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Muslim Parents at Crossroads: Choosing the Right School for their Children

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This paper is based on a qualitative study that investigated reasons behind twelve Muslim parents' decisions to send their children to either an Islamic or a public school in South-Western Ontario. Three major thematic reasons for parents' choices emerged from the interviews: first, were the parents' experiences with either the public or Islamic school environment; second, were the parents' experiences and perceptions of the school's dress codes; and, third, was the parents' understanding of the school curriculum content. In addition to these themes, the paper also discusses parents' views on the language of the school and that of the home and how these influence their children's ability to integrate into the Canadian society while maintaining their home (Islamic) values.

Keywords

Islamic education; multiculturalism; curriculum and pedagogy; Hijab, parents' choice of schooling

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank my mentor and my thesis advisor Dr. Dlamini Nombuso (Jean Augustine Chair in Education in the New Urban Environment, York University) for her ongoing support and guidance. Her valuable insight and expertise has assisted me to shape this manuscript.

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Muslim Parents at Crossroads: Choosing the Right School for their Children

Parents musulmans à la croisée des chemins: Choisir la bonne école pour leurs enfants

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Abstract

This paper is based on a qualitative study that investigated reasons behind twelve Muslim parents' decisions to send their children to either an Islamic or a public school in South-Western Ontario. Three major thematic reasons for parents' choices emerged from the interviews: first, were the parents' experiences with either the public or Islamic school environment; second, were the parents' experiences and perceptions of the school's dress codes; and, third, was the parents' understanding of the school curriculum content. In addition to these themes, the paper also discusses parents' views on the language of the school and that of the home and how these influence their children's ability to integrate into the Canadian society while maintaining their home (Islamic) values.

Résumé

Cet article est basé sur une étude qualitative qui a examiné les raisons se cachant derrière les décisions de douze parents Musulmans d'envoyer leurs enfants soit dans une école islamique, soit dans une école publique dans le Sud-Ouest de l'Ontario. Trois raisons principales thématiques concernant les choix des parents ont émergé des entretiens: premièrement, ont été les expériences des parents avec, soit l'environnement scolaire publique, soit celui islamique; deuxièmement, ont été les expériences et les perceptions des parents des codes vestimentaires de l'école; et troisièmement, a été la compréhension des parents du contenu des programmes scolaires de l'école. En plus de ces thèmes, ce document aborde également les opinions des parents sur la langue utilisée à l'école et celle de la maison, et la manière dont elles influencent la capacité de leurs enfants à s'intégrer dans la société Canadienne tout en conservant leurs valeurs familiales (Islamiques).

Keywords: Islamic education; multiculturalism; curriculum and pedagogy; Hijab, parents' choice of schooling

Mot-clés: éducation islamique; multiculturalisme; programmes scolaires et pédagogie; Hijab; choix de scolarité des parents

Introduction

In the last four decades, Ontario's school population has been increasingly diverse and has led to the need to accommodate differences, which have become more of a challenge as new immigrants arrive each year. To meet the needs of all students who are coming from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds, Canadian Ministry of Education took a leap by formulating a law that invites and celebrates the differences through introducing multiculturalism in the Canadian school curriculum (Cummins, 1979). In 1977, the Ontario Ministry of Education (1977) released a new curriculum document that ensured that all students should be given the opportunity to celebrate their cultural roots and to learn and appreciate other ethnic cultures. This was mostly done by incorporating topics of ethnic diversity and religious tolerance in public schools through multicultural activities such as music, dance, and food, teaching heritage languages, as well as through exchange of literature, art etc. (Kehoe & Mansfield, 1993, p. 3).

In spite of these efforts in the past to include students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, Muslim Parents are still frustrated with the distorted manner in which both Muslims and Islam are portrayed in the public school curriculum. Historically, in Canada, up

until the 1970s virtually all Muslim children were educated in the public school system (Azmi, 2001, p. 261). Similar to other ethnic/religious minority groups, their representation in schools, the curriculum, and in textbooks in particular, was minimal. In the 1980s, following the declaration of Canada as a mosaic, or a multicultural country, textbooks and the school curriculum were reformed, but the representation of Muslims did not change much (Helly, 2004). Many Muslim parents in Ontario, therefore, became skeptical of the public curriculum and the role it plays in transmitting knowledge, and started to look for an alternative solution to educate their children. Importantly, these parents were interested in a school system that runs parallel to their own cultural and religious beliefs, and did not want to uphold a curriculum that transmit knowledge, which is mostly Christian based. The search for alternative schooling gave rise to several private Islamic schools around the country, whose existence, however, did not convince all Muslim parents to disregard the education provided in public schools. Thus, even though statistics are not easily available, anecdotal information suggests the percentage of parents sending their children to private Islamic schools was lower than those in public schools.

