

faith and identity, rather than feeling the need to suppress or ignore it." Sarah highlighted how her inclusive teaching approach serves as Dawah: "I openly talk about different cultures, especially the Middle East." Sarah emphasized her commitment to bringing diverse cultures and beliefs into her classroom to show how Dawah can be embodied through inclusive teaching practices that validate and celebrate diverse religious and cultural identities. The Muslim educators' stories and experiences represent an approach to Dawah in which the invitation to Islam is not just about proselytizing or religious observance, but about aligning one's faith with a broader commitment to social and educational equity.

Knowledge and Empowerment

As a result of participating in halaqas, Muslim educators gained insights into different experiences of Muslim educators in various settings across the United States—experiences that broadened their understanding of the challenges they face. Halaqas provide Muslim educators the knowledge and community support that they need in order to navigate their professional environments that transform their individual experiences into collective strength, enabling them to feel more in control of their professional narratives and more capable of effecting change.

As part of increasing their knowledge, Muslim educators share how they experience, challenge, and dismantle anti-Muslim racism. Anti-Muslim racism is rooted in the belief that white Christians who harbor racial hostility toward Muslims are primarily colonizers and their religious feelings and imperial/colonial impulses continue to shape contemporary conflicts (Razack, 2021). Kadija mentions teaching in a predominantly Muslim city, contrasting her experience with those in the U. S. South. She says, "I don't know how y'all people in the South teach. God bless y'all. I would get fired, like, super quickly." Her awareness of regional demographics led her to understand how she wanted to advocate for Muslim students' and educators' rights, even in a predominantly Muslim area. Sarah compares her experiences in suburban and inner-city districts: "I don't see that much diversity, but I also live by the

university, so I do see a lot of protests." This comparison increases awareness of how school settings affect Muslim educators' experiences. Kadija discusses the lack of protection for Muslim teachers advocating for the Palestinian cause, and all the educators discuss the challenges of addressing global issues, particularly as related to Palestine, thereby revealing systemic biases in curriculum and school policies. The structural violence of anti-Muslim hate is deeply intertwined with the political and historical global context (Saleem et al., 2022). Sarah later revealed that she was unaware of these nuances, and the conversations she had with other educators in the halaqas helped her learn how those issues affected other Muslim educators.

Understanding the broader context of their experiences allows Muslim educators to recognize that their challenges are often systemic rather than personal. To challenge anti-Muslim racism's practices, assumptions, and logic, it is crucial to recognize anti-Muslim racism as a systemic issue rather than an individual bias (Abdul Khabeer et al., 2017). This knowledge empowers these educators to address issues more effectively and advocate for change. Fear of Muslims plays a crucial role in the territorial and symbolic foundation of whiteness (Razack, 2021). Muslim educators recognize the fear and fight against it. In the third halaqa, when Asiya shared her frustration that the school shooter training focused on Muslim shooters, this awareness empowered her to question the fairness and bias in the training, rather than internalizing it as a personal issue. The discussions about the lack of diversity in leadership positions empower participants to aspire for and work toward leadership roles, knowing that their presence is needed and valuable.

Awareness of systemic issues helps Muslim educators identify areas in which change is needed, empowering them to take targeted action. Discussions about leadership academies and continuing education inspire participants to pursue further professional growth as they begin to feel empowered by the knowledge of these opportunities. For example, Hawa's reflection on her journey to education and leadership roles during the first halaqa demonstrates how awareness of one's path and challenges can lead to empowered career choices. A greater understanding of

the educational landscape and its challenges empowers Muslim educators to make informed decisions about their careers and advocacy efforts.

Anti-Palestinian Racism

In the halaqa, Muslim educators expressed deep emotional responses to anti-Palestinian racism. Their emotional responses reflect the deep connection many Muslims feel to global issues affecting Muslim communities. The halaqas provided a space for Muslim educators to express their profound sadness and horror and to find support among peers who understood their unique position as Muslim educators in navigating their professional roles while staying true to their beliefs. Their internal conflicts already added to the emotional stress of navigating their workplaces as Muslims.

