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Schools, religion, and affect: unpacking Australian educator discomfort

Nadeem Memon [a], Samantha Schulz [b], Stephen Kelly [b] and Dylan Chown [a]

aEducation Futures, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia; bSchool of Education, University of Adelaide

ABSTRACT

Religious bigotry, including incidents of discrimination and violence based on religion, continues to rise across Australia. Religion is consequently considered a destabilising factor in Australia's commitment to diversity. But does Australia's religious diversity pose a threat to social cohesion or an opportunity? In Australia's public schools, despite significant curricular and pedagogical advances in the areas of equity and inclusion, it remains unclear how and to what extent educators support the diverse religious identities of learners. Informed by an affective-discursive analytic, this study unpacks a series of emotional encounters at one primary public school in Sydney that serves a community where most families self-identify with a religion. Educators were invited to discuss how their school responds to religious diversity. This article explores the discomforting affects that entangle liberal humanist commitments to freedoms and secular schooling that emerged in focus groups. The article argues that emotional responses to learners' religious diversity, particularly of fear or apprehension, speak to a broader national teacher education context in which how religious and secular beliefs and knowledges should come into conversation remains unsettled. If Australian teacher education is to prepare educators for social cohesion, how can learners' religious identities be genuinely included in curriculum and pedagogy?

Introduction: is religion a threat to social cohesion?

Australia has witnessed a significant rebalancing in the past decade of religious and cultural practices. Christianity remains the most common religion in the country but has endured a steady decline from 61% in 2011 to 44% in 2021. The decline of Australians identifying with Christianity coincides with a steady increase in those reporting "no religion" from 22% in 2011 to almost 40% in 2021. At the same time, there has been a steady increase in Australians who identify with religions other than Christianity. Between 2016 and 2021, adherents of Hinduism grew by 55% and Muslims 35%. The most prominent non-Christian religions in Australia – Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism, which account for over 15% of the country's religious affiliations – have each

steadily increased over the past two decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021). In addition, there is a strong section of Australia's population (38.9%) who identify as non-religious. While Australia's religious landscape has shifted, within this social mix the acceptance of religious diversity remains contentious. As the country's social and political institutions aspire to be responsive to Australia's increasing social diversity, the complexities of religious identities raise a critical provocation: Does the "new" religious diversity pose a threat to social cohesion, or an opportunity (Ezzy et al., 2020, p. 1)?

In the Australian schooling sector, the relationship between religious diversity and social cohesion is refracted through multiple public debates. Public funding of religious education where independent religious schools receive government subsidies in addition to their private tuition is one example. Tensions over public funding became a national point of contention when it was revealed that the government spent approximately $429 million between 2007 and 2014 to place chaplains, the vast majority of whom are Christian, in state schools through the National School Chaplaincy Program (Maddox, 2014). Associated with the public funding debate is the absence of government oversight of curriculum and teachers of religion in these schools but also in state schools in the teaching of Special Religious Education (SRE) or Special Religious Instruction (SRI). Some argue that SRE/SRI is a "policy blind spot" in Australia because of the lack of oversight of "who teaches what" during SRE/SRI (Byrne, 2014). A second issue that arises pertains to the right of independent religious schools to discriminate on the basis of religion. This debate revolves around section 116 of the Australian Constitution, which addresses freedom of religion and belief (Bouma et al., 2011). There have been only piecemeal discussions on the place of religion in Australian law such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 1997) *Free to believe?* discussion paper, the follow-up report *Article 18: Freedom of religion and belief* (HREOC, 1998), and the religion clause of the Constitution, and there is an absence of actual legislation ensuring religious freedoms and protection from discrimination (Mortensen, 2007). In the absence of clear guidelines, conceptions of religious belief and observance are commonly associated with mainstream Christian belief, and greater scepticism arises with respect to minoritised religious communities (Thornton & Luker, 2009). Debate over whether Australian schools should be compelled to support the Safe Schools Coalitions (SSC) is another intersection between human rights and religion in schools.[1] This "competing rights" and freedoms debate is pitted between those who feel school communities should have autonomy in how they address violence and bullying related to homophobia and transphobia and others who argue that not supporting the SSC curtails freedoms associated with gender and sexuality in Australian education (Rasmussen, 2017).

