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## **Strategies of teachers towards Muslim students in Polish schools**

**Abstract:** Due to over 40 years of seclusion behind the iron curtain (until 1989) and the myth of a single ethnicity, single religion nation, the Polish education system lacks exposure to a multireligious classroom environment. With EU accession in 2004, the situation is gradually changing. Although higher education facilities provide teachers with comprehensive training in this matter, the actual first-hand experience is rare and new. In this paper, we used an exploratory study, based on qualitative data collected in autumn 2022, using an interpretative approach, to identify and describe strategies for the best practices of teachers when working with Muslim students in a Polish classroom. The empirical data was derived from 37 interviews with teachers (25) and with Muslim students (12) covering 5 voivodeships. We aim to provide a valuable source of information for professionals on how to create an inclusive classroom environment. The exploratory study is part of a larger research project that received funding from the EU, titled *EMPATHY: Challenging discourse about Islam and Muslims in Poland, [101049389 CERV-2021-EQUAL]*. In effect, we identified 2 predominant strategies of teachers for engagement with Muslim students and several best practice examples on how to overcome obstacles to classroom inclusion.

**Keywords:** Muslims, Poland, school, students.

## **Introduction**

Muslims are a small and vulnerable group of students in Polish schools. They are also a very diverse group of students: Polish Tatars, Chechens, Iraqis, Afghans and others. These factors make their experiences at school incomparable and therefore hard to study. This diversity is intersectional and includes a number of factors such as nationality, ethnicity, fluency in Polish, religiosity, and being 'visibly' (Tarlo, 2010) or not visibly Muslim. We do not mention the internal diversity of Islam such as Sunni, Shia and smaller fractions, as these are more advanced forms of identification invisible to the Polish majority and the only commonality – religion – might be lived differently (Ammermann, 2016) and only perceived as a difference by their Muslim peers. From this perspective the school experiences and opportunities of a Polish Tatar, whose family has been living in Poland for centuries and an Afghan refugee who recently came to Poland and lives in a refugee centre are incomparable at many different levels.

Despite these internal differences, being a Muslim student in a Polish school is an important factor to investigate. A Muslim might be identified as one by the public regardless of whether Islam constitutes a vital aspect of his or her identity, and whether they are actually willing to be considered as one. Jeldtoft (2016) uses in this context the concept of hypervisibility of Islam, while Rissanen (2018) analysed how Muslims are considered primarily as religious beings. In the Polish context, these distinctions might be even more appealing, since Muslim students and their parents are often the only Muslims ever known by their classmates or teachers, while the monocultural character of Polish schools makes such differences easier to spot (Górak-Sosnowska and Markowska-Manista, 2022). At the same time, with high levels of Islamophobia and the prevalence of anti-Muslim hate speech, Muslim students are vulnerable in school settings, especially since young Poles hold more anti-Islamic prejudices and are more prone to accept Islamophobic hate speech compared to the older population (Stefaniak, 2015, p. 32; Wieniawski et al., 2017).

This article aims to look at strategies used by teachers in Polish schools toward Muslim students in their classrooms. Teachers are required not only to have high professional qualifications, but also appropriate moral attitudes and behaviours, that enable them to shape the relationship between them and their students (Kutrowska, 2008). The need to navigate between external and internal demands (parents vs. system), calls for professionalization (maximizing the academic preparation of teachers for the demands of uncertain social realities), and an ever-changing institutional context,

with the moving of rules and regulations, teaching programmes and books forced upon teachers by politicians, pushing a populist agenda, all go towards making their work environment fragile. In this context, some of them face an additional challenge, to accommodate a student of a unique background in their classroom.

The article begins with data and methodology setting the context for further analysis. In the subsequent parts of the article, we identify two main strategies of teachers for student engagement and a number of best practice examples on how to cope with potential and occurring challenges.

