lunchtime sessions provided at school “because they are mostly ESL and they have English problems that they need help with” (Muslim student).

Generally, the students live a dual language life – English at school and their home language at home. Persian is the majority language of the Muslim students at the school and the particular students interviewed in this case study, but it is not the home language of all the Muslim students. Although this distinction between English at school and home language at home tends to be reinforced at school it is by no means as clear cut. The Muslim students recognise that language development takes time and they are particularly aware of the language needs of new students:

When it comes to new students... they have language problems so the teachers say it’s OK to explain to them in your own language for a period of time until they get used to the (English) language. So we are allowed to use it (Persian) for certain times, not always. (Muslim student)

The use of home language for explanations in the early stages of being at school is accepted but the teachers are also concerned to develop the English language capabilities of students. This account from a Muslim student, and re-iterated by the teachers, indicates that the two languages are understood as separate, and belonging to two different domains yet neither at school, nor at home is the language use of the students entirely monolingual.

The students do use their home language among themselves “at recess or lunch”. This observation provides another distinction in relation to domains of use where it is acceptable to use particular languages. Inside the classroom is the domain of English language; beyond the classroom, at breaks, the students feel that it is permissible to use their home language.

The Muslim students experience great satisfaction in using their home language at school, but they are also aware of reactions:

We get that (reaction) a lot because even if someone else speaks in their own language (i.e. students from diverse linguistic and cultural groups), I’m like: Look at them. What are they saying? But that’s just like, to show respect you have to speak in English when you’re around them so they don’t get offended that you’re talking about them... (Muslim student)

The students appreciate that the use of particular languages can mark inclusion or exclusion and that in order to mark respectfulness and inclusion, they need to use English.

The Muslim students indicate that the use of their home language brings pleasure and enjoyment because whenever they use their own language they “don’t feel anxious that (they) don’t speak properly” (Muslim student). It is entirely natural that their home language comes into play in their regular conversations. At a particular moment during the focus group discussion with the Muslim students, in a discussion about going out with Australian students, the group began to smile and laugh. When we asked why, the students explained: “I kind of said a word in my language. I mixed it up”. It was a natural and spontaneous action, to incorporate words from their bilingual repertoire, but it is

seen as an act of confusion or “mix-up”. This would suggest again, that the dominant understanding on the part of students and their teachers is that the two languages represent two distinct and separate worlds, rather than an integrated, linguistic resource that the students are able to and indeed do draw upon contemporaneously.

Appreciating the availability of a Persian language program in the school, the Muslim students observe that “we’re lucky to have the Persian language in our school”. Notwithstanding the fact that this provision is made available out of regular school hours, and that the school and the program act as a centre for a range of students from different schools, the Muslim students see it as immensely valuable. When she imagines the use of the Persian language at school, one of the students states:

So it would make me feel really good because... the teachers would let us use our language as well, they would teach in our language. (Muslim student)

The use of the personal pronoun “our” marks the sense of belonging or being ‘at home’ in their particular language and culture and the value that this would bring to their learning.

The non-Muslim students are themselves “all from different countries” (non-Muslim student) and recognise that they learn reciprocally from each other. They appreciate the complexities associated with the choice of language for use in particular situations. On the one hand, they comment on the challenge of learning English, recognising both the relatively rapid progress and the difficulties:

I’m actually a little bit surprised because some of the girls have only been here a year and a half, how much English they actually know... we end up trying to figure out what they’re saying and help them explain. (Non-Muslim student)

For some, this empathy and willingness to make an effort to interpret meaning and support the exchange or explanation of meaning comes from their own personal experience of migration.

Student: Because I compare myself with them, because I’ve been in Australia for ten years now, but I know when I first came here I was like them as well. I struggled with English, but now I know I’m far better than that. So when I interact with them, I keep that in mind, and not to let my thoughts turn bad, and try and teach them as much as I can give them, and not, you know, not try to make them feel uncomfortable while I’m doing that as well.

Researcher: Right. Tell me a little bit more about that, not making them feel uncomfortable.

Student: It’s when, they feel uncomfortable when you can’t understand what they’re trying to give back to you. I, it’s hard to explain, but when you’re having that conversation, when I can’t understand I try to ask them again, and they struggle to explain that back to me ... (Non-Muslim students)

On the other hand, they also comment on the use of the home language on the part of Muslim students:

Student: Last year we had girls who had been in Australia for a long time in our class, and they didn’t speak in their own languages much, whereas this year we’ve got girls who are more recently moved here to Australia. Like, they can’t communicate with each other in any other way, I suppose they’re kind of forced to speak in their own language because there’s no other form of communication. To a certain extent I can understand that, but due to them communicating with themselves, they don’t communicate with us. Yeah.

Researcher: What opportunities does the school provide, or what activities, not necessarily just in lessons but after school or during lunch breaks, to create opportunities for interacting between all the diverse groups?

Student: You actually see a lot of them in homework club and that, because they try and make the effort to be able to communicate with you and, and a lot of teachers do help them out. (Non-Muslim students)

The non-Muslim students also observe that the pattern of home language use changes over time and that the circle of interaction in English widens as the reliance on the home language at school is reduced.

Although many of the non-Muslim students are also themselves bi- or multilingual users of languages, they too appear to understand the languages as separate and not as part of an holistic repertoire for communication.

The teachers' perspectives on language are similar to those of the Muslim and non-Muslim students. They highlight the fact that the school is "a multicultural school" where 48 languages and cultures are represented. They recognise that there is a complex diversity in the school as a whole, which is, in fact, more diverse than just being comprised of Muslim and non-Muslim students.