A key challenge in this debate on the place of religion in schools is that Australian education is in principle secular while committed to a multi-faith society and yet has provided minimal regulations and conceptual clarity on how increasing religious diversity is to be supported (Bouma, 2012; Maddox, 2014). In the words of Maddox (2014), "Australia lacks not only robust religion-state boundaries, but also public vocabulary for talking about the issues" (p. 300). Despite significant curricular and pedagogical advances in the areas of equity, inclusion and intercultural understanding, religion remains a glaring exception (Byrne, 2014; Ezzy et al., 2023). At best, religion remains an area of special interest that is essentialised as a bland review of world religions, or a personal and private

"accommodation" of religious observance. And as Halafoff et al. (2020) argue, if religious diversity and therefore religious literacy are to "better match the complex lived experiences of Gen Z Australians," this means "exploring religious and non-religious worldviews," and a "variety of spiritual practices that are being widely adapted to secular contexts" (pp. 209–210). If moving beyond cursory and reductive views of religion and spirituality is a cause for concern, Byrne (2014) suggests such marginalisation of religion among other forms of diversity is due to fear. In her words:

> Some religious leaders and religious parents fear the possibility of children learning outside of their own faith tradition. Some educators fear being labelled too religious, or too atheist. Some bureaucrats and curriculum writers avoid the word religion because, both historically and in recent times, it has been connected with bigotry and child abuse. Politicians fear the electoral fallout of changing laws that seem to have worked for more than a century. Some fear that a perceived lack of moral guidance in the state school system will create a flight to private (religious) education institutions (Byrne, 2014, p. 15).

Multiple studies have found that Australian educators are either reluctant or refuse to engage with issues of religion in public schools (Halafoff et al., 2020; Keddie et al., 2018; Singleton, 2018). Despite increasingly super-diverse classrooms, "many teachers lack the confidence and/or expertise to engage with cultural difference in supportive and educationally productive ways" (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 57).

This study explores educator discomfort with religion and its implications for teacher education. Akin to the discomforts that arise when issues of race, racism and whiteness are discussed in classrooms (Boler & Zembylas, 2003), we explore educators' affective responses when religion and the religious identities of learners arise in Australian public schools. We start by establishing historical links between religion and racism in Australia, where racism is understood in broad terms as a part of a hierarchical system that both produces and manages human difference. Next, we theorise affect and pedagogic discomfort and introduce the layered (or genealogical) methodology used to "read for affect" across the focus group interviews. Lastly, we consider how the discomforting emotions expressed by the educators in our study illuminate discomforts over religious diversity playing out more comprehensively in Australia, and how the religious worldviews of learners can serve as learning assets for classrooms committed to social cohesion.

Racism and religion in Australia

Between 1869 and 1882, the initiation of mass compulsory schooling in Australia was part and parcel of the project of White Anglo-European nation building (Hunter, 1996). As Hunter argues, the emergence of the popular school was shaped, firstly, by the "political objectives and governmental technologies of the early-modern administrative territorial State" concerned with the "government of the economy, internal and external security, welfare, [and] moral discipline" (p. 148). And secondly, "the modern school was provided by the institutions and practices of Christian pastoral guidance" (p. 149). For Hunter the Australian school, modelled on its British predecessors, emerged out of the exigencies of social and pastoral governance to be "irrevocably bureaucratic and disciplinary" (p. 149), with self-realisation as a central disciplinary objective. Hunter notes that in the development of the school system in the colony of Victoria, the colonists thought about education

as the institutional practice of educating citizens to be more valuable to the state. In this guise the education of the white Australian citizen involved the "cultural transformation of the population carried out in the interests of the State," a state that "should intervene in education as a means of enhancing its corporate wealth and prosperity, and *thereby* the wellbeing of its citizens" (p. 151). The education of this white European citizenry was predicated on Enlightenment logics that assumed that real knowledge and reason can only be achieved by white, heteronormative, Christian, European men. These logics substantiated the use of schools to exclude "otherness" (Grosfoguel, 2011).

In Australia, this exclusion of Otherness has historically been exemplified by the exclusion of the Indigenous child. What little formal schooling was extended to Aboriginal children at the establishment of mass compulsory schooling was based on the dominant cultural assumption that the Aboriginal "race" is socially and biologically inferior. To reference Bauman (2006), this objectification of First Nations participated in the schooling of human societies in order to "cope with the otherness of others" (p. 101). On one hand, schooling could fall prey to the anthropophagic strategy of assimilating Otherness by devouring "foreign bodies and spirits so that they may be made, through metabolism, identical with, and no longer distinguishable from, the 'ingesting' body" (p. 101). On the other hand, curriculum could fall prey to the anthropoemic strategy of "spitting out the others seen as incurably strange and alien" (p. 101). As Foucault (2002) has shown, schooling is a way of imposing order on things. It functions as a way of historicising the Other:

> which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcize the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness); whereas the history of the order imposed on things would be the history of the Same – of that which, for a given culture, is both dispersed and related, therefore to be distinguished by kinds and to be collected together into identities (p. xxvi).

Both Bauman and Foucault provide a sense of how, through processes of normalisation or exclusion, dominant cultures have the capacity to inflict symbolic violence on difference and alterity (Kelly, 2022).

