

How Neoliberalism and Islamophobia shape schooling of Muslim minority students in Sydney

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The schooling of minority Muslim students in Australia has been constructed as a social problem for some time. Since the early phases of migration in the 1970's, Arabic Muslims were constructed as a pedagogical challenge. More recently, this has taken on more political overtones, moving beyond concerns of educational achievement to issues of national security and socio-political integration. This study draws on the Muslim population of Western Sydney to capture the disparate voices of a late modern generation of Muslim students and their experiences of lived relations within institutions at a primary school level, which I am reading in the context of Islamophobic and neoliberal dynamics, which have permeated their ways into schools through policy and practice. The study is the first of its kind in Australia because it is shedding light on early years of schooling rather than high school when issues are hard to address, with an overall aim to facilitate Muslim young people's access to a socially equitable education and their aspirations beyond schooling. As such, this study investigates how discourses of neoliberalism and Islamophobia shape the schooling experiences of Muslim students in Sydney. The study employs a multi-level analysis consisting of three intersecting yet distinct levels: Macro, meso and micro (Miles, 1981). The macro level analysis has employed theories of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) and discourse/power/knowledge (Foucault, 1991) to understand discourses of neoliberalism and Islamophobia operate at the structural and systemic levels. Following this, at the meso level, Islamophobic and neoliberal policies in relation to schooling are examined. Finally, at the micro level, the experiences of students in relation to social equity are examined to understand how wider systemic dynamics shape the schooling experiences of minority students in Western Sydney. The study is underpinned by a social constructivist epistemology, Critical theory as the theoretical framework, critical ethnographic case- study methodology, and interviews and focus group method, and critical discourse analysis for the data analysis. The study was conducted across three public and private schools in Sydney. Teachers, Muslim parents and students aged 10-12 years were interviewed and partook in focus groups to share experiences of how neoliberal and Islamophobic policies and practices shape schooling. The study found that structural inequality is reproduced through schools as ideological state apparatus'. Neoliberalism and Islamophobia permeate their ways into schools as social institutions through state policies and teacher pedagogy, devouring schools of their democratic function of schooling, and the students, who were aged 10- 12 comprehended the material impacts and the social inequality that they face due to these timely two dynamics.