The teachers have developed a range of ways of engaging with or managing the linguistic and cultural diversity. For example, some indicated that they differentiate lessons and tasks "so that literacy (in English) isn't going to stop them from participating" (Teacher). For others, it is a question of constantly remaining open to the individual by not making assumptions:

What we're saying is not to make assumptions... So not to make assumptions that, just because you've read a book on Islam, that applies to everybody in your class. (Teacher)

Many teachers recognise that they have had to change their own language to better connect with students. The adjustment may be linguistic, but it is also cultural and touches upon the content knowledge of the curriculum. For example:

We have, even in tourism, especially when the students were first coming to Australia, ideas like a 'caravan'. "Let's caravan around Australia". "What's a caravan?" Just not understanding that.

So even when you talk about solar panels, I think that was in business studies... and the students just had no concept or idea that you can get energy from the sun... it's just about making it more easily accessible to the students. (School leader)

This example illustrates the way in which language and culture come into play in developing students' conceptual understanding.

The teachers are aware of the literacy demands of learning across the curriculum. The Principal, for example, highlights the fact that:

You're trying to teach all these things with these huge literacy demands, and yes, you have a big percentage of the class who have just come from the School of English, so, what do we do? Professional learning, draft and draft and draft. Homework club of course. Anytime, all the time. (Principal)

She sees this as integral to the teachers' professional literacy.

The teachers also observe the use of the home language on the part of the Muslim students. A school leader summarises the situation:

... so when they're in the classroom setting we'd ask that they speak English... and the girls quite happily accept that. It's about developing their (English) language skills in both writing and how they speak... Sometimes in the yard, they will sit in a group and speak their own language. If they're generally just sitting there... we don't naysay it, but over time, they will generally speak more English. That might be a comfort thing. (School leader)

From a learning point of view, the teachers recognise that students will necessarily incorporate in their writing, especially in EAL classes “the richness that they bring”. In other words, they recognise the different knowledge, values and attitudinal stance that the Muslim students bring to their learning. They would like to see greater participation but recognise the role of language in enabling such participation:

I wish the Muslim girls would participate more because I know they've got a lot of wisdom, but sometimes they take a back seat because of the oral language, and let the others lead groups.  
(Teacher)

It is clear that all students, Muslim and non-Muslim, and the teachers are highly aware of the power and centrality of language and that they are attentive to it. It is an understanding that comes from their lived experience of the complexities of communicating, learning and teaching across diverse linguistic and cultural worlds. An extensive range of initiatives are in place, as well as an awareness about ways of attending to language, including the provision for English language/EAL and languages in the curriculum, the use of translation, and so on. What is less evident is the recognition that languages and cultures, together, mediate both learning and reciprocal relationships, and that there is a need to recognise that all the languages and cultures that the students are experiencing are enriching their social, linguistic, cultural and knowledge repertoires.

## Mediating cultures/making spaces

The school has adopted a role of intercultural mediation in a number of different ways that work to create a space for Muslim students in a Catholic school.

In the school, the Catholic religion is highly in evidence and all students, regardless of religious affiliation are expected to participate in the public practices of Catholic religion such as daily prayer and attendance at Mass.

We have got church days and masses and everything, that's something that the parents don't know about. So some of them if they don't know they would come and ask and say that, you know when you go there they give you something. The school will explain to them that they still have to come, it's a compulsory day, but it's like if you respect the Christian religion and go to their churches, and pay a respect, go get the blessings, that's what we get in return. They would respect our religion and our beliefs I think. (Muslim student)

The participation of the students in Catholic activities is therefore presented as a requirement but also one that is understood as having a reciprocal role in promoting mutual respect. This mutual respect has been shown by the school opening spaces for Muslim students to practice their religion by providing places for daily prayer within the school.

Actually on the short days when we can't get home in time to do our prayers, so what they did is they made a prayer place in the chapel, so we can just go there and pray anytime, or we can just use the orchard, there's a prayer place there as well. So that's something that shows that they actually, you know. (Muslim student)

The provision of places for prayer filled more than a practical need for the Muslim students, but also created a sense of belonging within the school community. The school also allowed silent participation in daily prayers so that prayer become an individual action rather than the public recitation of Catholic prayer formulas.

Connecting with yourself and connecting with God. At our school it's not like you have to connect with Jesus or anything, it's connecting with your own God. (Non-Muslim student)

This opened the possibility for prayer to be a common practice for all students rather than the religious practice of a particular faith.

Religious education is compulsory in the school and in the earlier years focuses on the Catholic faith. In these classes, however, a comparative approach is accepted and it is possible for non-Catholic students to draw parallels with their own beliefs.

Researcher: Do you have an example, do you remember a time when that happened or an instance when you were able to have a good conversation about your religion and how you felt about that?

Student: Mostly in religion classes. Since there are some similarities between Christian and Muslim, especially about Jesus. I know that there's differences, but I felt confident to share what I think. So I did say whatever I wanted and then people would respect my point of view. They didn't have an argument with me, like "That's not what it's about or how it goes". It's something that's really good about it. (Muslim student)

Thus, Religious Education created spaces for Muslim students to present their own religious beliefs. Classes in later years adopted a comparative religion perspective and opened space for discussion of personal religious beliefs and practices and the presentation of Islamic approaches to ethical and moral issues.

