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Introduction

THIS PAPER REPORTS SOME RESULTS from a large scale study of attitudes towards Islam and Muslims amongst Australian secondary students. The findings show Australian students – Catholic and others – are generally ignorant about Muslims and Islam, and few believe that schools are filling the gaps in their knowledge. While non-Muslim students agree that acceptance of Muslims does not Australia tend to suggest non-Muslim and Catholic students may not be well informed, while the longstanding multicultural posture of educational policy suggests otherwise. Variation in response between boys come easily in Australia, school does not emerge as a site for change.

Islam is among the fastest growing religious denominations in Australia. The Muslim community grew from 210 000 in 1996 to 282 000 in 2001, making it the third largest religion in Australia, after Christianity and Buddhism. It is possible that it could move into second place in the coming decade.

Australian Muslims are an important and growing community, but are generally held in poor regard in schools and the larger community for reasons that are little understood, and, so far, little studied by researchers. The proposed research will provide information needed to tackle what could otherwise be a growing problem.

Schools have an important role to play in increasing mutual understanding and respect and appreciation of cultural diversity.

Eradicating racism and promoting racial equality must be an integral part of school life and should be explicit and implicit in all curriculum activi-
ties that take place within the school. National, regional and local initiatives provide support, advice and guidance for schools to ensure teaching about equality to all pupils. The National Curriculum guidelines for Citizenship and PSHE identify what pupils should be taught in association with racial equality and anti-racist behaviour.

Survey method

The survey unit was the high school student. Over 2232 student-completed questionnaires were obtained from students — Catholic and other — at 42 schools throughout Australia; over 148 schools were contacted to take part when the survey commenced. These schools were located in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. The analysis in this paper focuses on Catholic students, comprising 53% of the total participants.

In each selected school, the survey was administered to all eligible students present on the day of the survey. Its primary aim was to measure the attitudes and perceptions of non-Muslims towards Muslims. Schools were requested to survey Year 11 students, these being considered mature enough to give informed answers, yet unencumbered by Year 12 exams. Even so, many schools chose to administer the survey to Years 12 and 10. This was an unplanned bonus, as it allowed us to test the impact of another demographic variable. Schools were selected by first seeking permission from school agencies including Catholic Education offices in the relevant states and territory.

Characteristics of participating schools

Figure 1: Sample distribution in schools

About half the sample came from Catholic schools (53%), and roughly quarter each from other Christian schools (26%) and non-denominational schools (21%). The predominance of Catholic students was probably a consequence of the relative reluctance of state schools to participate.

\[ N = 2161 \]
How students differ in their knowledge

Respondents were presented with ten statements concerning objectively verifiable facts about Islam and Muslims, and asked to rate their agreement on a five-point scale from Strongly agree through Neutral to Strongly disagree. Responses are tabulated for each question and aggregated into a score representing each respondent's knowledge. To avoid bias, questions were worded so that half had Agree as the correct response, and half Disagree.

A study by the Pew Research Centre (2006) showed that those who are more knowledgeable about Muslims express more favourable opinions of Muslims and Islam. It was noted that, through knowledge, greater levels of awareness come from equal status interaction between the learner and individuals of Muslim background. The study showed that:

• the ability to identify both Allah and the Koran correctly correlates with holding a favourable view of Islam;

• being informed about Islam think that Islam and their own religion have a lot in common;

• being knowledgeable about Islam makes one more likely to see recent terrorist attacks as part of a conflict with a small radical group rather than as part of a major conflict between Westerners and Muslims;

• being aware of basic facts about Islam accept that Islam does not encourage violence more than other religions.
A significant difference was found between the mean knowledge scores of religious affiliations \( F(2,948) = 13.036, p < .001 \). Post hoc tests (Student-Newman-Keuls, \( p < .05 \)) showed Non-religious to be the most knowledgeable (mean score 1.54), followed by Other Christian (1.45) and Catholics (0.68). Non-religious students were more knowledgeable of Muslims and Islam than were Christian students (though there was considerable ignorance among all groups).

The survey revealed a great lack of knowledge of Islam: on all questions about half the sample recorded a ‘don’t know’ response (Figure 4). The proportion of correct responses varied from a high of 49% for Some Palestinians are Christian, to a low of 6% for Iran is an Arab country.

**Figure 4:** Proportion of correct and incorrect responses (knowledge of participants)

\[ N = 996, 997, 994, 991, 994, 989, 991, 995 \& 993 \text{ respectively} \]
All Arabs are Muslims

The correct answer to this is Disagree, since some 14% of Arabs are not Muslims. Most of the 22 million non-Muslim Arabs are Egyptian Coptic Christians or Lebanese Maronite Christians. The proportion of correct and incorrect responses was 42% and 8% respectively, meaning that of those who claimed to know the answer, most were correct. This may be because Australians of Arab origin are disproportionately Christian.

