



## LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AT J.L. FORSTER SECONDARY SCHOOL, WINDSOR, ONTARIO, CANADA

CHRISTOPHER A. WOODRICH

International Indonesia Forum  
[chris\\_woodrich@hotmail.com](mailto:chris_woodrich@hotmail.com)

**ABSTRACT:** *As international migration increases, questions of cross-cultural understanding and pluralism become increasingly important. People live and learn in heterogeneous communities where some, or even many, members have different ethnic, religious, or socio-economic backgrounds. This article explores the involvement of minority groups in the learning process by discussing the lived experiences of Muslims at J.L. Forster Secondary School, a senior high school in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. A religious minority, Muslim students were nonetheless able to follow their religious guidelines and expectations. They were able to keep hijab, to keep halal, and to worship within the secular school context with little difficulty and without any conflict in values. Although they did not receive a religious education at school, they continued their religious studies in their families and in the mosque.*

**KEYWORDS:** Education in Canada, Islam in Canada, lived experiences

### INTRODUCTION

As international migration has become ever more common in the globalization, questions of cross-cultural understanding and pluralism have become increasingly important. Communities that are quasi-homogenous, with most or all members practicing the same religion or tracing their heritages to the same regions/groups, are becoming less common. Urban centers—and to a lesser extent rural areas—have become more cosmopolitan as families and individuals have traveled from their places of birth in search of opportunities to work and study.

Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in countries such as Canada; in 2011, 6,775,770 of the country’s residents (20.6% of the population of 33,476,688) were born abroad (Statistics Canada, 2017c). For nearly two decades, migration has been the main contributing factor to Canada’s population growth; between 2001 and 2011, about two-thirds of the country’s population growth has been attributed to migration, a trend that is predicted to continue into the foreseeable future. Since the turn of the century, this immigration has been predominantly

from South, Southeast, and East Asia, with smaller but still significant numbers coming from the Middle East and Northern Africa (Statistics Canada, 2017c).

The demographic composition of Canada has thus shifted. The percentage of persons who are visible minorities—defined as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in color” (Statistics Canada, 2015)—has risen from 11.2% in 1996 to 19.1% in 2011. Meanwhile, religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism have experienced growth, respectively from 0.9% (1991) to 3.2% (2011), 0.6% (1991) to 1.5% (2011), and 0.5% (1991) to 1.4% (2001); as of 2011, non-Christian religions are practiced by 8% of the Canadian population, a two-fold increase since 1991 (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

Following Christianity, which is practiced by 67.3% of the country’s population, Islam is the most widely practiced religion in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Recorded in Canada as early as the 1871 census, Islam experienced 316% growth between 1991 and 2011; as of the 2011 census, there are more than a million Muslims in Canada, more than half of

whom live in Ontario. Mosques can be found in most major urban centers, some of which have their own private schools for Muslim parents who desire for their children to study at a religious school. Most Muslim families in Canada, however, send their children to publically funded schools.

This paper details the experiences of Muslim students at J.L. Forster Secondary School, a Canadian public high school in Windsor, Ontario. Two aspects are explored. First is the experience of being Muslim and practicing Islam in a secular environment, including keeping halal, keeping hijab, and worship. Second is the experience of interacting with peers and teachers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, within the school. This is hoped to provide insight into how inclusive and multicultural education has been provided, and thus assist in the formulation of best practices for such education.

### **BACKGROUND: EDUCATION IN ONTARIO**

In Canada, education is handled at the provincial level. As such, no single curriculum applies to all Canadians, and no single learning experience is shared across the country. Curricula and learning experiences are adjusted to meet local requirements and conditions. Lessons may be offered in the official language(s) of the province, or in another language. Owing to these diverse conditions, this overview focuses on education in Ontario, as it offers the most appropriate context for understanding the lived experiences of Muslim students at J.L. Forster Secondary School.

In Ontario, there are four publically funded school systems, as well as private schools, though the latter account for only a small percentage of schools and students (OFIS, 2012: 1). The publically funded school systems in Ontario are divided based on the language of instruction and religion informing the curriculum: the English-language public school system (the largest), the French-language public school system, the English-language Catholic school system and the French-language Catholic school system. Despite the name, Catholic schools are presently open to persons of all faiths at the high school level, and participation in Catholic religious practices are not compulsory. Public schools, meanwhile, are secular and open to persons of all faiths. No religious instruction is included in the curriculum, and parents hoping to give their children such instruction are expected to do so either by themselves or through their places of worship. All school systems are divided into school boards at the regional level, one per school system.