After October 7, Muslim educators faced heightened scrutiny and unfair treatment. Kadija notes a Muslim teacher being pulled out of the classroom for her stance on Palestine, whereas a Jewish teacher who violated student privacy was not punished. Muslim educators felt constrained in expressing their views, fearing professional repercussions. Muslim educators feel an added burden to educate others about Islam and counter misconceptions, especially in the wake of heightened tensions. Iman describes educating staff about Ramadan. Muslim educators struggled with how to teach about the conflict objectively while dealing with their own emotional responses.

The educators felt overwhelmed by the scale of the tragedy and their limited ability to effect change from their positions. They worried about how these events were affecting their Muslim students. Despite feeling overwhelmed, the educators strongly desired to find ways to support affected communities and educate others about the situation. Each week, this space provided them a place to express their feelings and helped them move into conversations about what changes they would like to see.

Sisters' Ummah

As the halaqas progressed, the affinity space became more than just sharing stories and connecting. It started as a place with six strangers, whose only commonality was that they knew me in some form. The meeting space transformed into a space where Muslim women could support one another in a caring and supportive way that uplifted the group collectively. The group became an ummah, and with all educators self-identifying as women, it became a sister's area of the mosque. The Muslim women provided encouragement to and empathy for one another, as they understood firsthand what it was like to be a Muslim educator in a public school setting. In this halaqa, the Muslim women expressed self-love, acceptance of one another, and love for their students, all grounded in their faith. Underneath their stories was a deep appreciation and love for education.

The intention behind the driver's diagram on Muslim ummah was to create a space for Muslim public school educators to be in a community together—a space that can establish a network of support where listening and speaking truths can be healing. Muslim commonality—a shared religion and ethnicity—is crucial for social identification and fostering a sense of belonging among Muslims (Dana et al., 2017). Anti-Muslim racism disrupts individual, interpersonal, and structural systems (Samari, 2016). As an antidote to anti-Muslim racism, Muslim educators can create a sense of belonging and develop a sense of sisterhood or brotherhood that is naturally part of their faith.

Several strategies helped transform an affinity space into a collective, robust network of sisters. Each halaqa began with a structured opening, often including the reading of a Hadith. This practice helped create a shared spiritual foundation for the meetings. Educators shared their current feelings and experiences at the start of each halaqa. The mindfulness and grounding exercises helped educators connect with their identities as Muslim educators. Educators were given opportunities to reflect on prompts related to their experiences as Muslim educators and to share their thoughts with the group, fostering open dialogue, mutual support,

empathy, solidarity, and understanding. The regular, consistent meeting structure of the halaqas, including opening ceremonies, discussions, and closing reflections, helped create a familiar and safe space for Muslim educators.

At the end of each halaqa, Muslim educators shared hopes for one another, as if making dua or prayer for the group. The feeling was akin to praying in communal salat. The educators were encouraged to share moments of gratitude, which helped foster a positive and supportive atmosphere. Educators shared their hopes for the coming week, such as a hope for a calm week, rest, blessings, and one good thing in their day, as well as a hope that any positive experiences could serve as a "shining light at the end of the tunnel" during challenging periods. Other hopes included yearnings for ongoing support and connection within their professional and personal communities, the strength to face challenges in their work environments, a desire for peace, remembering their foundations, and staying grounded in their values and beliefs. Their collective hopes represent a personal way to communicate with one another, express their needs, and show gratitude, just as Muslims do when they make dua. Muslims believe that duas have the power to change our future, and in the same way, these hopes became a way for Muslim educators to uplift and change their future.

The halaqas themselves create a loving community. These educators' hopes became a gift of love. In developing a sisterhood, these Muslim women expressed deep care and love for their students; an understanding of, and support for, their colleagues; love through advocacy; love in teaching; and love through empathizing with one another's struggles. The love they experience and share is multifaceted, encompassing personal growth, professional dedication, cultural appreciation, and a commitment to creating inclusive and supportive environments.

