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# Exploring the Experiences of Muslim Students in an Urban Ontario Public School

Asma Ahmed

*The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor

Dr. Katina Pollock


*The University of Western Ontario*

Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the experiences of Muslim students in an urban public high school in Ontario with a reputation of having a large Muslim student presence. Much of the studies and surveys involving Islam and Muslims make evident that Islam is the most misunderstood religion in the world. Therefore, Muslims in the West are a “poorly understood” minority group (Environics Institute, 2016). While other ethnic or racial minorities feel moderately comfortable defending themselves and their groups, and asserting their identities, Muslim youth “face qualitatively different identity tasks than do many of their peers”, largely due to feelings of “being under attack or scrutiny because of their religion” (Stonebanks & Sensoy 2009). I used a case study approach to explore from different participant groups the challenges of and supports for Muslims students attending a public high school. I utilized semi-structured interviews with 32 participants, including students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the local Imam of the city. There were two main findings in this study: (a) the teachers, that I interviewed, lacked knowledge of Muslim values, faith, and practices, and had negative biases and preconceived notions of Islam and Muslims in a public high school; (b) the youth, in this interview, showed a deep longing to be acknowledged, understood, and respected for who they are. The six challenges most prominently faced by Muslim youth, as articulated in the literature review and guideline of different faiths provided by school boards to the schools, are: religious practices, dress code, sexual ethics, stereotypes and biases, Islamophobia, and curriculum-related challenges. These challenges seem to directly correspond to the daily challenges Muslims face when practicing their faith, and provide a vantage point

whereby Muslim students can request accommodations. However, this study shows that, Muslim students want to go beyond mere accommodation. They long for spaces, in their school, that are free of any pressure to fight for their faith or to defend either of their multiple identities, as both Muslims and Canadians.

**Keywords:** Muslims, Islam, support, challenges, sexual ethics, gender interaction, *haya*, Islamophobia, Banks's Multicultural Dimension, York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's Types of Support.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Due to an increasing association between Islam and terrorism in the public consciousness, Muslim youth face distinct challenges, and often feel like “the other”. Muslims, in general, worry about visually and verbally self-identifying, out of fear of facing discrimination, assault, prejudice, and disrespect (Helly, 2004; CAIR-CAN, 2002; Adams, 2007; Hildebrandt, 2010; Chung, 2011; Mehta, 2015; Fine, 2015; Miller, 2015; Hammer, 2011). Islam may appear as an “unusual” religion. Muslim dress code, prayers, and fasting are all examples of practices that may appear odd or different (Kahf, 2006; Beshir, 2004; Zine, 2001). This is exacerbated by the fact that Islam is the most misunderstood religion by both Muslims and non-Muslims (Mohamed, 1996). Furthermore, Muslims have been, and continue to be, a “poorly understood” minority group in the Canada (Environics Institute, 2016, p.1). Subsequently, Muslim youth have found it difficult to lead “normal” lives because of their religion’s association with terrorism, and because of the discomfort others may feel when witnessing them practice their religion. Muslim youth should have areas in their communities, including their school, where they are free to be themselves and do not have to worry about other people’s prejudices. Being a young person, especially in a high school setting, already has countless challenges (Silbereisen & Kracke, 1997; Wolfe, Jaffe & Crooks, 2006). Schools should be safe havens for youth to feel a positive sense of self.

What are the challenges of Muslim students? How can schools support Muslim students in their educational journey? What are the challenges that schools face in supporting Muslim students? This thesis seeks to explore such questions within the context of the role of a public school in supporting Muslim students.

## Background

This study examined the supports offered to Muslim students in a public school. Muslims have been under pressure and scrutiny in the past few decades, all the more so after 9/11. Islamophobia, the fear and hatred of Muslims and Islam, has been on the rise in Canada (Helly, 2004; CAIR-CAN, 2002; Adams, 2007; Hildebrandt, 2010; Chung, 2011; Mehta, 2015; Fine, 2015; Miller, 2015; Hammer, 2011). Negative attitudes toward Islam has been on the rise across Canada over the past four years, from 46% in 2009 to 54% in 2013 (Geddes, 2013). Interestingly, Muslims are the fastest growing minority faith group in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2014). The growth of a Muslim population means that the likelihood of non-Muslims and Muslims meeting at work, school, or in general social situations, is on the rise. How is it, then, that a generally peaceful population that is growing so fast is also sustaining a negative reputation among their fellow citizens?