After September 11, 2001, the rise in hate crimes, negative media publicity and Islamophobia prompted some Muslim parents to reconsider sending their children to public schools and to seriously look at Islamic schooling as the best option (Merry, 2005; Azmi, 2001). This paper is based on a research study that examined some of the reasons and factors behind Muslim parents' choice of schooling for their children in one city in South-Western Ontario, Canada. Through a qualitative research methodology, this study interviewed Muslim parents about their reasons for choosing either an Islamic or a public school for their children. As well, the study asked parents about the experiences they have had interacting with the school personnel in the school of choice. The results of the study indicate the complex interconnection between the parents' language, religion and culture as key to the decision making process, which then shapes their expectations of either school system.

Looking at my placement as a student teacher in training, I can relate to the miscommunication and the misrepresentation of the Muslim community in Canadian society. Although my experience endowed me with meaningful learning experiences regarding teaching philosophy in Canada, and the use of different instructional strategies during my classroom placement, to be a Muslim became more challenging in the wake of the gruesome tragedy of September 11, 2001. Since I was the only Muslim student teacher in that school, I experienced the silent treatment from a few teachers and negative comments about Islam in general. After my convocation in 2002 from the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, I moved to Windsor, Ontario and began teaching grade three in a local Islamic school. In the beginning, I was unsure how Islamic schools operated in a Canadian setting. Having taught in an Islamic school for four years, my opinion about Islamic schools and the environment has changed considerably from being skeptical to being positively informed, and I was pleased to see the implementation of modern teaching methodologies. I also noticed that the enrolment in this Islamic school increased dramatically during these four years. Despite this increase, however, there are parents like myself, who still choose to put their children in public schools, and yet, still want them to integrate into the host society without losing their language, culture and Islamic beliefs.

I started this study with the assumption that in Islamic schools, most parents believe that their children can preserve their language and cultural values, however, parents with children in the public schools have to deal with an environment that forces their children to assimilate into mainstream society. Gans (1997) explains assimilation as a process where newcomers or new immigrants leave their ethnic culture and values and adapt the non-ethnic values, which are accessible to them in that host society. However, I was not sure of the validity of these

assumptions, therefore, I engaged in an examination that contributes to an understanding of how parents come to the decisions they make for the schooling of their children, and whether or not there exist contradictions within the decision making process. Studies conducted by Bullock (1999); Kelly (1997) and Zine (1997) show that Muslim students in major cities like Toronto, and Montreal experience discrimination because of culture and/or religion in public schools. My investigation aimed to contribute to these studies and to tease out other possibilities for parents' school choices and the contradictions and ambiguities embedded in these parents' school experiences.

Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this paper provides a theoretical framework to understand the major reasons that may influence Muslim parents to enroll their children in an Islamic school or a public school system. The literature review also offers relevant information regarding experiences of parents and their children with respect to Islamic dress code and perceptions of the Hijab by Western society.

Muslim Immigrant Parents, Multiculturalism and the Canadian School System

Emigrating from one country to another is a stressful decision that has profound long lasting effects on many families, especially if the culture and the language of the country to which they are moving differ from what they are accustomed to. Some scholars stress that in order for immigrant parents to adjust into the dominant Euro-Canadian culture they must make critical choices of how much they want to retain from their culture and how much they wish to interact and adopt into the values and customs of the dominant Canadian culture (see, for example, Berry, 2001). One of the goals of Canadian settlement policies is to facilitate integration and to avoid marginalization and segregation of immigrant groups within Canadian society (Anisef & Kilbride, 2004). According to Moodley (1995), multiculturalism promotes a society and a Canadian identity in which people and groups of all cultures are accepted. Although, there exists a comprehensive approach to multiculturalism, Canada still does not have a set definition of multicultural education, which according to Ghosh (2004) is because affairs related to education is a provincial responsibility. Banks (1999) and James (2004) explain that one of the goals of multicultural education is to expose ethnic students to a curriculum that is not Anglo-centric and negative in relation to other cultures. However, as the following discussion will demonstrate, parents sometimes feel that the multicultural education provided in public school often conflicts with their religious and cultural values.

The Importance of Islamic Education

In the Qur'an, emphasis is placed on acquiring education, pursuing knowledge, and seeking wisdom and guidance. Islamic education, as explained by Ahmad (1968), is a process through which people transmit their culture, or heritage, and, by which they raise children to understand their duty in life so that they can be good human beings. Muhammad (1990) describes Islamic education as a holistic approach where the education is not confined within the boundaries of the school, rather it involves every aspect of society, and it starts at home and it continues in schools, mosques, and with friends. Ahsraf (1994) states that faith and moral education are the most integral elements of an Islamic education, making it different from Western education; which according to Ashraf, children in public schools are taught moral values, however, their instructions are independent of religious affiliation. Islamic education thus follows the Qur'an, which provides moral and religious principles, and the practices of the Prophet Muhammad

(Sunnah). Islamic schools, therefore, are responsible for providing an environment that helps to develop moral sensibility through the teaching of etiquette or *adab*. The Western tendency to view Islamic radicalism/fundamentalism as having a role in Islamic education has recently placed Islamic schools in a difficult defensive position.

While there are between Shia's and Sunni schools of thought, Islamic schools are united in following the five pillars, or duties of the faith (shahada, obligatory prayer (salah) five times a day, almsgiving (zakah), fasting (sawm) and the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj). According to Merry (2005), despite variation in the ways that Islamic schools are run, including varying degrees of orthodoxy, strictness, and ethnic affiliation, many similarities unite them. Ramadan (2004), however, points out that since Islamic schools take only a small percentage of children, the true purpose of Islamic education in the West is not fulfilled. He further states there should be other approaches to educate Muslim children who do not attend Islamic schools. Ramadan also states that Islamic schools create an artificial, closed Islamic environment that almost completely cuts off children from the surrounding society. Despite the contradictions and complexities in definition, in the West, about Islam and Islamic teachings, for the many Muslim parents, the main purpose of an Islamic education is to expose their children to a culture that runs parallel to their own experiences (Zine, 2001). In addition, Islamic schools provide an environment where students are not alienated and are free to exercise their religious duties without having to resist the dominant group interpretations of schooling (Merry, 2005, p.378).

The Islamic Dress Code and the Hijab

The teachings of the Qur'an specifically encourage both Muslim men and women to embrace modesty in their daily lives out of respect for God, their faith, and each other. According to Qur'an: O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons when abroad."(Quran, 33: 59). This verse from the Qur'an is mostly cited to describe women's dress code in Islam. The differences in veiling practices have a very complex history, which predates Islam by centuries (Mernissi, 1991; Bodman, 1998). Mernissi (1991) argues that veiling practices in the Qur'an specifically came down for the wives of the Prophet Muhammad because men on streets harassed them. Roald (2004), however, argues that Mernissi's statements are clouded by a feminist viewpoint, which fails to give the whole meaning of the Qur'an text, where the verse actually includes wives of the Prophet and the women of other believers.

There are controversial debates over the veiling practices and the way women dress (Hoodfar, 2003; Eid 1999; McDonough 2003). According to Hoodfar, to wear a similar style of clothing indicates certain cultural values with others similarly attired, while minor details may distinguish an individual from others in his or her social group. The same notion applies for women who are wearing certain styles of the Hijab. For example, women in Egypt wear a different type of Hijab that varies in style and colour as compared to women in Saudi Arabia who are mostly covered in black abaya or niqab (a black veil to cover the face). These variations in dressing in certain styles also indicate that various cultural practices among Muslims do exist (Hoodfar, 2003).

Recently, in multicultural countries like France and Canada, the practice of allowing young Muslim girls to wear the Hijab within public schools has raised controversies (McAndrew, 2006). The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms ensures women's freedom. Canadian women see themselves as progressive, modern, liberated, and educated, whereas Muslim women are usually seen by Western society as coming from third world countries and as backward, especially when wearing the Hijab (Bullock & Jafri, 2000). Thus, the Hijab is seen by

mainstream Canadian society, as a reflection of the dominating power of Muslim men over Muslim women.

Studies conducted in Canadian urban cities showed that Muslim women who wear the Hijab face discrimination in educational institutions such as in elementary schools, colleges and universities (Bullock, 1999; Hoodfar, 2003; Zine, 2006). Accordingly, discrimination based on religion is evident in France, Turkey, and Quebec where public schools threaten girls who insist on wearing the Hijab with expulsion. McAndrew (2006) and Zine, (2006) state that current situations of Islamophobia might play a role in the decision by some women and girls whether or not to wear the Hijab. Correspondingly, parents are concerned about how their daughters will be perceived in public schools when they follow the Islamic dress code or wear the Hijab.

Methodology

The intent of this research study was to explore, in depth, the experiences of Muslim parents who had enrolled their children in public and Islamic schools. At the time of the research in 2008, there were no published studies that I could find that had explored the decisions about schooling as well as the associated experiences of Muslim parents with their children. A few comparable studies had been conducted in urban cities such as Toronto in school settings where high school students were interviewed about their experiences (see example, Zine 1997).

For this research study, a qualitative methodology was chosen because of its effectiveness in identifying information about the values, opinions, and behaviours of Muslim parents regarding their children's schooling. The use of the Emotional Model served to generate data that offered an authentic insight into the experiences of the participants. In the emotionalism model, interviewees are viewed as subjects, who actively construct their social worlds. For instance, as a researcher, my main objective was to elicit authentic accounts of the experiences of 12 Muslim parents with children in elementary schools, both Islamic and public systems; that is, to develop an in -depth sense of how the interviewees feel in regards to their children's schooling experiences.

The research questions focused on uncovering reasons that motivated Muslim parents to send their children to either a public or an Islamic school. Parents were asked the questions such as: Are there any similarities or differences between what they promote at home and what is taught in the schools where their children attend? What were their children's religious experiences in the schools? What were the experiences of their Muslim girls regarding the Islamic dress code in these school settings? The question about the Islamic dress code was asked in order to uncover the role gender had played when parents decided to enroll their children in Islamic schools or move their children from public to Islamic schools. All the names used in the study were given a pseudonym and do not represent any person in the community.

Data was analyzed by reading each transcript individually and by grouping responses to each question to read for emerging themes. In the end, findings were categorized into three major themes under which were subthemes for deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The first theme revolved around factors that influenced the parents towards a particular school choice; the second major theme was about the experiences of parents in the Islamic or public school systems; and the third theme focused on discussions about the Islamic dress code and the perception of the Hijab.

Context

The Muslim population of 10,000 comprises approximately 5% of the city of Windsor where the study was conducted (Statistics Canada, 2006). This percentage is small compared to larger Canadian cities such as Toronto or Montreal. The Muslim community in this city constitute of

many ethnic groups from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, the Middle East, Somalia, etc. Three full time elementary Islamic schools cater to the needs of approximately six hundred Muslim students. However, there are many parents in this city like myself, who chose the public school over Islamic school system and yet, still want their children to integrate into the mainstream society without losing their language, culture and religious values.

Participants

In order to investigate the reasons behind parents' decision to choose a specific school system, 12 Muslim parents agreed to participate of this total, 11 participants were female and one was a male. During the analysis of the data, and based on the central question of school choice and their experiences with the Islamic and the public school systems, the participants can be categorized into three major groups. The first group involves parents who have experiences with their children in the Islamic school system only. The second group involves parents who have experiences with their children only in the public school system. The third group involves parents who have experiences with their children in both school systems. The selection of participants was purposive in nature (Berg, 2006), which means the main focus was to recruit participants who belonged to the Muslim community (both Sunni and Shi'a), so that the research could represent the two main sects of the Muslim community.

A few limitations need to be noted. First this study looked at a small sample of parents; therefore, the findings are not generalizable to a broader population. Also, there were more female participants than males, which are attributed to the fact that a female Muslim researcher was conducting the research. Islamic rulings discourage close proximity between males and females in situations where they are alone, which in this case would have been necessary for the researcher in order to conduct an interview with male participants. This gender imbalance occurred even though I sent invitation to all Muslim parents in the city. This method of conducting interview suggests that Muslim student researchers should find other ways to conduct the research in order to avoid situations where the researcher is alone with the participants of the opposite gender, and try to get more male narrative accounts in order to avoid female narrative bias. Lastly, only parents' views were sought out in the research, however, it would have been interesting to learn about the school experiences of the children and the roles they had in the decision about the school of choice. Broader generalizations require broader basis of analysis, however, it is hoped that the information provided here will begin to help those in further studies on the school livelihood of Muslim students.