All Muslims are Arabs

The correct answer to this is Disagree, since some 80% of Muslims are not Arabs. Most non-Arab Muslims are Indonesians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Indians. The proportion of correct and incorrect responses was 43% and 9% respectively. This breakdown resembles that for All Arabs are Muslims, suggesting that it is generally understood that 'Arab' and 'Muslim' are not synonymous.

Some Palestinians are Christian

The correct answer to this is Agree, since some 20% of Palestinians are Christian. Formerly the proportion was considerably greater, but has declined in recent years due to emigration. The proportion of correct and incorrect responses was 49% and 5% respectively—the highest correct response of all the questions. This may be because many respondents happen to know or know of Christian Palestinian migrants, of whom there are a disproportionate number in Australia.

How students differ in their attitudes

So far we have explored the response of the sample as a whole. But does this mask differences within the sample? For instance, do boys differ systematically from girls in their attitudes towards Islam and Muslims? To answer this and similar questions, we used statistical techniques to determine if there were significant differences in the mean attitudes of all the demographic groups measured in the survey.

A total of 24 variables were presented. From these, four demographic variables were selected for detailed discussion as they showed high explanatory power over attitudes. Significant differences were found between the responses of respondents according to their religious affiliation (or lack of one) (Figure 5).

On many statements, there was a strong tendency for the two Christian groups—Catholics and Other Christians—to resemble each other and to differ from the Non-religious:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-religious agreed more, or disagreed less, than Christians</th>
<th>Christians agreed more, or disagreed less, than Non-religious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslims have made a major contribution to world civilisation.</td>
<td>Most religious fanatics these days are Muslims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims have made a major contribution to Australia.</td>
<td>Most migrants are racist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Muslims have good feelings for Australia and Australians.</td>
<td>Muslims do not belong to Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian schools should teach more about Muslims.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On two statements, all three religious affiliations differed significantly from each other. On the statement *Muslims threaten the Australian way of life*, all disagreed, but to different degrees: Non-religious most, Catholics next, Other Christians least. On the statement *Most Muslims treat women with less respect than do other Australians*, they all agreed: Other Christian most, Catholics next, Non-religious least. On one statement, *Australian TV and newspapers show Muslims in a fair way*, Other Christian and Non-religious did not differ significantly, but did differ from Catholics: all groups disagreed, Catholics least.

These findings show that the two Christian groups were significantly less well-disposed towards Muslims and Islam than were the Non-religious.

**Figure 5: Mean attitudes score, by Religion**
Religion also played a significant role in this area. There was a strong tendency for the two Christian groups—Catholics and Other Christians—to be less well-disposed towards Muslims and Islam than were the Non-religious.

On two statements, all three religious affiliations differed significantly from each other. On the statement *Muslims threaten the Australian way of life*, all disagreed, but to different degrees: Non-religious most, Catholics next, Other Christians least. On the statement *Most Muslims treat women with less respect than do other Australians*, they all agreed: Other Christians most, Catholics next, Non-religious least. On one statement, *Australian TV and newspapers show Muslims in a fair way*, Other Christians and Non religious did not differ significantly, but did differ from Catholics: all groups disagreed, Catholics least.

As regards gender differences, boys were less accepting of Muslims and Islam than were girls. Interestingly, boys agreed more than girls with the statement *Most Muslims treat women with less respect than do other Australians*—clearly a view not founded in direct experience.

**Figure 6: Religious affiliations in their perceptions of Muslims as 'dislikeable'**

A significant difference was found between religious affiliations in their perception of Muslims as 'dislikeable' \[ F(2,1889) = 10.3, p < .001 \]. Post hoc tests (Student-Newman-Keuls, \( p < .05 \)) showed the Catholics plus Other Christians jointly to perceive Muslims as slightly more 'dislikeable' (mean scores 0.04 and 0.10 respectively) than did the Non-religious (-0.19).

**Figure 7: Religious affiliations in their perceptions of Muslims as 'virtuous'**

A marginally significant difference was found between religious affiliations in their perceptions of Muslims as 'virtuous' \[ F(2,1889) = 3.33, p < .05 \]. Post hoc tests (Student-Newman-Keuls, \( p < .05 \)) showed the Catholics plus Other Christians to perceive Muslims as slightly more 'virtuous' (mean scores 0.04 and 0.02 respectively) than did the Non-religious (-0.12).
These findings show that the two Christian groups resembled each other in being more inclined than the Non-religious to ascribe both vices and virtues to Muslims. This could mean that for the Non-religious, the matter of religion with Muslims were not an issue, whereas for the Christian groups it was.¹

Is there a difference between those with Muslim friends and those without?