Up to year 10 you learn more about Christian, the Christian religion and everything, but once you do your senior classes that's when you have the background knowledge about Christians and you're at a mature age to absorb other information about other cultures and religions. So once you come into the senior classes you do get to do research on other religions and you can share it with the class. So they do give us the opportunity to learn about other cultures and religions. Not only Islam but Buddhism and Hinduism, we get an opportunity to learn about that. (Muslim student)

Religious Education was, therefore, a class in which students of all faiths were able to present and discuss their religious beliefs and reflected to overall religious diversity of the school, which included Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions, not just Catholicism and Islam, and so provided a space for understanding religious belief in general terms. The inclusion of space for Islam, and other religions, within Religious Education thus not only created a space in which Muslim students felt included but also played a role in mediating understanding of the Islamic religion to other students.

Student: For a recent project, last term, was to explore, not just the Catholic religion, but more ancient religions and stuff.

Student: I guess they try and relate it together so they've even got, "Oh, you do that in your religion, well we do this", and yeah, they, we kind of show each other the differences and similarities. Sometimes we see that we have similarities, but they're just like in different languages and that, and it helps them understand our religion too.

Researcher: And what about you understanding their religion? Is there a sense of ...

Student: Yeah, you do understand more of their religion, you go, "Oh, that's very interesting, I didn't know that". You get to see ... (Non-Muslim students)

Religious Education therefore brought religions into contact and developed understanding of religious differences in constructive ways by identifying similarities in belief not just differences.

The school also made other accommodations to the needs of Islamic students in their teaching and learning approach. For example, the period of data collection coincided with the month of Muharram, a period of mourning for Shia Muslims, during which certain activities, such as listening to music are forbidden.

- Student: Yeah like in music, if you're doing music during the Muharram, so if you tell the teacher she will, instead of doing music she will give you an assignment that is related to music but it's a written task, so you can just easily do that.
- Researcher: And do you find that the teachers, what other changes for example have some teachers made, obviously that's what the music teacher has done. What are some examples of what other teachers have done?
- Student: Well in dance we had to do a test, then she made it a written test.
- Student: Once, it happened last year, that in religion we had to listen to music and analyse it, but because it was Muharram we couldn't listen to it, that's why the teacher just gave us the lyrics, so we didn't have to listen to music. (Muslim students)

Teachers therefore responded positively to constraints that religious beliefs imposed on curriculum and developed activities for Shia students that did not require them to act against their beliefs but did allow them to continue their work in the curriculum.

The school Shia Muslim School Support Officer played a significant mediating role in developing the school's response to Islamic students. He was an advocate for the Muslim students and worked to have Islamic elements included in the school's practice largely by calling attention to particular needs and opportunities. For example, as a result of the School Support Officer's advocacy, the school had recently started to include a celebration of Eid as a whole school event.

It was great, because he came when I was in year 10, so like three years ago. So he was the one who started celebrating Eid, so he started that and then he also started the AIIME leadership group, so that's been great and really successful as well. So I think it's great to have him there because some of the girls who are new arrivals if they have any, if they get into trouble or anything, it's easier for them to go to [name] than other teachers because he would understand them more than the other teachers, like the situations and everything. So I think it's a great thing yeah. (Muslim student)

The School Support Officer therefore had a significant mediating role between the Muslim students and the school and also provided a point of contact for students with the school. He provided an important link between Persian speaking students and the school as he was able to deal with and respond to issues that the students could not, or preferred not to, communicate in English.

The school has also responded to some of the more general needs of Muslim students. It has introduced a modified school uniform that allows the students to wear veils and to cover their arms and legs so that their style of dress better conforms to Islamic ideas of modesty. The school also has adopted a practice of providing halal food for students; the canteen offers halal options and food served as school camps is halal.

For Muslim students, the inclusion of an Islamic dimension in various religious practices of the school created a sense that their religion was validated and affirmed by the school as this was central to their feelings of being included and accepted by the school, and that this acceptance was a point of distinction about the school.

I feel like we're being recognised. You know in other schools where my friends go, they don't really feel like they belong there, because here we have a prayer place where we can just go pray. (Muslim student)

Some students expressed a belief that it was because the school was a faith-based school that it understood the importance of faith for others. This meant that there was not a sense of Catholicism and Islam being in conflict as faiths but rather that an understanding of faith was the common core for the school. For non-Muslim students the inclusion of Islamic content in religious education and the

celebration of Eid gave a sense of a better understanding of the Islamic religion and Islamic culture that made the religion seem less 'other'.

Yeah the Eid celebration is something really big as well. We've been doing it for three years and we've been inviting students from our school and outside school just to show, you know, how much our school is looking after us, how much they're respecting us, giving us. That's something important and unique as well, because outside our school there's no other school that has that. It's something really unique. (Muslim student)

Students from both groups commented that observable differences between Muslim and non-Muslim students, such as wearing a veil, avoiding certain activities during Muharram, become subjects for talk among students. Non-Muslim students often asked questions about these practices and Muslim students were happy to respond as they felt this was an opportunity to educate others about Islam.

In year 8 when I first came here, I did have Aussie friends who would come up to me and ask, especially in the summer, "Isn't it hot to wear that scarf and those sleeves?" I did give them the right because maybe they've never seen girls with a scarf on and sleeves, covered up in summer, but I didn't feel it offensive. I would explain it to them, but if they come again and again and ask the same thing, that's when I would feel like it's offensive. But if they asked once then I would just explain it to them and they would get it. They wouldn't approach me again and ask the same question. (Muslim student)

They normally ask us if we wear the scarves at home as well and when we sleep. The other interesting question that they ask, and obviously they're curious because they ask if we always wear a scarf every time and with everyone. We give them the answer but that doesn't make us that uncomfortable (Muslim student)

The Muslim students did not perceive such questions as intrusive and saw them as the consequence of a desire to know, a feeling that was confirmed by non-Muslim students' responses. The non-Muslim students expressed an appreciation for the response of the Muslim students as it help them understand another religion and its practices.