Self-Positioning

As the investigator, I identify my position in this study as a practicing immigrant Muslim with school-aged children and as an experience grade three-homeroom teacher in an Islamic school. I come from a Pakistani background and my ways of practicing Islam are different from people of the Middle Eastern countries. In Pakistan, there are people who practice their religion moderately, and there are those who follow the teachings of Islam in an orthodox manner, leaving no room for modernity. Before starting my first teaching job in the Islamic school, I did not usually wear the Hijab. In this religious school, however, I had to comply with the requirement to wear it. In the beginning, I was not very comfortable with this arrangement and felt that I compromised myself. As time passed, I became more accustomed to the school's Islamic environment, and to the way young girls took pride in wearing the Hijab, which then made me rethink my views on life and gave me the strength to accept the Hijab as part of my identity. Thus, by the time I left the school to pursue my Master's degree, I was fully acclimatized and wore the Hijab as part of my daily dress code.

During my tenure at the Islamic school, I saw new students enrolled each year, and at that time, wondered why their parents did not enroll them in the public school system with all its resources, and instead choose a school system, which lacked adequate funding and resources. Furthermore, I also assumed before joining the school that majority of students who attended Islamic schools in general are coming from very strict and conservative backgrounds. However, in four years of my teaching in Islamic schools in Windsor, I noted that children who attended the Islamic schools, approximately six hundred students are mostly coming from not very conservative backgrounds. Some of the students came from conservative families, while, other students came from families who practice religion in a moderate way. However, it is not safe to say that the majority of parents who send their children to public schools did not support the ideology itself of having an Islamic school. For many Muslims, practicing religion after 9 /11 was a major undertaking, and enrolling their children in an Islamic school would label them as “radical Muslims”. Financial factor might be another reason that many parents opted out to enroll their children in an Islamic school. This observation led me to explore further and look for reasons and factors that motivated Muslim parents to choose one school system over the other. Working in the Islamic school for four years, and having children in the public school system, enabled me to build a rapport with diverse parents, some of whom later became participants in my research.

As a Pakistani Muslim immigrant, as a female researcher and as a teacher, I had the benefit of understanding the participants on many different levels. First, as a Muslim, I understood the teachings of Islam and limitations that come with it. Second, as a female researcher, I easily communicated with the female participants, since in this research study a majority of the participants were female, with only one male. I also saw my status as an insider advantageous because it enables me to obtain a data that is not easily available, and offered me the opportunity to demonstrate Muslim women as knowledgeable individuals, worthy of research attentions. Lastly, as a former Islamic schoolteacher, I found I was more familiar with the level of implementation of the public curriculum in the two Islamic schools in that city. Furthermore, being a parent of two teenage children enrolled in the public school system, in Ontario, (and, prior to migrating to this city, had attended public schools in Saskatchewan) I could recognize and understand public school curricula issues and practices.

Results and Discussions

In this study three major themes emerged, which were further broken into sub themes. The first major theme that emerged was School choice, where a group of parents consciously chose Islamic school over public school system based on the following sub-themes: (a) school environment; (b) school language; and (c) subject content and its pedagogy. Parents with children in the public school system, on the other hand, chose it because of their previous personal experiences (as they had attended the public school system as children), and their cultural and religious convictions.

Parents, who decided to choose the public school system, based their decision on the availability of information with regard to school systems. Parents who had originally placed their children in a public school, but later decided to move them to an Islamic school, offered three reasons for doing so: 1) lack of religious accommodation and acceptance in the public school; 2) social behaviour, communication patterns, and curriculum content; and 3) pedagogy. Low student ratio in the Islamic schools on the other hand, was also a concern, for some parents and advertently, in a few cases was the driving factor to move their children to a public school.

The second major theme was the experiences of parents with children in an Islamic school or a public school or experiences in both school systems. The last theme discusses experiences of parents with their children with regards to the Islamic dress code and the perception of the Hijab in Western society.

The School Environment

One of the key findings of the study is that parents value school environments that support, rather than contradict or even ignore, the religious needs of Muslim children. All parents in this study, regardless of the school system they chose for their children, expressed that they value schools in which their children can freely perform religious duties such as the five daily prayers, which are a central component of the five pillars of Islam.

Parents with children in the Islamic schools offered religious supportive environment as one of the reasons for choosing to send their children to this school. Those parents who had moved their children from one school system to another, regardless of the school system, also mentioned that they value the support children get from Islamic schools. The study also reveals that Muslim parents consider the harmony between the school environment and the home environment as important. According to these parents, the Islamic environment is crucial to the upbringing of children in a society where values outside the home are different. Parents also stated that Islamic schools promote the same values and reinforce the same ideologies that are essential for their children, to be able to practice their Islamic beliefs. This finding is in tune with Zine's (1997) study where she stresses the need of Islamic schools for Muslim students can perform their religious duties freely. This means that for the majority of practicing Muslims, performing prayers is very important, even if they are at school or at work. As a result, the lack of accommodation to perform religious duties by public schools compels parents to choose to send their children to Islamic schools. The majority of parents believed that Islamic schools play a significant role in creating an environment that helps to instill Islamic values and beliefs in their children. As one parent put it, "Our first responsibility as [Muslim] parents is to make sure that we inculcate our values and our identities in our kids". This finding confirms the literature review that stipulates the importance of religion as part of children's school lives.

Parents who chose public schools over Islamic school system expressed that while practicing religion in public schools was important for their children upbringing this undertaking challenged their sense of identity. James (2004) confirms that many parents fear that if the environment is not supportive of their cultural or religious beliefs, children will lose their identity. As one parent expressed, some teachers and staff in public schools are not well informed enough to explain to the class about Islam and children's religious beliefs. She further stated that children are ridiculed by their classmates because of their religious convictions. Conversely, there were parents in this study, who found public schools very accommodating to their children's religious needs. Parents complimented the school administration for providing provisions, such as a separate room during lunchtime for students who were required to observe Ramadan, and for those students who do not wish to participate in school dances.

These two contrary responses over the issue of respecting and accommodating Muslim students, in the public school system, deserve detailed analysis. The questions to be asked are why do two different schools in the same public system respond or treat Muslim students differently during Ramadan. Does each school formulate its own policy with regards to respecting religious practices of minority students? To find the answers for these questions, we first need to look at how multicultural education is implemented in public schools, and what message is conveyed to students in terms of understanding the differences between various ethnic

cultures and their religious practices. Second, we need to discover the role of school administrations, especially the role of the principal, in facilitating respect for minority students.

Curriculum and its pedagogy

Muslim parents also expressed that some curriculum subjects in the public school system, such as arts and health, are instructed in a way that interferes with their religious and cultural values; examples included figurative art, music, and dance, in the Arts curriculum. Zine (2001) reports that some educational practices in subjects such as music, dance or physical education are against the teachings of Islam because such activities usually require close physical contact between boys and girls.

With regards to sex education in the public health curriculum, the majority of Muslim parents are stressed with the use of explicit materials to teach young children about sex. For some parents, this was the compelling factor to move their children from public school system, to an Islamic school system. At the same time parents with children in the public school system acknowledged that they want their children to be informed about topics related to puberty. In addition to that parents also stressed that content should be age appropriate, and, should be given without going into intimate details that include sexual relationships and also should be taught separately; that is separating boys and girls. One parent whose children were in a public school system was very vocal about how the public school curriculum addresses sex education in the younger grades. She was very distressed to the extent that she later moved her children from the public system to an Islamic school system. According to her:

My experience with the public school is that they have given our children way too much information that they really don't need, at a very young age, especially for Muslim children. I went to the public school, it was my son's grade six class, they were talking about birth control; just way too much information. When I went to the school, they told me that a couple of grade six students are sexually active and we know this is happening every year.

Parents with children in Islamic schools on the contrary expressed that information on sex education is too vague and meaningless. For example, one parent stated, "Teachers in this school don't go into details like talking about the body changes, the hormones, or physical changes. They only explain the basics, such as you have one, two, and three parts of the body and that is end of it." Some parents suggested that there is a need to modify the existing style of teaching in health education in Islamic schools, especially, for students in junior grades.

With respect to extracurricular activities, such as celebrating Valentine's Day, posed concerns for parents who regard this holiday as a venue that may promote or celebrate intimate relationships between boys and girls. Celebrating Halloween activities, such as wearing costumes and masks, are also considered contrary to the teachings of Islam, because these activities are related to ghosts, ghouls, and other evil depictions. Parents with children in public schools also commented that, in contrast to the Eurocentric activities, Muslim festivals or religious holidays, such as Ramadan, and Eid, are not given the value and attention as those based on the Christian belief system; even as Muslims represent the largest religious group in Canada, after Christians (Statistic Canada, 2006).

Importance of school language

Data in this study reveals that language plays an important role in the choices that parents made about the schools to which they send their children. The findings also show that there are two competing, yet valued languages that parents have to deal with: English and Arabic. Learning the

Arabic language was one of the motivators for many parents to enroll their children in an Islamic school. These parents strongly expressed their convictions to expose their children to an environment that teaches the Qur'an, as well as the Arabic language. These parents believe that learning Arabic will benefit their children to read and understand the Qur'an. In fact, a few parents with children in Islamic schools acknowledged that they do not have the time and the means to provide adequate education to teach all the tenets of Islam at home, so they preferred their children to be in an Islamic school. Parents see learning the Arabic language as an aspiration for their children to learn and understand the Qur'an so that they could fully practice their faith, and maintain their identity as Muslims. Miller's (2000) study affirms the importance of language as a primary resource for exhibiting one's social identity and membership in a particular social group.

The study also reveals that Muslim parents value the importance of learning "good English" in order for their children to be successful in school. In fact, the desire for "good English" for their children was referenced as one of the reasons some parents chose to send their children to public schools. These parents stated that public schools offer meaningful resources for their children to learn "English as Second Language", and integrate into mainstream Canadian classrooms, and society in general. The desire for children to acquire English language proficiency, in order to perform well in school, supports Miller's (2000) views, which stresses the importance of learning English for minority students whose first language is not English. However, this sometimes poses some problems at home when children communicate with their parents in a different language.

Parents' Experiences with the Islamic Dress Code and Hijab

Regardless of the school system, Muslim parents mentioned that it was an immense undertaking for Muslim girls to adhere to the rulings of Islam regarding the dress code. As stated earlier, Islam has clear rulings for both, men and women, that is, both are required to dress modestly. For women, however, the rulings are stricter as compared to men. The study reveals that parents view the Islamic dress code as stricter than that of the general Canadian population.

One parent stated that the uniform in Islamic schools makes it easier for girls to adhere to the Islamic dress code. According to her, "these days, it is very frustrating to shop for girls' clothes in general, and for teenage clothes in particular." Three out of four parents with children in public schools made similar comments about the dress code. According to these parents, peer pressure makes it difficult for their daughters to conform to the Islamic codes. One of the parents recounted difficulties of finding proper and decent dress for her daughters in clothing stores. She also stated that her husband is more concerned about how their daughters dress, which puts more pressure on her to find suitable clothing for their daughters. She further elaborated that her struggle and frustrations could be mitigated if public schools were to adopt uniforms for students. Osler and Hussain (1995) report similar types of pressure faced by Muslim mothers with children, in British state schools. In my study, one parent expressed that if they try to shop in Western Islamic stores; the clothes are not trendy, which creates a struggle between parent and daughter. The challenge is to find trendy and decent clothes that their daughters would wear, and feel comfortable and fashionable among their peers.

Experiences with the Hijab

Parents with children in both school systems view wearing of the Hijab as an important aspect of being a Muslim. The findings in this study showed that parents with children in the public school system expressed that their daughters did not report wearing of the Hijab as problematic. Four out

of six parents from the public school system reported that there are many Muslim girls who wear the Hijab where they children attend, consequently, making it an acceptable practice. However, for another parent in a similar situation, the experience was not positive. Aisha, who moved her children from an Islamic school to a public school, related her daughter's negative experiences, while wearing the Hijab, and attributed this to ignorance and a lack of understanding about Islam as a religion. Aisha gave an example of an incident that happened to her daughter during the celebration of Multicultural Day, where the children in her class ridiculed her for wearing a Hijab. When this happened, Aisha mentioned that the teacher was not very responsive, and did not try to explain to the other children in the classroom what the Hijab is, and to intervene when they ridiculed her daughter. As a result of this incident, Aisha, and parents with similar stories, become more skeptical about the possibility of public schools respecting Muslims' religious beliefs.