Figure 8 Difference in attitudes between those with Muslim Friends and those without

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Those with Muslim friends agreed more, or disagreed less, than those without</th>
<th>Those without Muslim friends agreed more, or disagreed less, than those with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslims have made a major contribution to Australia.</td>
<td>Muslims find it hard to integrate into Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims have made a major contribution to world civilisation.</td>
<td>Muslims threaten the Australian way of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Muslims have good feelings for Australia and Australians.</td>
<td>Most migrants are racist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Muslims have stronger family ties than other Australians.</td>
<td>Hollywood movies show Muslims in a fair way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian schools should teach more about Muslims.</td>
<td>Muslims do not belong to Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This school helps people of different cultures to get along better.</td>
<td>If I saw a Muslim student being abused in a public place I wouldn't care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning about Muslims helps students to understand them better.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person can be both a good Muslim and a loyal Australian.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings suggest that those with Muslim friends tend to endorse positive attitudes towards Muslims; and although those who lack Muslim friends do not mostly endorse negative attitudes, they do tend to disagree less with them. In other words, positive attitudes are generally embraced by both groups, but more strongly by those with Muslim friends; and negative attitudes are generally opposed by both groups, but more strongly by those with Muslim friends.

Note that these findings say nothing about causation. Having Muslim friends might give rise to positive attitudes, or alternatively having positive attitudes might predispose one to seek or accept Muslim friends. Nevertheless the two are strongly associated in a statistical sense, meaning that if one is present, the other is likely to be also.

¹ Note that the two factors 'dislikable' and 'virtuous' are orthogonal, meaning that they are not correlated. Hence it is possible, as here, for respondents to score positively (or negatively) on both factors at the same time. The Christian groups apparently see Muslims as having unattractive traits as well as good ones.
State school students felt more positively (less negatively) about Muslims and Islam than did private school students. Of particular interest, state school students endorsed the statement *Australian schools should teach more about Muslims* whereas private school students did not.

We cannot say that contact with Muslims reduces prejudice – merely that it is associated with reduced prejudice. It may be that people with reduced prejudice seek out Muslim friends. This issue would need to be disentangled with longitudinal analyses if we are to discover causality, though we suggest that the two may work in tandem. This supports a basic notion of the contact hypothesis which suggests that having some contact with others decreases prejudice.

**Conclusions**

The survey revealed a great lack of knowledge of Islam: on all questions about half the sample recorded a 'don't know' response. The proportion of correct responses varied from a high of 49% for *Some Palestinians are Christian*, to a low of 6% for *Iran is an Arab country*.

The survey found that students are divided in the degree and nature of prejudice and tolerance towards Muslims in Australia.

Boys were less accepting of Muslims and Islam than were girls. Interestingly, boys agreed more than girls with the statement *Most Muslims treat women with less respect than do other Australians*— clearly a view not founded in direct experience.

There was a strong tendency for the two Christian groups – Catholics and Other Christians – to be significantly less well-disposed towards Muslims and Islam than the Non-religious.

On two statements, all three religious affiliations differed significantly from each other.

On the statement *Muslims threaten the Australian way of life*, all disagreed, but to different degrees: Non-religious most, Catholics next, Other Christians least.

On the statement *Most Muslims treat women with less respect than do other Australians*, they all agreed: Other Christian most, Catholics next, Non-religious least.

Changing patterns of work and communication mean that, in the course of their lives, young people are likely to meet and interact with people from many different communities, cultures and backgrounds.

What then is the role of schools in promote intercultural understanding? Is there a role for school-based interfaith programs, intercultural studies, and
student welfare programs? Does the school curriculum matter? If not, why not? How can it be made more effective?

Schools have an important role to play in increasing mutual understanding and respect and appreciation of cultural diversity.

Eradicating racism and promoting racial equality must be an integral part of school life and should be explicit and implicit in all curriculum activities that take place within the school. National, regional and local initiatives provide support, advice and guidance for schools to ensure teaching about equality to all pupils. The National Curriculum guidelines for Citizenship and PSHE identify what pupils should be taught in association with racial equality and anti-racist behaviour.

The degree to which students feel that their school is educative about Muslims and Islam is an important predictor of certain levels of tolerance. This suggests that it is the atmosphere created by the school that is supportive and educative regarding Muslims and Islam, rather than the level of knowledge that is important regarding prejudice. Therefore, it is not just a matter of knowing more facts about Muslims and Islam but perceiving that the school cares enough to educate students on these issues that is important.

It is worth considering the contribution that outsiders to the education bureaucracy can make, particularly those from the Muslim community, to the development of policies, curriculum materials and pedagogical practices.

Current multicultural policies appear to de-emphasise knowledge as a means towards understanding and cultural harmony, and this appears as a major problem going into the future.

Bibliography


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