The work done by the school to mediate cultures does not mean, however, that there were no instances of conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim students. For example, the serving of halal food at camp created a conflict when some non-Muslim students objected to having to eat halal food.

Teacher: I think, when I took my year 10's on year 10 Retreat, everyone was saying all wonderful and positive things which are all true and lovely, but we did have an issue on year 10 retreat. I think the girls do have a long, there's still a way to come to understand the Muslim culture. For example, we were serving chicken at our Retreat,

Teacher: There's always someone

Teacher: And food is a very big issue here at school

(Laughter)

Teacher: And so the Anglo girls were refusing to eat the chicken because the chicken was *halal*.

Teacher: Not all Anglo girls

Teacher: Some.

Teacher: A very small group.

Teacher: But a small group of very vocal, strong personality and really like made a really big, vocal, public issue about it. But it was a lack of understanding as to what halal is and means, and they thought that this was some special chicken that had, I don't know what they thought. But they really had no idea what halal means. We serve halal sausages at every BBQ that we have. Halal is spoken about quite regularly here, but I know my year 10's they have no idea what it means. So I think that they still do have a way to come and maybe we need to discuss these things more.

Teacher: These things come from home.



Teacher: There's parental ignorance.

Both teachers and students pointed out that this conflict involved only a very small proportion of the students and that the conflict was resolved relatively quickly by the teachers but the possibility of tensions remains. It is notable that the complaint about halal food occurred at a time when there had been concern expressed by some conservative groups in the community about halal food and claims that money from halal food was used to fund terrorism and the complaint seems to be a reflection of conflicts in the wider society within the school. Such issues were integrated into the school's pedagogical response to diversity and were seen as a need to educate students about aspects of religious difference.

The mediational work of the school went beyond their approach to diversity within the school as the school provided a contact point between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities more generally. The school was the main site where Muslim students were socialised into the Australian community and were brought into contact with members of non-Muslim communities. Students reported that, although students in the earlier Year levels tended to socialise mostly within their own communities. Sometimes however, these communities are not religiously based, as one teacher noted:

You see the African girls who are Muslim and Christian hang out together because it's the common denominator that's most obvious because it's just before everything else. (Teacher)

Thus, affinities other than religion may create the common ground that enables students to form friendships with similar others. In the later Years they tended to form friendships across groups creating new social affiliations for both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Oh it's like, when you first start you will always go to the people who are similar. I would always go with a Muslim student, but once you're a bit confident, you start making more friends, because that's how I did. I have a lot of friends now, my whole year level we're close together. At the start of high school I would only go to the girls with scarves on just to be with them and get familiar with them. (Muslim student)

I myself have a lot of Muslim girls as my friends, and it's really good to share our cultural diversities, and we have a lot of celebrations here, like the Muslim girls celebrate, and we are also invited as a part of it, and I don't really see that as a barrier between us. (Non-Muslim student)

While those friendships were valued, they did bring about problems for both Muslim and non-Muslim students because of different expectations, values and practices between families.

Some of their families are strict on you can't go to their house, so we respect that, so sometimes we just hang out at school or when we have school events that make us go out of school, I guess that's when we learn more about each other when we're outside of school. (Non-Muslim student)

I guess during camps because that's when you finally, you're away from home and that's when you get to know, like we help each other, you get to learn about them. They tell you more about their culture and yeah. (Non-Muslim student)

For some students it was difficult to maintain friendships outside school time as some Muslim families were reluctant to let their children spend leisure time outside the extended family group. This meant that some Muslim students were unable to participate fully in their friendship groups. Others were able to do so within particular limits, such as having to stay in the local area, having to be home by a certain time, etc.

Student: Well I guess if it's still close to the school or their house and still in the same kind of area where they live, it's OK, but when you step out into somewhere further, or into

- like town or something, where there's big situations with lots of people, yeah it's not usually, they won't tend to come to those kind of places.
- Student: And I guess some of them are scared to ask, though they, if it's another Muslim girl they will go "Oh yeah" or "She was my cousin so I was allowed", but if it's like someone else, and they're like "No", they don't want to have to go through it with their parents and know that it will still be a "No". Yeah, I guess they're too scared.
- Researcher: Right. And how do you react to that? Do you find that a difficult thing or a puzzling thing?
- Student: Because obviously my parents will not always say yes, so I guess I understand because we can't all be able to do everything. You just work with what you've got, I guess at school, you just use that time that you have. (Non-Muslim student)s

Where these friendship groups emerged, both Muslim and non-Muslim students felt they gained from the relationships and most were accepting of the different expectations of different families. In fact, this was largely seen as a difference between 'strict' and 'less strict' parents rather than a specifically religiously based difference.

The school also played a role in the socialisation of Muslim families as school activities provided a connection point between these families and the wider community. One practice that the school valued was its 'Multicultural night' which many Muslim students and parents attended. This event provided a significant contact between members of the diverse communities of the school. The celebration of Eid also had begun to play a role of bringing communities into contact. There were however limits for the school in the role they could play in bringing communities into relationship. The school reported that Muslim parents (and parents from other cultural groups as well) were more likely to engage with the school over matters specifically relating to education than other events. This meant that the school played a role in mediating cultural understandings of education but that its role in other forms of mediation was limited. The school reported that it was particularly difficult to engage Muslim parents in Catholic religious events.