At the time that a "secular" school system was being invented across the colonies of Australia, many faith-based practices (e.g., Chinese, Afghan, Pacific Islander) were put to work in the prudential and moral formation of the nation. The Christian liberal humanism of Australian settlement cherry picked the virtuous circle (Smith, 2013) of diverse religions to produce a secular political economy. In this sense religious beliefs and practices became the technology which seared the productive capacities of homo economicus to the earth on which it walks. If whatever sits outside the virtuous circle spells danger it seems to be an affect and intelligibility that transgresses normative and *visible* accounts of a prudential, productive and moral self. This affective intelligibility (religious or non-religious) seems to be located in a private interiority that is sealed from public view: the transgressive that potentially ruptures the surface performativities of Judeo-Christian social exchange.

Despite being a country of immigrants (European and non-European) since colonisation, Australia's *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, commonly known as the White Australia Policy, reinforced that immigrants of "Caucasian" backgrounds were preferred. Multiculturalism was established in Australia to manage European migrants who were

still largely Christian and white. Post – World War II migrants to Australia may have been culturally different but the assumption remained that they were still "acceptably 'white'" (Stratton, 2011, p. 21). Between the 1970s and early 1990s, Australians witnessed the formal end of the White Australia Policy, which in itself was driven by a pragmatic need to attract non-white migrants. The birth of a more "multicultural" Australia manifested in policies of multiculturalism and reconciliation. However, even as the multicultural policy of 1973 replaced the White Australia Policy, remnants of racial and cultural preference remained entrenched. In the early 2000s, fear of other cultural/religious groups played a prominent role in the political campaign and decision making of former Prime Minister John Howard (Kabir, 2015).

It was under the Howard governments between 1996 to 2007 that racism and secularism, masked by a veneer of neoliberal neutrality, was made personal (Stratton, 2011). Neoliberal structures are most commonly associated with economics and in the case of Australia this meant opening national markets to global trade through reduced tariffs. But Howard's neoliberalism had a second prong: to reassert "an Australian national identity based on Australia's British origins" (Stratton, 2011, p. 1). This shift was achieved by dismantling policies and practices related to multiculturalism and backing commitments towards a renewed form of assimilation. Migrants remained welcome but social cohesion meant fitting in to White Australia (Hage, 2000).

One of the implications of Australia's immigration program was that religious plurality blossomed (Bouma, 1995). Australia's multicultural frame also effectively demarcated religion as secondary to ethnicity (Voloder, 2010). Voloder (2010) calls this the "ethnicisation of religion" where race, religion and ethnicity are conflated. The Howard-led Coalition government's four consecutive terms in power meant that both the quest for reconciliation between Indigenous and settler Australians as well as the idea of multiculturalism could be thoroughly abandoned at the federal level (Hamilton & Maddison, 2007). Under Howard, neoliberalism manifested in the socially embedded exclusion of some groups over others and, in many ways, the criminalisation of excluded groups through for example fortified domestic anti-terrorism and border control policies (Patel, 2017). Post 9/11, for Australian Muslims, the Cronulla Riots of 2005 reinforced this sense of exclusion and the criminalisation of ethnicity (Poynting & Mason, 2007).

The Cronulla Riots raised the "question of whether Muslim Australians have a place in the white imaginary spatiality" (Kabir, 2015, p. 271). The Cronulla Riots refers to what began as an altercation at Cronulla Beach on 4 December 2005 between a group of four male Lebanese Australians and white Australian lifesavers as well as some female beachgoers. The following week on 11 December, approximately 5,000 Anglo-Australians gathered to "reclaim" the beach through racist chanting that progressed into religious hate speech and violence towards Muslims. The following day, on 12 December, a group of Lebanese Australians launched a reprisal attack, damaging property (Kabir, 2015), while, as Poynting (2006) argues, right-wing media outlets exacerbated the riots. It is important to acknowledge that the Lebanese Muslim community in Sydney has been stigmatised as criminals since this time. Crimes that were committed by Lebanese-Muslim Australians became associated with their religion and culture. At the same time, Cronulla, which forms a part of Sutherland Shire Council, has been racially constructed as a "White Australian" space (Kabir, 2015). During the riots on

11 December 2005, the Australian flag became a symbol of inclusion/exclusion that reinforced former Prime Minister Howard's 2001 pledge to keep asylum seekers off Australian shores (Kabir, 2015). Foundational to White Australian logics is an expectation of conformity and assimilation. For some Muslims, this has meant an attack on outward forms of religiosity, most notably women wearing a hijab, but it also includes non-verbal intimidation, verbal threats, vandalism and hate speech (Iner, 2019). Muslims in Australia have arguably become the second most racialised group, after Indigenous communities (Noble & Poynting, 2010) and the Cronulla Riots represents a watershed moment that entrenched Islamophobia within Australia (Byrne, 2015; Ezzy et al., 2020; Kabir, 2015).