The above views warrant discussion concerning the knowledge teachers possess about cultures, and religious beliefs that differ from their own values and beliefs. Landorf and Pagan (2005) explain that the Hijab can be used as a "touch stone" to provide students with useful information about Islam, and the reasons behind wearing the Hijab. Teachers should take multicultural celebratory days as an opportunity for providing discussions on the subject of Hijab and the ways that the Hijab is used as a social, political, and religious expression of Islam by different groups; both inside and outside, the religion. Moore (2006) similarly stresses the same notion that social studies teachers must play a vital role in educating students about Islam in Canada. He further argues that teachers can help transmit accurate information, stop negative stereotypes, reduce bias and discrimination, and improve intercultural understanding about different ethnic and religious groups.

Overall, parents in both Islamic and public schools expressed concerns with the stereotypical image of the Hijab that is portrayed by the media. Jafri (1998) points out Muslim women are subjected to stereotypical comments because of the tension and negative responses to the Hijab by the Western media. Fahima, whose children are in an Islamic school, recounted her negative experiences with the Hijab, when some teenagers in the mall referred to her and her daughter as "Ninjas." This treatment of Fahima and her daughter in a public place is a usual response from people who see Muslim girls wearing a Hijab as oppressed, or conclude that Islam does not value education for women (Zine, 2001). One parent with children in Islamic schools expressed the dire need to build self-esteem in Muslim children so they can educate others.

Conclusion

The study findings contribute to other studies that were conducted in Ontario on the educational needs of Muslim children in public schools. From this study, I come to understand that there are many challenges that most Muslim parents face when they decide to enroll their children in a public school system or an Islamic school system. This study shows that Muslim parents strongly weigh their priorities and analyze many aspects of coming challenges that their children might be facing when enrolled in a particular school system. The study reveals that in a public schools system lack of religious accommodations, such as performing prayers, and fasting during Ramadan was a major factor for few parents to move their children to an Islamic school. For other parents too much exposure to Christian based curriculum activities, such as Valentine's Day or Halloween, became one of the reasons to move their children to an Islamic school system. For some parents whose children attended the public school system expressed their distress with regards to exposing their children to mainstream culture and English language, especially when it

resulted in creating a conflict at home in terms of retaining their native language and cultural values.

On the other hand, parents who send their children to Islamic schools also face challenges that are different in nature as compared to children who are attending public schools. One of the challenges is limited ESL support for immigrant children who come to Islamic schools with very limited English skills, along with the issue of having a low student ratio, where children have very restricted choices to interact with other classmates within the classroom setting; which for one parent became a driving factor to move her child to a public school system. On the whole, parents who are sending their children to an Islamic school are satisfied knowing that their children are not ostracized because of their religious and cultural values and are safe in an environment which runs parallel to their own.

In conclusion, looking at the public school dynamics, teachers, should have more knowledge about the cultural reality of their classroom. It is important that schools in South-Western Ontario provide teachers and staff with the tools to understand the nature of the diverse student body, many of which may be new to the country. On the same note, Islamic schools also need to look at their school changing dynamics and provide adequate English language support to children who are recent immigrants. There is a dire need for more certified teachers in the area of ESL, and Health & Physical Education in Islamic schools. Furthermore, Islamic school administrators should also provide more professional development opportunities for teachers so they are well aware of changes that are made in the Ontario curriculum and how they can use current teaching strategies to prepare students for standardized tests such as, EQAO (Education Quality Accountability Office) and Canadian Achievement Tests.

The findings of this study also point to several directions for future research. First, to explore the co- relation of cultural coherence between home and school, and second, research is also needed to look at the Muslim children's perspective on many issues, such as celebrating holidays, participating in school dances, and issues with co-education.

Lastly, there has been a considerable amount of literature on the perception of Muslim women who are veiled or wear the Hijab. However, there is not enough research conducted that informs on the experiences of Muslim women who do not wear the Hijab or cover their faces, and how they are perceived within their own communities and Western society in general.

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