As indicated above, Persian language classes offered by the School of Languages were valued by the students as they felt the school provided them with opportunities to connect to and develop their own languages and it was seen as a validation and respect for their existing languages. This provision of languages as an after school option did, however, situate the home languages of the students outside the school as something less central to the students' 'main' education. It was seen as something that was made available if students wanted it rather than as something central to their education. The classes also brought outsiders into the school and this could create problems for the school's students. The Muslim students saw the school as a safe place and, in an all-female environment, some students felt able to do things they would not have done in a mixed-sex environment. This idea of the school as a safe place is, however, recast when others come into the school, especially male students from the same community. In some cases, photographs of Muslim students not wearing veils or showing their arms or legs were displayed in the school in the context of displays of photos from camps, sports days, etc. Within an all-female environment, such photos are not problematic, but when the language classes brought others onto the campus, they did become so and this created problems for some Muslim women, particularly if male students reported having seen the images to the students' parents. This demonstrates some of the complexities that may result when schools are used for multiple purposes and for multiple communities.

## Reflection and reflexivity

In making sense of their experience of diversity, Muslim and non-Muslim students and members of the school community reflect on their experiences of interacting with one another and manage reflexively the interplay of diverse languages, cultures and faiths. Muslim students make sense of their experience as one of transition from limited participation to full participation in the school, a process that takes time and carries with it perceptions of risk:

- Student: Oh it's like, when you first start you will always go to the people who are similar. I would always go with a Muslim student, but once you're a bit confident, you start making more friends, because that's how I did. I have a lot of friends now, my whole year level we're close together. At the start of high school I would only go to the girls with scarves on just to be with them and get familiar with them.
- Student: I feel like feeling safe is really important.
- Student: Feeling safe and that they belong here as well.
- Researcher: Why might students not feel safe in a school in Australia? Why's it important that you do feel safe?
- Student: In one aspect, one of them could be the change of the environment that they live in. When they first come to Australia it's not that familiar to them, but all of a sudden they change environment so they are not used to it. I think this can be one of the areas.
- Student: Sometimes it's because they come from a languages school where the languages school is simpler than here. They can have low self-esteem.
- Student: And there were different expectations. They think that they will have to live in a different way, that's why. (Muslim students)

Their concerns about safety and the potential for marginalisation echo research findings in which Muslims in Australia report perceptions of risk to their safety, wellbeing and ability to participate on an equal footing (Haque, 2001; Hassan, 2015; Kabir, 2008a, 2008b; Woodlock, 2011). These students were all born outside of Australia, and their responses highlight the challenges of living and learning in a new environment and adapting to unfamiliar ways, including the challenge of acquiring English as an additional language. However, there are further challenges to gaining confidence and capabilities that enable them to participate in school life:

In year 8 when I first came here, I did have Aussie friends who would come up to me and ask, especially in the summer, "Isn't it hot to where that scarf and those sleeves?" I did give them the right because maybe they've never seen girls with a scarf on and sleeves, covered up in summer, but I didn't feel it offensive. I would explain it to them, but if they come again and again and ask the same thing, that's when I would feel like it's offensive. But if they asked once then I would just explain it to them and they would get it. They wouldn't approach me again and ask the same question. (Muslim student)

I don't think it's too challenging but sometimes it's difficult to share what you do when everyone else is being a Catholic, but when we go to churches, I really like how organised they are and how respectful they are, and that's what, that teaches us how to respect other religions as well and be open-minded. (Muslim student)

In reflecting on such encounters, these students must navigate a lack of knowledge surrounding their cultural and faith practices (Haque, 2001), and at times, attitudes that continue to position them outside the mainstream. They interpret and respond to such potentially negative experiences in a positive way, seeing themselves as learning to be more tolerant and open-minded. The following interview extract from an Anglo-Australian student illustrates how the phenomenon of interacting in diversity is understood from another perspective:

Well before I actually came to this school, I had a very different view on Muslim students, because I'd never really been around them enough to know what they were *actually* like. So, I can't remember the actual picture I had in my head, because this good one has taken it over, but yeah, I remember when I got here and I saw how multicultural it was and the diverse range of people that were here, it kind of gave me a sudden shock almost, but in, kind of in a good way though. Kind of a good shock. It was a surprise at first, I needed a little bit of time to get used to it, because my old school wasn't very multicultural. We had multicultural nights and everything, but it wasn't as diverse as this school is. (Non-Muslim student)

This student reflects on her experience of adapting to diversity, also understanding it as a challenge. In this case, her presuppositions of Muslims were confronted with a different reality when she found herself interacting with them for the first time. Initially an unsettling experience, she now presents this in a good light, as it has led to a shift in her point of view.

From these different perspectives, adapting in a context of diversity is understood not simply as a matter of the minority adapting to the mainstream, but as an attitude of engagement and exchange that the whole school community are involved in (Kabir, 2008a). This involves reflexively managing a lack of knowledge about one another by creating a safe environment in which questions can be asked, and information shared. Here diversity is embraced and there is a positive take on the multicultural nature of the school that goes beyond token 'multicultural' events and popular misperceptions of new arrivals in the mainstream.