### **Data and methodology**

This paper uses a qualitative study, based on an interpretative paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). It has an exploratory character with no pre-hypothesis (cf. Creswell and Poth, 2017). The main method used is a case study of a phenomenon, the preparation of schoolteachers for religiously diverse classrooms (cf. Stake, 1995). The paper is based on 37 semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers (25) and Muslim students (12) in the summer and autumn of 2022. The teachers were purposely chosen from 5 voivodeships representing the North, South, Centre, East, and West of Poland with a mix of city, town and village schools. The majority of teachers (23) were women. The Muslim interlocutors were a diverse group of graduates of Polish schools. We decided to speak with middle school leavers rather than university students, because the latter may have had a consolidated approach to their school experience, combining it with that of higher education, whilst we wanted to focus our attention on compulsory levels of education. As the students and teachers were from different schools, their narratives are not comparative. They are intended to present a multi-dimensional perspective of teacher strategies toward Muslim students. The core narrative is that of the teachers, but it is complemented by how Muslim students perceive the behaviour of their teachers and what they found helpful to them and their process of learning.

All interviews were transcribed and coded in MAXQDA 2022 software for further qualitative analysis. The interviews were analysed according to the indicative approach in thematic analysis, sometimes called a 'bottom-up' approach. Thus, we created themes from our data without any preconceptions and determined the themes from the data. Each of the co-authors coded one set of data, so student and teacher data were coded independently. Subsequently, we compared the themes that emerged from coding, reviewed them

and prepared a final set of codes. This way we formulated two main strategies for teacher engagement with Muslim students.

Before presenting the strategies, the institutional context of Polish schools should be briefly noted. The Polish school is not institutionally adapted to the needs of Muslim students, unlike many schools in the West. It is difficult to talk about halal food in a school canteen (e.g. Giovine, 2014), the systemic consideration of the needs of Muslim women during PE lessons (e.g. Dagkas, Benn and Jawad, 2011), or the existence of Muslim schools (e.g. Zine, 2008). This leaves Muslim students and their parents with limited opportunity to negotiate their needs. At the same time, it also leaves the teachers in an uncomfortable position. They must accommodate a student of a different background, one that is strongly stereotyped, in their classroom and in the school setting. Many of them had no previous experience with Muslim students, or substantial knowledge about their cultural context.

### **Muslim students as cultural brokers**

A strategy indicated most frequently by teachers was that of accommodating Muslim students in the classroom and they approached it in two different ways. Either the student was invited to **share their culture with their class**, or **students' distinctiveness was used as one of many ways of being different**. In both ways, the student became a **cultural broker**. Odrowąż-Coates (2017) writes about the advantages of such situations for the benefit of society and its development.

Teachers and students alike mention instances when Muslim students were invited to present their religion or culture to other classmates. All students mentioned these opportunities as something they enjoyed. Usually, these were short lectures or presentations during history, geography or social science classes. Students were often asked in private if they would like to present something so as not to put them in the position of a 'living cultural laboratory' (Górak-Sosnowska, 2023). In this manner two teachers reported how they invited Muslim students to present their religion:

“I asked Jasmina (with the consent of her parents) to present her faith. It was a lesson devoted to developing children's self-presentation skills, each of the children prepared a presentation on a selected topic, I asked Jasmina to prepare a speech on her faith”. [Teacher 13]

“If I have a child who is related to a given culture, I try to let them say something more about it. Who is better to tell us about their culture than a child who comes from it”. [Teacher 18]

Another way of helping Polish students to become familiar with their Muslim peers, was to incorporate their diversity. While discussing their Muslim students, teachers often referred to them as only one of many members of a diverse classroom. Again Teacher 13:

“I strongly emphasize the right of a child to have their own religion and the issue of tolerance. Of course, not only in the subject of religion. After all, there are children with other problems, with disabilities (there is a boy with autism among my pupils), obesity, etc. I show in my class that we differ in many areas of appearance, difficulties and of course, in terms of cultural background and religion.”

In a similar manner, Teacher 21 presented a case of an Afghan student:

“This Afghan boy in my class stays in the classroom to pray during breaks. If there is a question why he stays I say: ‘because he wants to pray’ and it is received without much reflection or interest. He just stays in the classroom. I don’t see any problems here; it is accepted naturally”.

Creating such a friendly environment necessitates not only methodical skills, but also high self-awareness and caution in navigating the classroom. Sometimes the differences are acknowledged within the classroom. This was the case of Muslim and non-Muslim students who gradually came to know each other; the non-Muslim students invited the Muslim ones to taste some sweets, and Muslim students had to check whether there was pork gelatine in gummies, but at the end, there was fun and mutual learning.

Some situations were particularly hard to navigate. That was the case of St. Nicholas Day celebrations and traditional gift exchanges. Teacher 4 described her preparations for that day. She has two Muslim students in her classroom. Their parents told the teacher that children can only participate in national holidays, not religious ones. Yet, sometimes these students come to the class for celebrations. That is why the teachers always have emergency gifts – in case Muslim students decide to join the classroom.

### **Support to Muslim students**

In some cases, teachers decided to provide extra support to Muslim students to facilitate their participation in class. This strategy is usually employed in three different types of situations.

The first one does not have that much to do with a student's religious background, but with their legal status in Poland. Some schools accommodate Muslim students who have recently arrived in Poland as refugees. Sometimes it is just one student, or children from one family, and in some cases, there is a more numerous group of students from a nearby refugee centre. Our respondents shared their stories of incorporating Muslim students into their classrooms during the school year. They often had limited knowledge of Polish, sometimes also limited knowledge of English (Młynarczuk-Sokołowska and Szostak-Król, 2016), and were possibly traumatized by the events that led to them being in Poland. One of the teachers said bluntly that she “was simply not prepared to teach such children” [T3]. She had a Chechen girl in her class, who only passively participated in the class, by sitting in the classroom and looking around. She did not have any notebook and during tests, she only gave back empty examination sheets. The teacher talked with her mother and school counsellor, but without much success. The student left school. The teacher has no idea what has happened to her afterwards. Teacher 4 shared a similar story of a group of Afghan students. The students were smiling and never caused any problems, but contact with them was severely limited due to the language barrier. An additional challenge proved to be their legal status. Teacher 4 mentioned that “the problem was more that they came here for a short-term ‘detention’ with the thought that they would leave our country to the West anyway, so it was all temporary” [T4]. Both teachers indicated that they received no institutional support and were basically left on their own. Some teachers were offered dedicated training, but only in one case a teacher mentioned that there was institutional collaboration between the school and the local refugee centre [T5].

The second type of situation when teachers took proactive stance was about fulfilling the religious needs of Muslim students and helping them to navigate a non-Muslim school environment. That was the case of a primary school student who was supported by his teacher [T7] in the school canteen. The teacher advised him whether the dish contains pork, or not. A similar case was mentioned by Teacher 12:



“The Polish kids didn’t pick it up when choosing lunch, but an Algerian boy was so afraid to accidentally eat pork or non-halal meat, that he always opted for a vegetarian option. There could be no meat for him, so when the school canteen served lunch for our Algerian boy, if they had a cutlet, he must have had something else, like a rice dish instead, but only we – the adults knew. Kids did not pick on it, so they also did not know or question the reason.”

Such support was mentioned usually in the context of a school canteen. No similar cases were reported for PE or holiday celebrations.

The third type of situation was that of discriminatory practices against Muslim students. Interestingly, the interviewed teachers only mentioned this issue once [T25], but in several cases it was mentioned by Muslim students. However, they emphasized that they were sure that in case of problems, the teachers would be on their side. Sometimes support was provided by individual teachers or school staff. One student [S10] recalls that the person who yelled at a student who made fun of her was a janitor. From then on, the oppressive student stopped making fun of her. Another two respondents underlined the generally positive and inclusive atmosphere at the school, which allowed different students (not only Muslims) to be different. One of the teachers [T25] after events that fuelled public opinion negatively [the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and in Beslan, Russia], prepared leaflets and organized small group discussions to deflate negative discourse and anxiety. Her Muslim students told her later that it was very helpful to face the issues, make it personal, and work through it, rather than making the topic taboo. At the end of this process, Polish students were offering support to their Muslim peers if challenged by other students, so the strategy to get the elephant in the room identified, and then deal with it worked.

## **Conclusion**

Without a doubt, teaching and learning in a multicultural, multifaith classroom is an enriching experience for all participants in the educational process, but there are also several challenges, which may be addressed using the experiences of our interlocutors.

The two main strategies used by teachers involved the Muslim student being a cultural broker and either 1) sharing their culture with the majority [increasing cultural awareness] or 2) using their religious distinctiveness as just one possible ‘flavour’ of diversity [building on distinction]. Best practice involved supporting religious needs, ensuring space for prayer, and dietary requirements, (unfortunately neglecting sport and clothing issues in our

participant group), and publicly addressing curiosity, anxiety, or reluctance through information sharing and open discussions. Both teachers and students found some areas for improvement in the situations relating to religious festivals. Awareness is a head start.

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