



# Religion and Equity & Social Justice

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With the activities of Islamic State filling the headlines right now, the work of Dr Liz Jackson on Islam in the curriculum has attracted considerable interest. She did her dissertation on Islam in the US curriculum in the context of terrorism and patriotism, post-9/11, when there was renewed patriotic fervour in the air, and her interest was in how this impacts a student learning about religion and Islam.

Her book *Muslims and Islam in US Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism* came out in 2014, based on her dissertation and exploring the complex interface that exists between US school curriculum, teaching practice about religion in public schools, societal and teacher attitudes toward Islam and Muslims, and multiculturalism as a framework for meeting the needs of minority group students. It studies how values relate to tolerance and understanding other people, how those values can change and shift over time and explores that within the curriculum.

Dr Jackson arrived in Hong Kong in 2012, and began to study how religion and ethnicity are discussed in the Hong Kong school curriculum, particularly in the core senior secondary subject Liberal Studies. She was surprised to find that the emphasis – perhaps following a Western paradigm – was always on Islam and terrorism.

As Dr Jackson observes, the Liberal Studies curriculum explores globalisation and global problems. At the same time, it aims to increase understanding of diverse viewpoints. In the case of Islam, doing both can be challenging. If the curriculum ultimately hammers negative associations about Islam dominant in the news – terrorism etc – multicultural understanding of Islam can be precluded.

While some scholars are looking at the experiences of Muslims in Hong Kong from an anthropological point of view, and others are working on ethnic minorities learning within Hong Kong's education systems, Dr Jackson's work is unique in asking whether the curriculum is reflecting our society's values and the values that we as a society want to promote. It all became even more pertinent in view of the debate about moral and national education that was raging in Hong Kong last year.

**What are the moral values we want education to promote?**

The Umbrella Movement too raised important questions among her students such as who is a Hongkonger, what is multi-culturalism, and are Hong Kong people one race or one language group? It also threw up other unforeseen developments – some of her ethnic minority students who have lived in Hong Kong all their lives said they have never felt such warmth and belonging as during the Movement.

From a wider perspective Dr Jackson is working towards an over-arching agenda focusing on the key question: what are the moral values we want education to promote? New trends such as multi-culturalism, education for sustainable development, and global citizenship all raise questions about what attitudes and attributes we want people to have.

Dr Jackson is also looking at Islam in education from a comparative point of view, and is setting up a project to collaborate with people in Thailand, India, South Africa, China and Iran. She aims to look at what Islam means in terms of educational challenges – especially from the teacher's point of view.

Recent events such as the rise of IS have put Islam under the spotlight. For Dr Jackson in Hong Kong this has meant a change in how people view her work. Whereas before she had to explain her specialist area, and sceptics would often react with the question 'Why would I want to know what's going on in Islam?', now they say: 'please tell me what's going on in Islam?'

Dr Liz Jackson is Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Policy Studies in the Division of Policy, Administration, and Social Sciences Education, HKU Faculty of Education. Her book *Muslims and Islam in US Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism* was published by Routledge in 2014. Dr Jackson is currently the principal investigator of a Hong Kong Research Grants Council funded project, "Representation of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in School Textbooks: Aligning Multiculturalism and Liberal Studies" (Early Career Award Scheme, 2013-2015).