Facilitating a cohesive school environment in diversity also involves developing teachers and students' capabilities for reflection on where such misperceptions of one another might come from:

Once again we've got this broad label of Muslim, you know it's a bit like we've got this broad label of Catholics, of our students who are Catholic, how many are strongly practising Catholics whose, and we use that term Muslim and people have that huge idea about "Here's someone that's so committed to their faith" that it's extremist in some way, whereas these are girls who are Muslim in the same way that girls are Catholic. And that because they wear headscarves everyone identifies them as strongly religious, whereas they wear a headscarf the same way they wear jeans, and the same way they wear a dress. It's a piece of clothing they put on. (School leader)

So I see the Muslim girls going through the same thing I've seen the second generation Vietnamese girls, second generation Italian and Greek girls. And the greatest challenge we have is society's depiction of Islam, rather than, this is exactly what we've seen before with a traditional culture coming into a contemporary Australian secular culture and how they deal with it. (School leader)

In encouraging reflection on social discourses and media representations of Muslims, and showing an awareness of how cultural and religious practices such as head scarves can be misinterpreted (Smith, 2007), school leadership and teaching staff actively manage the tensions between cohesion and difference (Heugh, 2013), modelling an approach which encourages reflection, dialogue participation and collaboration:

And in terms of headscarves on a school day, officially our canteen does stock blue fabric for headscarves. We actually got a group of Muslim students on to that as a project. They went out and they sourced different "We like this one and we don't like this one" and "This one's good for these reasons", we got them to price it and then we ordered up the stock, so we very much, "We want you to have that". (School leader)

... you unpack it as you go. And I get, all the time, full phone calls from people from Sydney and Canberra with people worrying about whether they should have sleeves for their frocks or whether they should be tight or loose, tights, "What would you do about headscarves?"... "Just wear them!" (Laughs) So you know, just what you fall over. There'll be camps arranged and then

you'll find they're in Ramadan, you know teachers are very good, but you may not want to ask them to cook brekky at five in the morning. So you don't put camps on during Ramadan anymore, and then you really learn to talk at interview (to parents) about camps and that they're an integral part of the year. (Principal)

From the school leadership's and teachers' perspectives, it is important to create an ongoing dialogue involving the whole school community, including parents, to work together towards mutual understanding. In doing so, managing misunderstandings, often arising from misrepresentations of Muslims in the media (Kabir, 2008a), brings both challenges and opportunities:

So an example would be the year 10 camp this year, they went off and they always cater for halal food and other food, and the chef put out a sign that said halal chicken. [...] So then the non-Muslim students all went there, "I'm not Muslim, you can't make me eat halal chicken" and we went "Well it's just the same", and it was like "Oh the only reason they're halal, to get that name you need to sell, you have to buy the licence, and that fuels terrorism". So it all blew up into a massive concern, so that was the year 10 group, the year 10 pastoral care teachers looked at how we can almost debunk that myth or explain to them why things are done. Once again it was a group project, they sat down, apparently there was something like 'The Project' exploring what halal is, why it works, so we got contemporary fun TV clips. We let them watch it and explore that, and other examples in other cultures. So it's not telling off individual students, and we found it was more educating parents. So it was the parents who were more "How dare you make my child eat halal food". So it was more talking to them about how it's just chicken! So a lot of phone conversations, trying to inform our local community why things happen and how we are catering for their children, supporting their daughters as well as others. (School leader)

I was just going to say, when you were asking about the other nationalities, I teach classes and every week is a half hour on current events, *always*, and what's been interesting with what's happening this year with ISIS, and what could reflect back, is, and I was wondering "Should I bring it up?" because I was trying to be sensitive as well, and I've got a big mixture [...] No, it's that we can discuss this all reasonably and I haven't heard one negative thing. And that's when we're reporting back, we should never generalise things like that, and we've got to respect everyone in this classroom. And I've done it several times and some issues and that have come up, and I was saying the other groups, they've all discussed it in a very mature way, and in different groups, lots of non-Muslim "But that's not our girls here", "It's not our girls at this school". Something over the years has come through. (Teacher)

In this way, the powerful influence of representations from the media and social discourses that conflate religious or cultural practices with political acts (Smith, 2007) or represent being Muslim and Australian as incompatible (Woodlock, 2011), are not avoided, but addressed in a collaborative and sensitive way. These examples illustrate how teachers themselves are reflecting on how to manage the tensions that arise when working in such diversity, as they simultaneously encourage students to reflect on, explore and respectfully discuss the different perspectives and representations in play. This becomes an ongoing dialogue in which teachers also involve parents and the local community as they provide them with information to encourage mutual understanding and respect.

Here 'respect' is not just talked about, but enacted in interaction with one another:

I feel like we're being recognised. You know in other schools where my friends go, they don't really feel like they belong there, because here we have a prayer place where we can just go pray, and there's always additional help for us since English is our second language. (Muslim student)

And I guess that people tend to view them in a negative way, and so when you actually interact there is more than what meets the eye. You get to learn more than how, like they come to school and share their food with you. They will teach you, and invite you to Eid festivals and that's when you actually realise it's not just people who wear a scarf and there is more to them. (Non-Muslim student)

From these perspectives, reflecting on and 'doing' recognition and respect is seen as more than just the co-presence of people of multiple languages, cultures and faiths. Actively supporting English as an additional language development and opportunities to participate are seen as important for developing shared understandings amongst Muslim and non-Muslim students in Australian high schools (Haque, 2001; Kabir, 2008a). Yet here 'recognition' goes further than living and learning alongside one another, but reveals a sense of reciprocity through which students have opportunities to share who they are and what they value, find common ground, develop empathy and promote a sense of acceptance:

I guess it's because, it's like how nice someone is to you. If they respect you, you respect them. For me my religion and cultural beliefs they're really important to me. If someone disrespects that it's something that, you know it makes me go further away from them. I'll just avoid that kind of people. So I guess it's because, the thing about this school is because we're a multicultural school they all respect what you believe and that's something that I really liked about it. I did make friends who would understand me more, and accept me for who I am. And that has improved a lot as the years went by. (Muslim student)

In a faith-based school it could be argued that understanding and tolerance is a natural consequence of such dialogue (Bouma & Halafoff, 2009). However, both students and staff highlight the importance of attending to the multidimensional nature of interacting in diversity:

Isn't religion just a part of who you are? It's not really, like it doesn't define you. So there are other things that define us as a person, and it's not necessarily religion, so it's not the first thing that we'd look towards. (Non-Muslim student)

We focus on individual strengths and if we use those strengths, we can all achieve anything and work together, so that's a big part of the school. We do a lot of activities that support varied cultures. We do Diwali festival, different Indian celebrations. On our school calendar you'll see the Islamic festivals are included, so we really embrace every culture so people start to realise "Oh that's why that cultural group does this, this is why that's happening" and I think it's with this understanding comes the acceptance, the reduction in fear. I think it's probably how, not really co-curricular, but just very natural for our school and how we celebrate different events, it's all focused on "We're all here together, we're all here to learn, we're this wonderful community, let's embrace that". (School leader)

These accounts highlight that while faith is very much understood as central to the school's identity and socially and culturally inclusive practices, the emphasis on education, and in particular, the individuation of education in which every student is unique, is an important way in which diversity is managed. In bringing together the different perspectives of students and the school community these reflections reveal an orientation to the multidimensional and complex nature of diversity (Blommaert, 2013). The school encourages an ongoing dialogue through an ethos of welcome, an intercultural stance and critical reflection on the influence of social and political discourses. Opportunities to interact in meaningful ways, for reflection and reciprocity are seen as integral to shaping attitudes and understandings between Muslim and non-Muslim students (Haque, 2001). In a broader social context, this is important for learning to live together sustainably in diversity beyond the classroom (Heugh, 2013).

## Key findings

**Finding 1:** That the dichotomy between Muslim and non-Muslim is overly simplified representation of the experience linguistic and cultural diversity in the school.

This project was designed as a project to investigate an issue of Muslim-non-Muslim interaction in an Australian school. This means that there is a dichotomy between two groups at the heart of the investigation and this dichotomy is based on religion. The findings of this project suggest that such a way of conceptualising the linguistic and cultural diversity in schools oversimplifies the situation. Many of the experiences of the Muslim students at the school did not relate specifically to their identity as Muslims but rather reflected more general features of the lives of immigrant children in schools; for example, language difficulties and the need for linguistic mediation, unfamiliarity with the dominant culture, including educational culture, and finding ways of adjusting to it, differing expectations about ways of living in the home and host culture, etc. It is important, therefore, in considering the lives of Muslim students in Australia not to reify religious identities as the sole factor of significance for understanding how such lives play out.

Moreover, it is important to reconsider the dichotomisation inherent in the distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim as neither of these are homogenous categories. The Muslim students as a group carried multiple identities relating to language, ethnicity, country of origin, experiences of which religion was only one and not only or not always the most salient one. The schools designation of these students as AIIME in a sense reflects an alternative way of constructing the students' identities that is not religiously based. Moreover, the schools Muslim population is not co-extensive with the AIIME group; some Muslims for example come from Pakistan, Bosnia, Africa or South East Asia. Similarly the AIIME group itself is not necessarily Muslim as students from the region are religiously diverse. The school's community includes both Sunni and Shia Muslims, although the majority is in fact Shia, and the distinctions that exist within Islam can be significantly relevant for the students, how they perceive each other and the relationships they establish with other Muslim students. The Muslim group is also diverse in terms of students personal histories, there are distinctions between those who were born in Australia and those who were not, those who arrived as refugees and those who immigrated for other reasons, each involving corresponding differences in identity, affiliation and experiences. For the Muslim students, being Muslim is one identity that they can adopt and which becomes salient in particular contexts, but should not be essentialised as the only, or only relevant identity that they have.

The idea of a non-Muslim group is similarly problematic as it too is internally complex ranging from those who would identify as Anglo-Australians, to children of immigrant groups, especially from Europe and Asia, who may have been born in Australia but who do not identify as Anglo-Australian, to immigrants from many parts of the world, which may include the countries from which the Muslim students come. In some cases affinities between Muslim and non-Muslim students from the same country of origin, with perceived communalities of language and culture may be more salient than distinctions made on the basis of religion. There are also communalities of experience that may become relevant affinities for the students, such as the fact of immigration or of having been a refugee or having arrived by boat, which do not pattern along the religious division of Muslim and non-Muslim.

This does not mean, however, that the Muslim identities of the students are peripheral to understanding the experiences within the school or the wider society as issues of religion for these students are features of their daily lives that influence how they dress, what they eat and their expectations about the public practice of their religion. Thus, Muslim students cannot be treated

simply as any other immigrant group and cannot be accommodated in the school with a purely secular approach. The communalities, the diversities and the particularities of Muslim students' experiences of life in Australia need to be taken into consideration.