Although Islam is considered an extension of the other two monotheistic Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity (Esposito, 2002; Ramadan, 2004, 2009), it appears it is publicly perceived in stark contrast to them (Saunders, 2007). There are many reasons why Islam is perceived as strange or as “the other.” First, Islam is the most misunderstood religion in the world, not only by non-Muslims or those living in the West, but also by Muslims themselves (Mohamed, 1996; Environics Institute, 2016). There are also issues related to Islam that are commonly misconstrued and misunderstood. For example, *Hijab* (the covering of women’s hair) is seen as oppressive, degrading, limiting, forced, and antiquated, yet most people who choose to wear Hijab do so because they feel the opposite (Gurbuz & Gurbuz-Kucuksari 2009; Barktkowski & Read 2003) — that it is liberating, dignifying, freeing, equalizing, and very much a choice. This perception of Hijab is not just a societal misunderstanding. Rezai-Rashti (1999)

indicates that some educators, in Ontario public schools, view the hijab as oppressive and forced upon female Muslim students against their will (p. 51). Granted, there have been Muslims who were forced to wear Hijab either by their parents, guardians, communities, or by their governments, such as in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Iran. Hijab has also been used, by some guardians and governments, as a tool to oppress and control women (Diffendal, 2006; Hirschman, 1997; Syed, 2005). However, given the diversity of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, and the Islamic belief that no one can or should be forced into a religious practice against their will, these examples are not representative of the Muslim population, nor of the religion's teachings. In this study, I present the general view of Islam and general Islamic practices, not the cultural practices that often become entwined with Islam, and thus are perceived as being derived from it. For this reason, many books and articles have emerged in the past decade by prominent Muslim scholars and researchers regarding the basic tenets of Islam. For example, the two specific and popular books that I would like to mention: *What I Believe* (2009) by Dr. Tariq Ramadan, named by *Time Magazine* as one of the seven religious innovators of the twenty-first century, which describes in layman's terms what Islam stands for, and *Who Speaks for Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (2007) by John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, which is a six-year Gallup study that sampled from more than 90% of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims in 35 countries. This study debunked deep-rooted and commonly held myths about Islam, terrorism, and suicide attacks. A second reason why Islam is perceived as different is that the religious practices of Muslims seem very strange to those unaware of their meaning (Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2009; Chan & Schlein, 2010; Zine, 2001). For example, one perceivably strange practice is fasting in Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar Islamic Calendar, from dawn to dusk for 30 days. Meaning that in June of 2016, Muslims in Canada fasted over 18 hours. Another perhaps

odd practice to outsiders is the “bent-down” position required as part of Muslim prayer — not quite like the downward dog in yoga or a recovery position in an emergency situation, but a mesh of both. A third example is found in common Muslim dress and behaviour. Wearing the Hijab, choosing not to engage in premarital relationships, declining handshakes from the opposite sex often deems Muslims to be odd and different. History and learned behaviour as human beings appears to suggest that we do not like, or trust, those who are different from us (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954). In addition, media coverage of terrorism has indicated that Muslims commit the majority of terrorist attacks in the world (Ahmed & Matthes, 2016). Yet, research has shown that the majority of terrorist attacks in the United States (FBI, 2005) and in Europe (Europol, 2013) are actually committed by those who are not Muslim. It seems that misunderstandings and misinformation are the primary reasons for fear toward the Muslim population. Furthermore, research has shown that Muslims in general, let alone the youth, are not well versed in their religion (Ghanea Bassirri, 1997) and are not knowledgeable enough to debunk myths and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims.

Both Muslim students and their non-Muslim counterparts share the cognitive, emotional, and physical challenges of schooling (Silbereisen & Kracke, 1997; Wolfe, Jaffe & Crooks, 2006). However, Muslim students in the public school systems, wherever they are on the continuum of practice, from secular to orthodox, have additional concerns (Elnour & Bashir, 2003; Collet, 2007; Sarroub, 2005; Zine, 2008). These often include performing their religious practices; maintaining a certain dress code; adhering to certain values misunderstood by secular culture; and dispelling stereotypes, misconceptions, and negative appraisals of their religious group (Kahf, 2006; Beshir, 2004; Zine, 2001). While ethnic or racial minorities also have to defend themselves and their groups, and assert their identity, Muslim youth “face qualitatively

different identity tasks than do many of their peers” largely due to feelings of “being under attack or scrutiny because of their religion” (Stonebanks & Sensoy 2009, p.5). The distinct challenges that Muslim youth face need to be addressed and require support from schools to ensure the equity and well-being of the students.

### **Researcher Positionality**

I wear many different hats in my life. As a mother of two young boys, both under school age, I am concerned about their future schooling. Should I enroll them in a public school or a private Islamic school? Should I surround them mainly by Muslim peers and predominantly Muslim educators who may understand and appreciate their Islamic background and values? Or, should they be exposed to a mainly Eurocentric curriculum and teachers who are predominantly unversed about Islam and Muslims?

As a Muslim-Canadian educator, I believe in public schooling. I also believe in exposing children from a young age to people from different cultures, backgrounds, and religions. I think this kind of exposure makes them appreciative of diversity, and accepting of different lifestyles. Despite starting my professional career in a private Islamic school, I sought to work in the public school system as an occasional teacher. Generally, Muslim students at a private school grow up living Islamic values and learning how to appreciate and love Islam (Zine, 2008). Students see the value of Islam, Islamic contribution, and Islamic scholars in their Muslim teachers and the culture of the school (Zine, 2008). Granted, life in an Islamic private school is not perfect either; however, that is beyond the scope of this study. I explored the value of Islamic schools in my master’s thesis, and upon completion I was yearning to balance those findings by investigating the value of public schools for Muslim students. Therefore, I selected a public school with a with



a reputation of having a large Muslim student presence, in hopes of capturing support for the challenges that Muslims encounter.

As a former student of public school, it was not my schooling that gave me pride in my faith, but rather the consistent and unrelenting efforts of my parents and the community to ensure that the youth were surrounded with an appreciation of Islam. I enjoyed public school and I am still in touch with some of my teachers, but while in school, I did not develop any appreciation for Islamic values and contributions to the production of knowledge. I grew to have tremendous respect for Western scholars and Western literature; I thought there were no other noteworthy contributions to the sciences and literature than those from the West. There are many similar stories: Muslim youth with no confidence or pride in their background, who are not rerouted intrinsically, nor are they outwardly assisted by family or members of the community, and often find themselves lost and engulfed by others who lack affiliation to and appreciation for their faith. Unfortunately, this is not just a story of Muslim youth, but one that most students from non-European backgrounds experience.

Over the past few years, while conducting this study, I have continually looked back on my position within this research and my own experiences. I position myself both within and outside of the study. I am within the study because of my overall experiences as a Muslim in public schools, my role as an educator, and being in a parental position striving to instill in my students and my children the pride of being a Canadian Muslim. I am outside the study because I am not a high school student, a teacher, or an administrator in that setting. My public school experience is over a decade old now, and therefore I am not an insider to the research. However, as a qualitative researcher, my experiences and beliefs have become part of the research process

(Bourke, 2014; England 1994). Therefore, it is important that I am cognizant of my thought processes and inclinations.

### **Rationale for the Study**

Muslims face specific challenges related to their adherence to Islam, which they may require support for from their respective schools (Rezai-Rashti, 1994; Zine, 2001; Sisak, 2015; Nuttall, 2016). As discussed above, Islam and Muslims are perceived as strange and different by over 50% of the population (Environics, 2016). Despite facing unique challenges with respect to acceptance and associations to terrorism:

Muslims are one of the most religiously observant groups in Canada, and their religious identities and practices appear to be strengthening rather than weakening as their lives evolve in Canada. Being Muslim is a very important part of the identity for most followers of Islam (Environics Institute, 2016, p. 3).

Muslim youth who want to practice their faith in schools have been faced with numerous challenges directly from administrators and teachers, but also indirectly from their peers (Sisak, 2015; Nuttall, 2016). Misconceptions about Islam, held by teachers (Niyozov, 2010; Kassam, 2007) exacerbate Muslim youths' anxiety about practicing their faith and identifying outwardly as Muslims. The obvious "difference" visible to others observing Muslims in prayer or other forms of worship contributes to Muslim students' feelings of alienation and self-consciousness (Aliv, 2008; Zine, 2008). Researchers (Ryan, 2006, 2002; Dei, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2002; Byrne, 1999) maintain that those defined as "different" usually find it difficult to gain access to opportunities and resources available to the majority. Policies and procedures in Ontario public schools require school administrators and teachers to "ensure equity" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) for all of their students. Equity, according to Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) is "a condition or state of

fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people”, meaning that everyone has fair access to knowledge and learning (p.4).

My master’s research delved into the available supports to Muslim students in a private Islamic school. My findings were that Muslims, in the private Islamic school of my study, did not have to defend their faith or feel different for practicing it. The challenges that come with practicing the Islamic faith in a public school were mostly irrelevant in a private Islamic school setting. I was an educator in the private school under study for five years. My master’s thesis was presented in August of 2010, and almost six years later, I have found myself grappling with the same questions I posed back then. My study, at the time, led me to view the private Islamic school in question as a successful extension to students’ established family values, beliefs, and practices (Coleman, 1981, 1988; Ahmed, 2010). When students feel that there is no disconnect between their family and their school, successful and meaningful learning takes place.

However, private schools are not an option for everyone. I discuss numerous reasons, below, on why most private schools are not the best option for families. Those reasons, however, are not exclusive to private schools; some public schools may also pose one or more of the challenges I have outlined here. First, private schools often have strict and extremely limiting acceptance standards; some private schools have entry exams and others refuse students who have disabilities or special circumstances. Second, private schools are not accessible, proximity-wise, for all parents. Some parents live far from the available private schools in their area, and not all of these schools offer transportation. Also, though true of public schools as well, coordinating the pick-up and drop-off of children every day for parents who work from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. may pose a challenge, and not all private schools offer before- or after-school programs. In Ontario, for ages 6–12 years, before- and after-school programs have just recently

become an option, as of July 1, 2016 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). Third, not all parents can afford private schools. Subsidies and scholarships are limited for private schools and therefore affordability becomes a major issue (Van Pelt, Allison & Allison, 2007). Fourth, a private Islamic school may not be very different from a public school in terms of its lack of integration of Islamic values and contributions (Zine, 2008). Some Islamic schools continue to teach from a Eurocentric perspective. Fifth, some private schools may not have the resources and technology to teach and engage a tech-savvy generation, or they may not have the resources to train their teachers in more modern techniques for teaching and learning (Zine, 2008). Lack of resources may also make a school less effective than its comparative counterparts (Van Pelt, Allison & Allison, 2007). Sixth, private schools may not be able to attract competent and effective teachers due to lack of public and private funding and thus lower wages (Orlin, 2013).

I became a proponent of public schools primarily due to issues of accessibility and affordability, which led me to conduct this research. If an independent school was not an option for all students, then could a public school be a potential alternative environment in which Muslim youth could build their Canadian Muslim identity? The Islamic school I studied graduated students who were proud of their identity and their religion, though unfortunately not all provide a nurturing environment (Zine, 2008). As a parent, such a school would have been my first choice for my children due to the seamless transition of enduring beliefs and practices between the home and the school. Certainly Islam is not monolithic; there is plurality and diversity within it. The culture and practices of Muslims differ from family to family, and even from individual to individual; however, the basic values taught at home and at Islamic schools are more or less the same.

This study, among other things, focused on providing a better understanding of the challenges of Muslim youth and the support offered to them by their respective public schools. Ultimately, I would like this thesis to spark discussions and engender the courage to introduce activities and support at public schools that advance their fundamental primary goals—to raise confident, competent, and contributing global citizens.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this research is to explore the support systems offered to Muslim students in an urban public school in Ontario, Canada. The main research question I pursue in this study is: How does a public school support Muslim students? More specifically: What are the specific supports provided in the school to try to help Muslim students in their educational journey, as both citizens of Canada and members of the Islamic faith?

I examine one school site to address the following interrelated sub-questions:

1. How do educational partners of the school understand issues related to Muslim students?
2. What kinds of supports are in place in the school to help Muslim students?
3. