

# Spotlight — Rabia Khokhar



*Rabia Khokhar is a teacher in Toronto, an equity consultant, and a doctoral student. Her research interests include equitable education, children’s literature, and professional development. Rabia is passionate about bringing theory to practice and enjoys sharing her learning on her social media platforms. She is the recipient of the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario’s 2021 Anti-Racist and Equity Activism Award, the 2022 Professional Learning and Curriculum Development Award, and the 2022 Angela Thacker Excellence in Teacher-Librarianship Memorial Award.*

**The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) presented you with the 2021 Anti-Racist and Equity Activism Award. Talk to us about this special moment in your life.**

This was such an incredible and humbling moment in my life! I have always been incredibly passionate about equitable education and to receive this award from ETFO; fellow educators was really affirming. I have always been interested in bringing equity theory to practice in tangible, relevant,

contextual and accessible ways for students, educators, families and other stakeholders and so to be recognized for doing this work and some of its impact was really exciting and an honour.

One of the things this award recognized was the newsletter I had created around equity topics and book recommendations. It was really cool to know that there were subscribers like educators, librarians, community workers, families, administrators, professors, publishers, authors etc.). The interest in this newsletter showed me the importance of ensuring that our equity work is accessible and practical for all of our community members. This award also reaffirmed my own commitment to making equity or anti-racist theory/practices accessible and relevant and to sort of demystify them.

It also reminded me of the purpose of this work which for me is to strive to “build longer tables not higher walls” (Jose Andres). This award reignited my responsibility to do this work with humility and to always remember that we play a small role in a bigger picture of creating equity, justice and fairness within our spheres of influence.

**Professional development is something important to you. How does it fit into your daily work and profession?**

Professional development and ongoing learning is really important for me personally. I believe that as educators, we need to be reflective practitioners and so it’s important that we stay committed to learning, growing and evolving within our roles and our practices so we can meet the needs



of those we are serving. I also believe that there are many ways and methods of engaging in professional development and learning.

Currently, professional development is a central part of my work. As an education and equity consultant at Rabia Teaches, I offer professional development to various stakeholders around making equity topics accessible such as workshops for educators and students. As well, as a Teacher-Educator, I am part of the practicum team at a Toronto Teachers College program. My role is to mentor, support and observe student teachers in their placements. This also involves providing workshops. As well, as a doctoral student, my upcoming research study (hopefully) will be focused on bringing together a group of elementary educators to engage in a professional learning community around anti-Islamophobia education through picture books.

Professional development is a central part of my work and I believe that workshops and tangible resources are just one way to work towards equitable conditions for all.

**You contributed to the 2023 TESL Ontario Conference. How did you get involved and what was your takeaway?**

I was very excited to see the TESL flyer calling for workshop facilitators for the conference. I think I came across it on social media. My workshop topic focused on how we can use picture books to build identity affirming learning spaces. The topic really arose from my own experiences as a former English as a Second teacher in Toronto schools.

Most of my students were newcomers to Canada and spoke many beautiful languages. I wanted students to feel a sense of welcome and belonging as this classroom was one of the first ones in their new country. One of the ways I strived to do this

was by having picture books that represented their identities and I hoped that as they transitioned into their new spaces they could see aspects of things that were important to them. Picture books became a central way for me to strive to build equitable learning spaces for my students that affirmed and expanded their identities and experiences.

Also, my passion for using picture books to build equitable learning spaces in English as a second language classrooms arose from my own lived experiences. I came to Canada when I was 6 years old and the programs I was part of felt like I had to remove or hide parts of myself to ‘fit’ into the classroom and school space. The focus was mostly on learning the technical aspects of the English language and not on building identity affirming learning spaces that saw or valued the multilingual aspects of our identities. Therefore, I knew that if I was ever to teach such a program, I would strive to build a space that recognized and built upon the identities of my students. The classroom would focus more on a holistic approach that would center students and build upon what they already knew.

Being part of this conference was an incredible experience! Everything was very organized and I felt very supported throughout. In the session, people were respectful, kind and brought their experiences to share with others. My key takeaway was that there are many people working to create equitable changes in their learning spaces. It was also exciting to connect with others who are using picture books in different learning spaces and with students of all ages! Overall, it felt powerful to be part of this amazing community!



**On your website, you posted about a reading challenge – Centering Muslim Characters. How did you come up with this and how can it be expanded to all classrooms?**

I have always been passionate about intentionally using stories and picture books as tools for different communities to tell and share their own stories authentically. I also feel that stories are a tangible way to build bridges of understanding, connection, empathy and community. As a Muslim person, I know that there are many stereotypes about our identities that play out in various settings. This reading challenge arose from my need to take a small step within my circles to bring forward and center the intersectional stories of Muslims.

I was working on curating this resource that sort of moved beyond just sharing stories that could be seen that could seem tokenistic in nature. I wanted to really intentionally bring forward Muslim authors, illustrations and stories that were writing stories that worked to show the dynamic and diverse experiences of Muslims. I wanted to focus on stories that provided common entry points for students such as themes around friendship, family, teamwork, community.

I had been working on this resource for a while but what prompted me to finish it was when the attack happened to the Muslim family in London. As someone in the community who was also hurting; I wanted stories to be a way we could come together and heal. I was honoured to know that people shared this reading challenge in their classroom, homes and in their communities.

I think that the root of the reading challenge is the idea that intentionally curating and centering stories about communities we want to support is an important and tangible way we can work towards equity. Furthermore, it is important that we are learning about and amplifying

the stories that the community wants to share. For me that means looking for authors and illustrators from the community who are telling their own stories.

I think this reading challenge and others like it can be expanded to all learning spaces because I wholeheartedly believe in the power and role of stories. Stories can help us learn new information, consider actions we can take to create change, foster empathy and joy. I believe all of these elements are needed as we work to build strong communities.

**When we look at the field of education, regardless of what we teach, what are your dreams and aspirations for the field when you reflect on the upcoming 10, 20 years?**

I really appreciate this question so much because it is so hopeful! This question reminds me of an assignment that I had to do many years ago in teacher’s college. We had to come up with a slogan/caption of the change we wanted to see within the education space in 2030. Even though I graduated in 2014, at the time 2030 seemed so far away! The slogan I wrote was “I’m ensuring social equity doesn’t slip between the cracks in our education system. My classroom is a positive space where students are represented and have a voice. This is my time...”

As I reflect on my slogan and this question, I feel like my dreams and aspirations for the education field are generally still similar. At the time, when I wrote the slogan, I did not necessarily know all of the ‘language’ of equity and social justice education. Of course, I feel that I am still learning and figuring out what equity means in practice in different contexts.

However, I think my commitments and visions for this field focus on working to create equitable conditions for all. I want us to continue working to dismantle unfair systematic



structures, for students of all identities to find a sense of belonging in their learning spaces, to bring forward authentic representation of people's stories and histories. I want people doing and leading equity work to continue to be supported. I see this equity work being multidimensional and diverse so many different people will engage in it in different ways to make an impact. I sort of see it like the picture below, many ways to work towards a central goal. I would encourage people to consider their own special gifts and how they can use those to impact a cause they care about.



*Photo taken by Rabia Khokhar*

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share through this interview!

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If you would like to know more, please visit [Rabia's website](#).

***Thank you once again for your contribution,  
Rabia!***