Collective Healing

Through collective healing and shared experiences, Muslim educators find empowerment, resilience, and a unified voice to navigate challenges, affirm their identities, and

create positive change in their educational environments. The halaqas helped them combat isolation, validate experiences, build resilience, create a support network, share strategies, affirm identity, address systemic issues, and promote professional growth. The halaqas also allowed for emotional processing, fostered hope, developed a collective voice, and increased cultural competence. Several components of the halaqas contributed to collective healing: safe and inclusive space, shared experiences, mindfulness practices, cultural and religious affirmations, problem-solving discussions, emotional support, reflective practices, community belonging, professional growth opportunities, and dreaming of future aspirations. Combined, these elements created a holistic healing environment that addresses Muslim educators' emotional, spiritual, and professional needs, fostering community and empowerment.

The halaqas provided a judgment-free environment in which educators felt comfortable sharing their experiences openly. Sarah opined, "everybody felt safe to share their experiences." Educators found comfort in realizing that they weren't alone in their struggles. Sarah also noted that the halaqas gave her "a fresh perspective that I'm not the only one going through these challenges." Iman described the space as comforting and helpful in sharing experiences, allowing for emotional release and healing. The halaqas incorporated Islamic traditions and teachings, such as reading Hadiths and quotes from Islamic figures, thereby allowing educators to embrace their identities fully. Collective healing builds emotional resilience. Kadija mentioned how the group made her feel "more proactive in advocating for her identity." Educators collectively brainstormed solutions to everyday challenges, such as educating colleagues about Ramadan.

Muslim educators provided empathy and encouragement to one another, creating a supportive atmosphere, evident when Asiya shared her frustrations and received understanding from others. The halaqas encouraged introspection, helping educators understand themselves better. Umme-Rumaysa reflected on how the group helped her appreciate her own life more.

The sense of belonging fostered in the group helped heal feelings of isolation. Asiya's sharing of microaggressions resonated with others, creating a healing sense of shared understanding.

Sharing teaching strategies and addressing workplace challenges specific to Muslim educators helped build confidence. Collectively brainstorming solutions to common challenges helped educators feel empowered and less overwhelmed. After experiencing the benefits, Asiya considered starting her own support circle. Discussions about ongoing support and future plans gave educators hope. Many expressed interest in continuing meetings and collaborations.

As a facilitator, I led mindfulness exercises that helped participants ground themselves and process emotions. By incorporating mindfulness exercises and prompting educators to reflect on their experiences, I created space for individual introspection and growth, rather than imposing a specific agenda. These practices were incorporated into multiple sessions.

Incorporating Islamic traditions and teachings into discussions provides spiritual healing, offering a way for participants to overcome daily stresses and reconnect with their identities. Sharing and witnessing one another's stories can have a healing effect. The space created allows for vulnerability, understanding, and the realization that the community "is in this together." Through these various aspects, the halaqas create a healing environment for Muslim educators, addressing their emotional, spiritual, and professional needs in a supportive community context.

CHAPTER 10: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL SYSTEMS, MUSLIM EDUCATORS, AFFINITY SPACES, AND SELF

This chapter outlines the next steps for individuals involved in this PoP and relates their work to the larger education field. The chapter builds on the previous chapters, focusing on analysis. Liberatory Design is “an approach to addressing equity challenges and chang[ing] efforts in complex systems” that is meant to investigate “deeper causes produced by systemic oppression” (National Equity Project, 2023b). At the core of Liberatory Design is a set of beliefs:

1. “Racism and inequity have been designed into systems and thus can be redesigned;
 2. Designing for equity requires the meaningful participation of those impacted by inequity, and
 3. Equity-driven designs require equity and complexity informed processes”
- (National Equity Project, 2023a).

In this chapter, I first share the implications for school systems and how they can redesign how racism and inequity have been incorporated into them (National Equity Project, 2023a). I share the implications, lessons, and recommendations for school systems on the basis of the research presented and analyzed in this dissertation of practice. The implications for school systems include promoting representation, fostering inclusive environments, enforcing antidiscrimination policies, addressing systemic barriers, encouraging trust, addressing trauma, and providing professional learning opportunities. In the next section, I discuss implications for Muslim public school educators, highlighting the importance of collective action and solidarity among Muslim educators to dismantle oppression systems in their schools, thereby enabling them to challenge biases and advocate for change. I then discuss the implications and the value of culturally specific affinity spaces. Lastly, I discuss the implications for myself as an activist researcher–practitioner, as well as presenting my own learnings and laying out the next steps.