**Finding 2: That the faith-based nature of the school facilitates how it responds to the religious identities and needs of the students**

One of the key features of the success of the school in educating Muslim students seems to have been the fact that it is a Catholic school. It would be possible for a faith-based school to be enclosed within its particular religious group and see other religions as irrelevant to its work. This however is not the case with this school, which sees its Catholicism as requiring openness to others. At the same time, the school remains a faith-based school in which religion is held to be of central importance. For this school, it is the centrality of religion that actually makes it a positive place in which to be a Muslim. As one school leader noted discussing Muslim parents' decisions to send their children to a Catholic school:

They themselves feel, like you'll say, "Why do you come to a Catholic school?" And politically there are probably some good reasons why Shia students come here than rather go to the Islamic schools, because most of the Islamic schools are Sunni run, and so there's some tensions there. Our fee policy also helps them a great deal, but it's also, one thing a student said to me once is "You can talk about God here" or "You can acknowledge God here". (School leader)

By giving value to religion, the school gave value to the particularity of the students' identities and aspirations. It is debatable to what extent such an accommodation to religious practice could happen within a secular (Zine, 2000), Australian public school. In such schools, religion is often treated as a private matter and remains in the private sphere. Such schools would be equally able to respond to the commonalities of Muslim students' immigration experiences, such as language provision, affirmation of culture, etc. but are less well able to respond to the centrality of religion as an aspect of daily life in Islam. This points to one of the most significant challenges that the arrival of significant numbers of Muslim students poses for Australian schools. With other groups of immigrants, religion has been less of a visible issue for schools as its public practice is often confined to weekends or occasional events during the calendar year and so relatively easily adaptable to the secular school. For many Muslim students this is not a viable way of understanding the public practice of religion, which is not only a daily obligation but which occurs a multiple points during the day. Responding to Muslim students in schools then involves an opening to *religion* as a part of normal public life, which does not render the religious practices of Muslims as 'other' but rather as part of the diversity of human experience.

**Finding 3: That the school, the students, the program and the experience of learning and being is both multicultural and multilingual.**

In many of the discussions participants invoked the reality of being 'multicultural'. This is very much in line with the discourse of multiculturalism in Australian society. What is absent from this discourse, however, is the reality that it is also at the same time *multilingual*. It is important to highlight both the multiculturality and multilinguisticity of the phenomenon because of the fundamental relationship between language and culture and because of the crucial mediating role that both language and culture play in the process of learning and in students' success in learning. Few studies in the literature on the experience of Muslim students in education have specifically addressed the multilingual nature of their social and educational experience. The present case study begins to consider this gap. Furthermore, where participants do consider language and the multiple languages that students use



at school and at home there is an underlying perception that the students hold the languages separately in their minds and that it is possible and in fact necessary to compartmentalise them. This perception does not do justice to the multicultural and multilingual repertoires that diverse students bring to their learning and that should be further developed through their learning. The recognition of the students' developing multiculturalism and multilinguality becomes an invaluable resource for the individual and the wider society in living and learning in diversity.

**Finding 4: That reflection and reflexivity play an integral part in how the phenomenon of linguistic, cultural and faith-based diversity is interpreted and managed by the school and students.**

In exploring the accounts of their experience of interacting together in linguistic, cultural and faith-based diversity, the present case study shows the extent to which the school leadership, teachers and students reflect on their understandings of themselves, and how they are understood by others, in the context of broader social discourses. While other studies focus on the experiences of Muslim students in Australian high schools, including their experiences of marginalisation and racism, few studies consider the multiple perspectives in play, and how potential tensions arising from broader social discourses are managed. The present case study has explored how school leadership, teachers and students in a particular school engage in a dialogical process of reciprocity, as they reflect on and manage reflexively the multiple understandings in play. While this involves challenges for students and the school, this process is understood as a means of overcoming potential tensions or limitations arising from categories based on one-dimensional understandings of who individuals are and how they might participate and belong in their diversity.

**Finding 5: That the engagement in working with Muslim and non-Muslim students in the context of diversity necessitates building a whole-of-school culture of learning and understanding.**

The leadership of the case study school and the Principal in particular, has succeeded in creating a *shared vision* that emphasises the fact that every girl (Muslim and non-Muslim) is unique, precious and important to the school and that learning and education matter for all. Within this kind of culture, there are clear expectations that both students and staff engage with mutual care and respect. There is also a sense of continuing to seek better ways of communicating, supporting students and their learning, engaging parents and the wider community and building the social and educational fabric of the school in the context of linguistic and cultural diversity.

## Conclusion

While there have been studies that consider the experience of Muslim students in Australia, there are fewer studies in the context of secondary schools, and fewer still that consider the phenomenon of linguistic, cultural and faith-based diversity while keeping the multiple perspectives in play. This study contributes to an understanding of how people make sense of and manage learning and being together in the context of a highly diverse high school in which there are a large number of Muslim students. The findings highlight a problem created by making sense of diversity in terms of a distinction between students based primarily on their religious affiliations, without taking into consideration the many other dimensions of diversity that are in play. Nevertheless, openness to religion and the value of creating spaces in which diverse languages, cultures and faiths can be mediated, is shown to be significant in creating cohesion in such a context of diversity. The importance of attending to language, in particular the role it plays in including or excluding people has also been a key contribution of the study. The experience of living and learning is both a multicultural and a

multilingual endeavour, in which students draw on their linguistic and cultural repertoires in their learning and being. This does not happen in a vacuum however, as the study shows how students and staff reflect on and manage reflexively their experiences of interaction and the potential for tensions arising from social discourses within and beyond the school community. This is understood as an ongoing dialogue and a dynamic process of engagement and reciprocity, through which a shared school culture of learning and understanding in the context of linguistic, cultural and faith-based diversity is created.

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