White nation building, the withering of multiculturalism under neoliberalism and the spike in Islamophobia post-Cronulla come together in ways that complicate the place of religion in Australian public schools. Indeed, the place of religion in public schools cannot be disentangled from fears and debates over the role of religion in society at large (Beaman & Van Arragon, 2015). Ongoing migration to Australia has led to a robust religious diversity in Australian public schools. Responses to supporting the religious identities of learners in Australian schools have taken three broad directions. The first is an attempt to provide religious instruction (RI) to all learners in their own religious tradition by teachers chosen from within their own religious community. Byrne (2015) notes that RI was offered as early as the 1950s within school time by volunteers in public schools. Today, RI has its own challenges that include being a "policy blind spot" because of a lack of government oversight and religion as a whole remains separate from the general education a child receives within the school. The second broad direction has been to debate the very place of religion and religious expression in public spaces, including schools. Current national debates continue in relation to the Religious Discrimination Bill. Notable examples include whether independent religious schools that are publicly funded in Australia can discriminate on the basis of religion when hiring staff or enrolling students; balancing freedom of religion and the right to be free from discrimination (e.g., hate speech); and exclusionary policies such as bans on religious head coverings in schools and workplaces (Ezzy et al., 2022). This debate continues and each Australian state continues to vary on its stance related to religious discrimination. Lastly, the third broad approach to religion in schools has been to foster intercultural understanding as a cross-curricular priority in the national curriculum, which includes religion, religious beliefs and practices of the world's diverse religions. The challenge again, as with RI, has been a lack of oversight of or support for what robust intercultural and inter-religious education would entail. At the same time, there remains a concerted effort from the conservative right to bring Australia's Judeo-Christian heritage back into the curriculum, as was evident under the leadership of former Prime Minister Tony Abbott (Byrne, 2015). Despite the Australian Human Rights Commission report into freedom of religion and belief finding that Australian students are "interreligiously illiterate and interculturally intolerant" (Bouma et al., 2011 as cited in Byrne, 2015, p. 266) and that Islamophobia continues to be an "acute problem [in Australia]" (Ezzy et al., 2020, p. 4), little support exists in providing teachers the tools to be responsive to the religious identities of their learners.

Circulating affects within (ir)religious discourses

Affect has been described as the dispositional tendencies which guide practice (Zembylas & Schutz, 2016). Through repeated engagement in the world, we each learn to embody particular responses to future experiences. Emotions, on the other hand, reflect a reaction that does not necessarily influence a similar response by others around us. Affect is not an individual phenomenon – it circulates and if repeated and sustained becomes part of one's subjectivity (Watkins, 2016, p. 72). Schaefer (2019) explains that "affect theory asks *what bodies do* – what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide – and especially how bodies are impelled by forces other than language and reason. It is, therefore, also a theory of power" (as cited in Zembylas, 2020, p. 492).

In schools, between the dynamics of educators and learners, communal places and classroom spaces, relations between those present and those absent, affect circulates. As described by Watkins (2016), affect "is not merely an individual phenomenon; it has a social valence and is multi-scalar. Affect circulates, impacting on and in bodies, leaving traces and, if repeated and sustained, can accumulate becoming constitutive of individual subjectivity" (p. 72). Affect is then both force – i.e., the ability to affect others – and capacity – i.e., the ability to be affected. But as Watkins (2016) further explains, affect can also have a "residual effect" – i.e., continue to influence and inform dispositional tendencies of others across time and space.

We use affect to examine structures of feeling that mediate how capacities to affect and be affected manifest among individual educators and collectively within a school ethos within broader social and political structures and histories. Affect provides a lens through which we explore the complex interplay between power, emotion, discourse, affect and subjectivity (Zembylas, 2020). In this study, affect allows us as researchers to ask new questions about the place of religion in secular state schools: What are the affective sentiments and responses held by educators when religion arises in state schools? How does the socio-political climate including school systems and policies inform educators' affective responses towards religion in secular spaces?

We also draw on the notion of "pedagogies of discomfort" (Boler & Zembylas, 2003), which encourages critical inquiry into how educators perceive others – particularly when socially constructed perceptions of the "Other" foster discomfort. Zembylas (2018) explains that "discomforting feelings can be the point of departure to challenge dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain social inequities, thus creating openings for individual and social transformation" (p. 94). Pedagogies of discomfort propose going beyond fostering dialogue between dominant and marginalised communities to encourage an "excavation of the emotional investments that underlie any ideological commitments" (Zembylas, 2018, p. 94).

Pedagogies of discomfort is derived from the theoretical contributions on "white discomfort" within race, racism and whiteness studies. Discomforting feelings such as anger, fear, guilt and denial typically characterise white people's unwillingness to acknowledge privilege (DiAngelo, 2018; Zembylas, 2018). Similarly, we draw on the notion of "pedagogies of discomfort" to explore feelings of reluctance, aversion and indifference when religion, but particularly the religious identities of socio-politically "pathologised" religious communities, arises in schools (Zembylas, 2020). Addressing and exploring

discomfort with respect to minoritised religions and religious identities in public schools may raise awareness of difference and help to recode learner life worlds as learning assets.

Methodology and context

This article draws data from a larger study of four public school sites in Australia on being responsive to the religious identities of learners. The data for this article specifically come from a single-site case study of a primary school located in Sydney, Australia. Data that inform this article were generated through interviews with the school leadership, walk throughs of the school site, analysis of school policies and three focus groups with a total of 8 school educators. Data were collected on the basis of ethical approval from the lead author's university, participant informed consent, and audio that was recorded, transcribed verbatim and then cleaned of identifying information.

ABC Primary has a diverse student body with 93% of the 330 students identifying as English as an additional language/dialect students coming from home cultures that speak predominantly Arabic, Farsi and Urdu. Most of the students are Muslim, predominantly Lebanese and Afghan. It was evident that, in the school context, some Muslim families choose not to identify as Muslim and others choose not to identify with their sect for fear of being treated negatively in the wider community. Many of the Lebanese students come from families that are third and fourth generation Australian. Some students from Syria or Afghanistan are more recent migrants. Participants described the school as a very tight-knit community. Many learners come from large families, including extended families, which require older learners to take on responsibilities of looking after younger siblings and cousins as an after-school priority.

All participants described the school as being culturally vibrant. Cultural celebrations, cultural food and the acknowledgement of cultural heritage are central to the school fabric. Religion, on the other hand, is minimised to the personal observances of learners and their families. For example, the school has a prayer room, acknowledges Ramadan and offers an Islamic scripture class, which the majority of learners at the school attend. The school makes clear to parents and learners that this is a secular school and that, given the religious sensitivities within the school's community, religion does not and should not be raised. Three of the educators who participated in the study self-identified as Muslim and the school's deputy principal also self-identified as Muslim. The principal did state that recruiting educators who represent the school's community is a priority.

The purpose of this study is to explore how educators are affected by and in turn affect others with respect to the place of religion and religious identities of learners in secular public schools. In a school like ABC Primary, where religion is a central aspect of identity for the majority of learners and their families, this study explores how educators navigate the intersections of plural religious/spiritual practices with commitments to equity and inclusion when religion intersects in ostensibly secular spaces. At the outset of the focus groups, the overarching research question was reiterated to participants: what does being "responsive" to the religious identities of learners look like in a secular public school? The research question was put in context in relation to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] (2011) focus area 1.3, which expects teachers to be responsive to diverse learner identities and explicitly mentions religion as an aspect of learner diversity.

Data analysis through an affective-discursive lens

To engage with affect, how it moves educators and, by virtue of that, what they do requires an analysis of the affective capacities of bodies, which are conceived here as assemblages of biological, social, cultural and discursive forces. Methodologically, we are interested in what affect does to inform the ways educators are responsive to religion broadly and the religious identities of learners specifically, as well as what other educators do in affective encounters when the topic of religion arises. Reading for affect entails identifying bodily relationalities and "emotion-bound vocabulary" within transcripts (Schulz et al., 2021). To read affect then, we borrow an affective-discursive analytic from McMorrow (as cited in Zembylas, 2020) that constitutes three moves:

(1) *Identify emotional encounters* to reveal "dominant discourses and practices that rely on certain manipulated and engineered affects and emotions to create a particular type of body . . . " (Zembylas, 2020, p. 496). In our study, this is about how and why anything to do with religion is deemed "sensitive," dangerous, or inappropriate for the classroom.

(2) *Uncover discourses* to reveal how affects/emotions may be manipulated "to make bodies do certain things" (Zembylas, 2020, p. 497) or, in our case, negate certain things such as broaching the topic of religion. Here we analyse data to uncover "the affects that are *not* being encouraged, the emotions being silenced, and the bodies that are (made) absent" (McMorrow, original emphasis, as cited in Zembylas, 2020, p. 497).

(3) *Formulate an understanding of the dispositions that are privileged and those that are silenced by* merging moves 1 and 2. Here McMorrow (2019) encourages deeper analysis of how "both manipulative and disruptive practices and discourses are simultaneously present in educators' and students' everyday lives, sometimes within the same educational setting" (as cited in Zembylas, 2020, p. 497). In our study this manifests in educators' commitments to being inclusive, equitable and culturally responsive and yet hesitant to engage with religion. This part of the analysis provides an opportunity to engage with the contexts that inform educator affect and emotion.