In Ontario, the twelve-year education program consists of primary and secondary education. Primary (or elementary) schools consist of Kindergarten and Grade 1 until 8 and serve students between the ages of 5 and 13. Secondary (or high) schools, meanwhile, consist of Grade 9 until 12 and serve students aged 13 until 17. After the completion of their studies,

secondary students may complete a “victory lap”, an extra year of schooling in preparation for their tertiary studies. Students with advanced academic performance may be permitted to “skip” a grade, either by starting school a year early or by going forward two grades at the end of a school year.

At the secondary level, courses are differentiated for students. Some courses are compulsory for all students, while others may be selected by students depending on their interests and plans for their future. To graduate, students must receive a minimum of 30 credits; they usually take four credits per semester, though in their final year of school they may have one or two free periods in a semester. Courses have different formats depending on students’ goals, and this affects the amount of theoretical/practical content included. Students who intend to enter the workforce directly often take more practical courses, while those who intend to continue their education at the tertiary level (university, college, or similar) tend to take more theoretical course. (H. Baharun & Mundiari, 2011)

Classes are held from Monday to Friday. They generally start in the morning, after 8 a.m. and finish around 3 p.m. Students have no school on Saturdays and Sundays, as well as a one-week holiday in the middle of March; summer holidays from late June until early September; and a two-week holiday in late December/early January. There are also one-day holidays, most of which are based around Christian or cultural celebrations, including Easter and Thanksgiving. Students who celebrate other religious holidays, such as the Muslim Eid ul-Fitr and the Hindu Diwali, can generally take the day off.

Frequently, classes have 25 or fewer students; some have fewer than 20. At the primary level, schools have fixed minimum and fixed maximum numbers of students. Total class size may not vary much between classes in the same school, though schools themselves may differ widely. According to People for Education (2012: 1), the average primary school in Ontario has 177 students, with schools in northern Ontario smaller than those in the more densely populated south. Secondary schools have an average enrolment of 794 students, with fifteen percent having fewer than 250 students.

### **J.L. FORSTER SECONDARY SCHOOL**

The origins of J.L. Forster Secondary School can be traced to April 1922, when 4.53 acres of land was sold to the Sandwich Public School system for \$24,000. A school was built on this land and named General Byng Elementary School after Julian Byng, a general who had led the Canadian Corps at Vimy Ridge in World War I. It became a high school in 1927, under the name Sandwich High School, and was sold to the Windsor Board of Education in 1935. It was later named after its first principal: John L. Forster, who led the school from 1923 to 1954 (Yearbook Committee, 2006: 4). The school operated under this

name until it was shut down in 2014, having produced more than 9,000 graduates (Battagello, 2014).

Historically, Forster was a relatively large school, with its student body size peaking at more than 1,400 students during the 1970s. However, as local residents began migrating away from the surrounding neighborhood in the 1990s and 2000s, the size of the student body dwindled. In Forster's final decades, total enrolment was under 1,000, and under 500 from 2010 (Battagello, 2014). During the period discussed here (2002-2006), the average class size was thirty students. By the 2010s, this had diminished to an average of fifteen students (Verspeelt, 2014).

For much of the school's history, the student body at Forster consisted primarily of Canadian-born persons of European descent. This experienced a significant shift as the population of Windsor became increasingly multicultural and as the school took over Essex County's primary English as a Secondary Language program in 2000. By 2006, one third of the student body had been born outside of Canada, with many born in the Middle East (Yearbook Committee, 2006: 4). Forster thus had a higher percentage of Muslim students than the city; 9,875 (or 4.8 percent) of Windsor's 2006 population of 205,865 was Muslim.

## STUDYING WHILE MUSLIM

### School Selection and Education

As a public school, Forster followed a secular curriculum, without any compulsory religious education. This secularism was not a problem for respondents or their families, who were not concerned that their children would be taught values incompatible with Islam. One respondent, NB, said that her family considered her to have received a sufficient background in Arabic and Islam at her Muslim private elementary school, and thus took no issue with her completing her secondary education at a public school. Meanwhile, AL explained that, although her brother had attended a Catholic school—sometimes chosen by Muslim families for offering more conservative values (Hammer, 2011)—instead of Forster, this decision was made based on the quality of education available. (Mundiri, 2015)

Another consideration in selecting Forster was its proximity to families' homes. Many of the Muslim students of Forster had received their elementary educations at one of five nearby feeder schools, schools located within the same district whose graduates often continued their education at a specific high school. As such, upon graduating elementary school, students frequently enrolled in the same secondary schools as their friends. Students' families generally lived within several kilometers of the school, ensuring short transit times. Transportation—by bus, bicycle, or foot—was likewise easy to access.

As Forster was a secular school, with its only religion course being an elective available to eleventh grade students that offered a sociological look at the world's major religions, students' religious

education was the responsibility of their families. As NB explained, "my family answered my questions regarding religion if I had any". Students—both Muslim and non-Muslim—could also seek information on Islam at one of Windsor's mosques, as well as at an Islamic center located downtown. Families did not consider the lack of formal religious education problematic, though some had sent their children to receive formal religious education at a private elementary school.

### Dress and Keeping Hijab

As with other public schools in Ontario, Forster did not require students to wear a uniform. Students were allowed to wear what clothing they desired, so long as it complied with the school dress code. For example, students were free to wear T-shirts and shorts during the warmer months, so long as these items did not depict death or profanity or expose too much skin. Religious clothing and attributes, such as the Catholic rosary or the Muslim headscarf (hijab), were permitted.

Fashion practices among Muslim students, as in the general student body, were diverse. Generally, male Muslim students dressed the same as male non-Muslim students. Meanwhile, female Muslim students who came from or traced their heritage to countries where it was uncommon to wear the headscarf, such as Bangladesh and China, generally did not wear the headscarf; female Muslim students who came from or traced their heritage to countries where it was common to wear the headscarf generally did so. Although some exceptions to this tendency were noted, they were rare. (H. Z. Baharun, 2017)

Both AL and NB kept moderate hijab—here referring to the standard of modesty, the covering of intimate parts (*awrah*)—during the course of their studies. Aside from the headscarf, both wore loose clothing that extended to their wrists and ankles. NB explained that the decision to follow hijab was hers, and as such she "was very comfortable in wearing hijab". Meanwhile, AH, as a male student, did not give any particular consideration to keeping hijab; his everyday clothing was sufficient to meet the expected modesty standards. Respondents did not experience any difficulty while keeping hijab at school, nor did they face discrimination for doing so.

Experiences differed somewhat in the physical education program. During the first (and only compulsory) year of physical education, male and female students were segregated: male students played sports with other male students and were taught by a male teacher, while female students played sports with other female students and were taught by a female teacher. During later (elective) years of physical education, classes were co-ed, though male and female students changed into their uniforms or swimming suits in their respective changing rooms. Female Muslim students kept hijab by wearing their headscarves together with long pants and long-sleeve shirts. Male Muslim students, meanwhile, wore the

same clothes as their peers, namely aerated cotton shorts and a T-shirt. As explained by NB, “sometimes it got a little warm in gym” but it would “have been the same whether [she] wore the hijab and modest clothing or not”.

### **Food and Drink**

During the lunchtime break, most students at Forster ate lunches that they had brought from home. However, they were also able to purchase food on-site at a cafeteria located in the lower level, as well as at a McDonald’s located a short walk away. Neither the cafeteria nor the McDonald’s were halal certified, nor were the foods they served fully halal. Both served pork products, including bacon and rib sandwiches. However, all foods were labeled, and though their ingredients were not listed, consumers could use their understanding of general culinary practice to select foods appropriate for them.

Muslim students, as with their non-Muslim peers, mainly brought lunches to school that they had prepared at home. When food was purchased at school, vegetarian choices were preferred, although meat products were sometimes consumed. AL explains that, if she needed to buy something at the school cafeteria, she “would buy something vegetarian and avoid meat products”. Similarly, NB explained that she “just did not eat pork and avoided ground meats”, the latter to ensure that she did not consume mixed meats that may contain pork. Likewise, she avoided purchasing “prepared burgers or prepared/packaged meats” such as those found in sandwiches. AH, meanwhile, simply avoided pork products, he was willing to eat “everything else” when he purchased food.

During certain school functions, food and drink were served to all members of the student body. In the week prior to the Christmas holiday, for example, Forster’s teaching staff prepared pancakes for all students, serving them together with toppings such as blueberries and maple syrup; none of the foods served during this pancake breakfast contained any meat products. Meanwhile, during the school spirit day (“Forster Forever”), students were served barbecued hot dogs with condiments (tomato ketchup, mustard) and potato chips. As hot dogs are traditionally made with pork, halal-certified hot dogs made with chicken meat were prepared instead. AH recalled that Forster “was actually very culturally sensitive to this matter”.