Implications for School Systems

Based on the statements and experiences shared by Muslim educators in this research study, several key implications arise for school districts to consider. (See Table 8.) These implications are important because they represent opportunities for school districts to meaningfully address Muslim educators' and students' needs and experiences, ultimately leading to more inclusive, supportive, and transformative educational environments. The term “school systems” used in this section includes individuals or organizations involved in decision-making processes that affect Muslim public school educators such as school leaders, the central office, school boards, educators’ unions or associations, superintendents, recruiters, and colleagues. The term can also apply to private sectors in education.

Table 8

Research Implications for School Systems

#	Implication	Brief Description
1	Acknowledging a need for representation and visibility	School systems should actively work to recruit, retain, and promote Muslim educators in order to reflect the diversity of their student populations better.
2	Fostering affirming and supportive environments	School systems should ensure that they are fostering inclusive cultures that validate and affirm the identities and practices of Muslim community members in order to better support, retain, and empower Muslim educators and other educators of color through their policies and practices.
3	Enforcing strong antidiscrimination policies	School systems need to have and enforce strong antidiscrimination policies that specifically address religious discrimination and anti-Muslim racism in order to prevent doxxing and harassment.
4	Addressing systemic barriers to leadership opportunities	School systems need to examine their policies and practices so as to identify and dismantle any systemic barriers that prevent Muslim educators from moving into leadership roles or any position of decision making.
5	Creating affirming and inclusive spaces to	School systems should provide resources, time, and space for Muslim teachers to connect, share experiences, find

	facilitate community and collaboration	solidarity, support one another, and develop strategies to address their unique challenges.
6	Fostering trust and understanding with Muslim communities	School systems should create platforms that facilitate open dialogues and collaborative committees involving parents, families, educators, and community members in order to foster mutual understanding and collective problem solving.
7	Addressing trauma and supporting educator well-being	Muslim educators experience the emotional and mental toll of challenging systemic issues, so school systems should provide comprehensive support and resources for their well-being.
8	Providing professional learning opportunities to combat anti-Muslim racism	The educators' experiences highlight the need for school systems to offer targeted professional development, mentorship programs, and resources to support the specific needs and challenges that Muslim educators and students face.

Acknowledging a Need for Representation and Visibility

School systems should actively work to recruit, retain, and promote Muslim educators in order to reflect the diversity of their student populations better. Anti-Muslim racism in public schools mirrors that in the broader society, replicating issues in the home, religion, communities, economics, and politics, in turn reflecting the replication of anti-Muslim racism throughout U.S. history (Fuller, 2018). The education system serves three functions: social integration, social placement, and social and cultural innovation, ensuring that students share beliefs, preparing students for future life, and fostering discovery among students (Sociology, 2016). Schools play a crucial role in promoting human growth and addressing historically inequitable conditions, as Sellars et al. (2023) have highlighted. Muslim educators can contribute valuable insights to curriculum development and instructional practices, helping to create more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments. Recruiting and retaining Muslim educators contributes to the overall diversity of the school staff.

The educators' experiences of feeling like "the only one" or lacking a sense of community within their schools point to the need for school districts to actively recruit, retain, and support Muslim educators, in order to ensure their meaningful representation and visibility in both schools and the larger society. Sarah and Hawa highlighted the lack of representation and visibility of Muslim educators in their respective school districts and states. Rosa's experiences highlight the need for school systems to closely examine their hiring, disciplinary, and support practices, to identify and eliminate any disparities or double standards affecting Muslim educators. Sarah's status as the only Pakistani and Muslim teacher in her district points to the lack of Muslim representation among educators. School systems should prioritize recruiting, supporting, and retaining a more diverse teaching staff that reflects the diversity of the student population.

Many of the educators teach in diverse Muslim-majority communities. Yet, the lack of Muslim representation in leadership and decision-making roles suggests a disconnect between the student population and the educators/administrators. Kadija and Asiya highlight the lack of Muslim representation in high-level leadership positions within their school districts. Accordingly, districts should actively work to recruit, develop, and promote qualified Muslim educators into administrative and decision-making roles.

Increasing the diversity of educators can help foster a sense of belonging and support for Muslim students. For example, Abidah's role as a visible Muslim educator and her positive impact on Muslim students bring out the importance of representation and the presence of Muslim role models in schools. Sehra takes pride in seeing a hijabi character represented in the school's library. Her own presence as a Muslim educator also provides positive visibility for Muslim students. Ensuring that Muslim educators and students feel seen, heard, and valued in the school community can have a powerful impact on their sense of belonging and success.

Fostering Affirming and Supportive Environments

School systems should ensure that they are fostering inclusive cultures that validate and affirm the identities and practices of Muslim community members in order to better support, retain, and empower Muslim educators and other educators of color through their policies and practices. School climate is influenced by individuals' experiences, norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching practices, and organizational structures, reflecting the overall school environment (Cohen et al., 2009). Educational institutions, like society, perpetuate racist practices through their own practices, cultures, and policies, which undermine human equity (Miller, 2020). School systems should work to reasonably accommodate the religious needs and practices of Muslim educators in order to support their ability to participate fully in the school community.

School systems should work to create more accommodating and understanding environments that allow Muslim educators to integrate their religious and cultural values into their professional roles. Bushra's daily routine of prayer, Quran reading, and fasting during Ramadan is essential to her Muslim faith. Iman and Umme-Rumaysa discussed the challenges of navigating their Muslim identities and practices within the public school culture. Abidah's experience of being offered the custodian's office as a prayer space suggests the need for schools to designate appropriate, dignified prayer areas for Muslim community members. Abidah struggles with inflexible school schedules and a lack of accommodation for her prayer times. Umme-Rumaysa and Sarah expressed the importance of creating "safe" and "supportive" environments for Muslim educators and students. School systems should be willing to accommodate the religious practices of Muslim educators, such as allowing time and space for prayer, without making them feel that they are "abusing" the privilege. Noor's advocacy for her Muslim students to have access to prayer spaces, Ramadan accommodations, and other resources demonstrates the importance of school systems being responsive to the diverse needs

of their student populations. Failing to provide such accommodations can exclude students and educators.

The educators' discussions around the challenges of observing Ramadan and celebrating Eid highlight the need for school systems to develop policies that accommodate the religious practices of Muslim students and staff. Sarah advocates accommodating Muslim religious holidays and practices, such as having Eid off or a half day for Ramadan. Sehra highlights the challenge of Eid not being officially recognized, unlike Christian holidays, such as Christmas. This omission requires her to navigate taking time off and creating her own family celebrations—a task that can be burdensome. Hawa's advocacy to get Eid greetings recognized highlights the need for schools to include Muslim and other minority religious holidays and traditions. Incorporating religious observances for diverse faith communities into the school calendar and policies demonstrates respect and accommodation for all students and staff.

Enforcing Strong Antidiscrimination Policies

School systems need to have and enforce strong antidiscrimination policies that specifically address religious discrimination and anti-Muslim racism in order to prevent doxxing and harassment. Schools are social and cultural institutions with leaders who govern, control, and manage their systems, shaping their community's beliefs and values (Gibson et al., 2005). School culture, influenced by school leaders such as principals, teachers, and parents, is crucial for student learning and reforms, shaping norms, values, and traditions (Deal, 1998). The ongoing discrimination and fear among those who disagree with the claim that criticism of Israel is antisemitic continues to penalize individuals (Bakan et al., 2024). Policies promoting religious interaction can enhance trust among religious groups, as individuals are motivated to learn about others' trustworthiness (Thunström et al., 2021). Educators critiquing and disrupting dominant, white-centric narratives, policies, and practices within education should be protected by school system leaders.