Another way to understand this methodology is to appreciate emotions as threshold points when affects pass through bodies which are moved by the worlds they inhabit. This "emotional governance" occurs at the nexus between affects, discourse, bodies and a world invested with discursive meaning. Thus, the social contexts, discourses, histories and politics that surround an emotional encounter are what give the encounter force and influence its outcome. The purpose of our methodology is to illuminate these relational dynamics.

Affect is thus entangled in embodied states of being, discourses and socio-political contexts. The turn to affect should expose these entanglements (Wetherell, 2013). Our use of an affective-discursive analytic places emphasis on the interplay between bodies, emotions, power, and discourses related to religion and secularism. From educator voices at ABC Primary we identified three "emotional incidents" that illuminate the web of entanglements in which educators are caught: i.e., attempting to be culturally responsive whilst circumventing potential parental backlash in a neoliberal policyscape that "blames" educators and puts huge responsibilities on them, while limiting their options for acting.

Findings: three emotional encounters

Emotional encounter #1: "what's the teacher trying to do, convert all these kids?"

Mid-way through a focus group conversation between five educators, the conversation veered towards what each is doing to foster intercultural understanding. Yasmeen explained that she makes it a point to "expose children to other cultures," but then Marnie explains, "It's very incidental." As a collective they agree that they may not go out of their way to explicitly bring cross-cultural learning to the classroom unless it is brought up organically by a learner during a personal identity assignment for example or if it is part of the recommended curriculum. The conversation then took a new turn.

Marnie explained that she has been using a book called *Mirror* by Jeannie Baker (2010). *Mirror* is an innovative picture book that contrasts the lives of two boys – one in Sydney, Australia and the other in a remote village in Morocco. The book illustrates starkly different lifestyles, cultures, landscapes and lived experiences. For the Moroccan boy many of those lived experiences are religiously informed. Images of mosques, women wearing hijabs, prayer beads and prayer are scattered throughout the Moroccan child's experience. Marnie, Emily and Yasmeen all commented that they use the book in their teaching because learners from their school can connect with it. They feel the book reflects the shared cultural experience of many of their learners – being brought up in Sydney and yet identifying with a cultural heritage that resembles in some ways that of the Moroccan boy.

When asked what aspects of the lived experiences of the two boys are unpacked in discussions, Yasmeen was quick to respond with an almost defensive tone: "We do not go into religion. Just the culture." Yasmeen explained that the main religion of the Moroccan boy is evidently Islam – the same religion as the majority of the school's learners – "but it just wasn't within our teaching" to go into religion. Marnie added: "It was more cultural than religious," referring to how the book is discussed with students, and Yasmeen confirmed, "Yeah, it's not appropriate [to discuss religion]." As the conversation unfolded, the educators very passionately explained that there are learners in their classes who are not Muslim and that they do not want those learners to go back to their parents and say, "All day we talked about Islam and [parents will] be like, 'Whoa, what's going on here?'" Shelly agreed and said as educators "you have to think about the whole class" and Emily added that the potential sentiment of parents will be, "What's the teacher trying to do, convert all these kids?"

Emotional encounter #2: "political correctness is a big thing"

As we transitioned from talking about *Mirror* (Baker, 2010) and group concerns about parents, Marnie asked the group if they were collectively being too sensitive. Considering *Mirror* and the central role of religion in the Moroccan boy's life experience, Marnie asked the group, "Is that a bad thing, though?" She recollected her experience as a Year 4 student in an Australian state school in the mid-1990s and said, "I did a whole project on Islam. Each of us had to research a religion. I didn't question it." Yasmeen jumped in and explained: "Back in those days [referring to the mid-1990s] when we were in school, it was a little bit different because multiculturalism was a like, vibe, it was like an influx." Marnie

agreed, "It was trending." Yasmeen continued by describing that in the mid-1990s there was an influx of migration and people from all over the world coming to Australia. She described a sense of openness and willingness to learn about cultural differences. The group collectively felt that times have changed. Cultural stereotypes and stigmas about differences make it challenging, they suggested, to teach about differences. Yasmeen explained, "To me really, if it's not a part of our curriculum at this point, I can't touch on it because it's a very touchy topic." Marine added that "political correctness is a big thing." Shelly said, "As a teacher, I feel your hands are somewhat tied" and Marnie explained, "We can get in trouble . . . like back in the day, teachers weren't questioned. But now, it's like parents feel they can . . . question our motives and our intentions and what we teach."

Emotional encounter #3: "we just sort of touch on things 'surfacely'"

At the time of data generation, the Beirut port explosion of August 2019 was a relatively recent event and protestors around the globe, including in Sydney, called for greater accountability and justice for those affected. Given the school community at ABC Primary has a significant Lebanese student population, the topic came up in a discussion about whether such political realities intersect with the lived experiences of learners at the school.

Yasmeen started by saying that some students from the school attended the "Lebanon protests of October 2019." She explained that students who attend such protests are welcome to come to school and share their experiences but added, "I think the other students that have no idea about it, there's no reason for them to be hearing about it because they're going to go back and tell their parents." Yasmeen concurred that speaking about politics in the classroom, especially politics that intersects with cultural and religious differences, needs "the green light from the community." Marnie added that such topics require "consensus" from the community and further clarified with a sense of finality, "We're not allowed to speak about politics . . . if we say anything that is slightly against the department or against, I guess, the 'greater nation,' we'll get in trouble." Emily said that they had initiated Monday morning circles across the school where students can share what they did on the weekend and if a student happened to attend the protests, they were welcome to speak about it, "but to go into great detail [she would respond with a flippant] 'Yup, that's great, excellent, let's go to the next [person]." Shelly agreed: "You just acknowledge it . . . [but] don't go deep . . . we just sort of touch on things surfacely . . . "

Analysing affective entanglements

At the outset, we had explained to the participants that the study was inspired by the Australian teacher standards that require educators to be "responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds" (AITSL, 2011, 1.3). This resonated strongly with the educators. But despite aspirations of culturally and *religiously* responsive pedagogy, the affective entanglements that surfaced across the data reveal how educators' willingness and capacity to be pedagogically responsive are shaped by a complex ensemble of material, discursive, historical and political factors discussed earlier in this article. These include the processes of normalisation of dominant cultures, which inflict symbolic violence in imposing an

order on things. Within this order, marginalised religious identities surface as having been Othered, deemed foreign and therefore able to be excluded not only by teachers but also parents.

Parents constitute a body in the transcripts whose opinions about educators are experienced as "potential affect," diminishing educators' willingness to engage in discussions that may attract backlash. The "educators" also constitute a "body" and, in genealogically excavating the incidents in which the teachers expressed fear, it is instructive to consider Australia's neoliberal turn from the mid-1990s when "teacher blaming" discourses surfaced powerfully (Dwyer et al., 2020; Gale, 2006). An expression of this was reflected in participants' portrayals of the "multicultural era," when educators could talk and teach more freely – but was also reflected in the relationality of words that form knowledge systems, as in discourse. A collective crisis of confidence concerning what they could or could not safely teach or discuss was patent. Fear of parental backlash, fear of being politically incorrect or, in Marnie's words, fear of the Department of Education and the "greater nation" and of being reprimanded and "getting in trouble" emerged as affects that inhibited the teachers' willingness to speak openly about religion. In Emily's words, they touch things "surfacely."

For Nash and Prochnow, discourses of teacher blaming position educators as not only responsible for student achievement but "in so tight a frame as to leave them virtually no room for manoeuvre" (as cited in Gale, 2006, p. 17). This sense of being restricted appeared frequently throughout the interviews, as expressed by a need to "stick to the script." Even Emily's Monday morning circles, designed to invite learner expression, limited real world problems or lived experiences to a surface level of disclosure. Later in the interview, Emily explained that, if learners wished to speak about sensitive matters, they were welcome to do so individually, "but there's no point in raising issues for the whole class that are irrelevant to the rest." The pressures of a scripted curriculum combined with educators' fear of transgressing normative boundaries appeared to reduce learning to that which is validated by the neoliberal state, delegitimising areas of interest or concern that skirt the symbolic boundaries of normalcy. This position seems to occlude the possibility that youth occupy fluid positions when negotiating the folds of their interior and external worlds and struggle over transgressive subjective acts. What goes missing is the possibility of opening a space for negotiation by expanding the limits of what teachers see as authorised curriculum.

There is no doubt that an imposing apparatus of educator regulations has equally affected educator agency. As Marnie and Yasmeen suggested in Encounter #2, what it means to be a "good teacher" in Australia has shifted. Neoliberal pressures of teacher performativity (Ball, 2003) place emphasis on educator competence and compliance over reflexivity, autonomy and agency (Connell, 2009). Aspirations of market-oriented order have also fostered anxiety with respect to globalisation and all that it represents – difference, diversity and the threat that national borders will be breached by "unsafe" bodies, including bodies of religious thought (Patel, 2017). Amidst these tensions, teacher professionalism is reflected in state mandates that remain vague such as the AITSL standards that explicitly require educators to be responsive to learners' religious backgrounds, while lacking clear explanation as to what this might entail. Critiques of the standards that have been raised elsewhere (see, e.g., Moodie & Patrick, 2017).

Encounters between bodies – educator and learner bodies, policy bodies, bodies of thought – were particularly illuminating with respect to the classroom resource *Mirror*.

The picture book is replete with images of religious observance that are embedded within the social fabric of the fictitious Moroccan village central to the narrative. Despite countless opportunities availed by the resource to discuss various aspects of learner life worlds, including religion, the educators sought "comfort zones" (Boler & Zembylas, 2003) inscribed by hegemony, which negated deep discussion of religion. Yasmeen did contemplate "what they might do differently," thus questioning, to an extent, their complicity as teachers in their own silencing. As someone self-identifying as a Muslim within a school community that is predominantly Muslim, Yasmeen had the moral authority to affect the group. But within a broader context of religious bigotry, it appeared safer for Yasmeen to appropriate the norms of White Australia. She remarked, "if it's not part of the curriculum, we can't touch it." Curriculum here becomes the discursive technology to assert the affective force of the common good to dispel the dangers of other ways of being and knowing. The force of curriculum seems to strike at ontological as well as epistemic levels through establishing the performance of a moral purpose that names what belongs but nevertheless distances and brackets what does not.

Common affects across the data thus appeared to make the "validation of diverse learner identities" a "subversive move" and, throughout the conversation, hegemonic boundaries were habitually restored. Pressured by a sense that they needed to stick to a "safe" script, the educators affected one another in ways that ultimately reinforced a false dichotomy between culture, as safe, and religion, as "a very touchy topic" (Yasmeen). Voloder's (2010) "ethnicisation of religion" is thus illustrated. The normalising process of a narrow conception of culture deemed acceptable and religion as the excluded and criminalised "Other" allows for a multiplication of categories, such as race, religion and othered cultures, to be silenced.

Conclusion

In this article we have presented three emotional encounters related to religion and religious identities arising in a public school in Sydney where most learners identify as Muslim. Interview data were analysed using an affective-discursive lens with a focus on "discomfort" and the affective entanglements informing that discomfort. We found that the educators were hesitant if not unwilling to engage with the religious identities of their learners out of fear of being reprimanded by the state and/or a parental backlash. The emergence of educator-blaming discourses which followed Australia's multicultural era, as well as narrow views of religion in public schools that cleave a division between "culture" and "religion," appeared to inform these fears.

There are more paths to a secular state than simply excluding religion from public institutions (Chavura, 2011). A narrow view of secularity and secular values explains the rejection of religion in public school classrooms (Keddie et al., 2018). Implications for Australian teacher education include the need to acknowledge the roots of racism (i.e., Enlightenment logics, benign multiculturalism and historicising of the Other) that underpin the anxiety and discomfort expressed by this study's participants towards religion and the religious identities of learners in public schools. To genuinely achieve greater social cohesion and understanding, teacher education courses on equity and inclusion must include religious literacy, and must go beyond an acknowledgement of Otherness and excavate the genealogies of racism that inform them. If issues of robust equity are already arguably

a marginal aspect of pre-service teacher preparation, preparing Australian educators to be responsive to the religious identities of Australian learners is a glaring blind spot.

Consistent with inclusive and responsive pedagogies is a call for "learning *from* religion" (Byrne, 2014), which gives agency to the learner to self-identify with a religion if they choose, describe the ways that religion informs their under-standing of the world, and share the value of religious practice when they deem relevant. Our call is not for more religion in schools but rather for learners and their families to have the freedom to believe, practice and express their religion as part of our commitment to inclusive and responsive classrooms. What this looks like in practice by way of enabling pedagogies responsive to religious identities and knowledges of learners requires further practitioner-led research. However, that research would best begin by acknowledging the historicisation of margin-alised religious identities in schools and the ethnicisation of religion that has fostered the fear and anxiety towards religion prevalent among teachers today.

Note

1. The intersections between religious and sexuality/gender diversity in Australia and the rights of individuals and groups to exist in schooling environments that are spiritually, socially and emotionally safe is complex, heated terrain. Whilst this terrain irrefutably adds to the affective atmospheres broadly described here, it is beyond the present article to explore these debates in detail. For further, see for example Ferfolja and Ullman (2020).

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Notes on contributors

Nadeem Memon is a Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Islamic Thought and Education (CITE) in the Education Futures at UniSA.

Samantha Schulz is a senior sociologist of education committed to educational and social justice.

Stephen Kelly is a lecturer in education, focusing on middle and secondary pedagogy, educational research, literacy education.

Dylan Chown is a lecturer in the Centre for Islamic Thought and Education Futures at UniSA.

ORCID

Nadeem Memon http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0205-0736
Samantha Schulz http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3458-3617
Stephen Kelly http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5414-1413
Dylan Chown http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3790-7656

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