### **Worship**

As Forster was a secular school, there were no compulsory prayers. Students of any religion who were not inclined to do their daily prayers were under no obligation to do so, while those who did were free to do so. Muslim students had to decide whether and how to pray, as zuhr or noon prayers (salah) were held during school hours, as were asr (afternoon) prayers during winter months.

Facilities were offered for prayers as necessary; AH recalls that “they [the school]” did the best they could”. Washrooms could be used for ritual ablution (wudu) before prayers, and certain rooms could be used for salah itself. There was no dedicated prayer room at the school. Instead, prayers were held in different rooms, depending on what was available; for example, both the auditorium and music rooms were used at times. As facilities did not include a call to prayer (adhan) or an imam, students had to keep track of prayer times themselves and select an imam from among the Muslim student body.

These facilities were nonetheless considered adequate for Friday congregational prayers, which were frequently held during the lunchtime break. Individual prayers could also be held at school, during the lunchtime break when zuhr fell between 12:00 and 1:00 p.m. or during breaks between classes when it did not. However, some students preferred to wait until after school and pray at home with their families. NB recalled that, if no facilities were readily available, she “would pray at home or during lunch in one of the hallways”.

Fasting (sawm) was also practiced by many Muslim students during the month of Ramadan, which during the four-year period covered here began in late/mid-autumn and lasted into late autumn. The school cafeteria remained open during the fast, and non-Muslim students continued to eat their lunches in the lunchroom, in the hallways, or outside of school. As such, fasting students were unable to avoid the sight of people eating. Nevertheless, respondents who fasted did not consider their fast particularly difficult. As AL explained, this was in part because “the days at that time were shorter” and in part because the Muslim students were fasting together and thus able to support each other. NB concurred with this assessment, stating that “while the first day of Ramadan was usually tough, the days after were easy. I wasn’t even hungry”.

At the end of the fast, Muslim students could take several days off from school for their Eid al-Fitr celebrations, despite it not being an official holiday. Similar attendance exceptions were granted for Eid al-Adha.

### **Social Interactions**

As explained by NB, students at Forster did not befriend others solely based on a shared cultural or religious identity, but rather “based on mutual respect and common interests”. AH concurred with this assessment, saying that such differences did not affect him in making friends. Respondents reported that many of their friendships from this period have been maintained until the present day, more than ten years after graduation.

Nevertheless, students at Forster did recognize that they came from diverse cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. As such, in their interactions with others, students—Muslim and non-

Muslim alike—attempted to keep an open mind and to recognize and celebrate their differences. Curiosity regarding students' varied backgrounds was common.

This curiosity extended to Islam and its practice. According to AL, in her interactions with non-Muslim students, she “would gladly explain to them about my religion and practices, and that added to their knowledge”. Similarly, NB also explained that, though religious topics were rarely broached, when she was asked questions about her clothing and keeping hijab, she “answered any questions of curiosity, no matter how silly”.

Non-Muslim students and staff at Forster were respectful of Muslim students' beliefs, and attempted to accommodate them when possible. Aside from the examples of halal food and prayer facilities mentioned above, this extended to the classroom. One female student, UD, was not allowed to be paired with male students during group assignments, citing religious beliefs; this was respected by the teaching staff, who paired UD only with other female students.

Muslim students at Forster, aside from interacting with non-Muslims, also interacted with Muslims of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Non-Canadian born Muslim students at Forster came from a broad range of countries, including countries where Sunni Islam is most widely practiced (i.e. Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia), countries where Shia Islam is most widely practiced (i.e. Iran, Iraq), as well as countries where Muslims are a minority (i.e. China; two students were ethnic Uyghurs from Xinjiang). Muslim students and their families thus followed a broad range of religious schools (Hanafi, Maliki, Ismaili, Jafari, etc.) and teachings. Likewise, they had diverse cultural-religious practices rooted in the practice of Islam of their countries of origin/heritage.

This diversity in understandings and practices of Islam did not lead to conflict between Muslim students, but instead offered them the opportunity to learn more about their religion and how it is practiced around the globe. This was recognized by students, who were open to information sharing. As mentioned by NB, some Muslim students discussed their different practices, though she did not participate in such discussions herself. AL viewed this diversity as adding to her learning experience, as she was exposed to Islamic practices that she would have otherwise not known about.

## CONCLUSION

In Canada, Muslims are a minority group, consisting of less than four percent of the population. Although they live within a social structure that has been historically shaped by non-Muslim practices and values, they have not experienced significant difficulty living and studying as Muslims. As shown in the case of J.L. Forster Secondary School, Muslim students have been able to study Islam, keep halal, keep hijab,

and worship while participating fully as students in a secular school system and establishing friendships with fellow students of diverse backgrounds. In doing so, they have been facilitated by the school where they study, which provide them with facilities and accommodate their needs, as well as by their fellow students, who build friendships based on mutual respect and common interests without considering their socio-cultural or religious backgrounds.

From the above discussion, it is evident that both minority and majority groups must be flexible to ensure the greatest social harmony and unity. Majority groups should recognize that their practices are not universal, and they must be willing to and capable of adapting to changing demographic situations and accommodating persons with different practices or beliefs. Likewise, minority groups should ease their integration within the existing social structure by adapting their practices in a way that allows them to maintain their own religious and cultural identity. This approach, which the Canadian government has codified as the “cultural mosaic” model of multiculturalism, offers the potential for true unity in diversity.

## REFERENCES

- Battagello, Dave. 2014, 30 May. “Emotional closing ceremony for ‘family’ of Forster Secondary School”. Windsor Star. Accessed on 12 June 2017. <http://windsorstar.com/news/local-news/emotional-closing-ceremony-for-family-of-forster-secondary-school>.
- Hammer, Kate. 2011, September 5. “Muslim students enrolling in Catholic schools”. The Globe and Mail. Accessed on 5 August. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/muslim-students-enrolling-in-catholic-schools/article4180638/>
- J.L. Forster Secondary School Yearbook Committee. 2006. Spartialogue 2005-2006. Windsor, Ontario: J.L. Forster Secondary School.
- People for Education. 2012. “Declining Enrolment / School Closings”. People for Education: Toronto. Accessed on 23 December 2016. <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/declining-enrolment-early-release-2012.pdf>.
- Ontario Federation of Independent Schools. 2012. “Private Schools by the Numbers”. Accessed on 23 December 2016. <http://www.ofis.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Private-Schools-By-The-Numbers-Independent-School-Statistics-2012.pdf>.
- Statistics Canada. 2015, 22 April. “Visible minority of person”. Accessed on 13 June 2017. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/concepts/definitions/minority01>
- Statistics Canada. 2017a, 14 February. “2011 National

- Household Survey: Data tables”. Accessed on 13 June 2017. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=0&PID=105399&PRID=0&PTYPE=105277&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2013&THEME=95&VID=0>
- Statistics Canada. 2017b, 3 March. “Population growth: Migratory increase overtakes natural increase”. Accessed on 13 June 2017. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2014001-eng.htm>.
- Statistics Canada. 2017c, 13 April. “150 years of immigration in Canada”. Accessed on 13 June 2017. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016006-eng.htm#def4>
- Verspeelt, Jay. 2014, 2 June. “J.L. Forster Secondary School closes its doors after 92 years”. OurWindsor.ca. Accessed 12 June 2017. <https://www.ourwindsor.ca/news-story/4552325-j-l-forster-secondary-school-closes-its-doors-after-92-years/>
- Baharun, H., & Mundiri, A. (2011). *Metodologi Studi Islam: Percikan Pemikiran Tokoh Dalam Membumikan Agama*. Ar-Ruzz Media (1st ed.). Yogyakarta: Ar-Ruzz Media.
- Baharun, H. Z. (2017). *Manajemen Mutu Pendidikan : Ikhtiar dalam Meningkatkan Mutu Pendidikan Madrasah melalui Pendekatan Balanced Scorecard* (1st ed.). Tulungagung: Akademia Pustaka.
- Mundiri, A. (2014). REKONSTRUKSI EPISTEMOLOGI PENDIDIKAN ISLAM BERBASIS SPIRIT INTEGRALISTIK. *At-Turas*, 1(1), 23-51.
- Mundiri, A., & Zahra, I. (2017a). Corak Representasi Identitas Ustadz dalam Proses Transmisi Pendidikan Karakter di Pesantren. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, Vol. 2, No, 21-35.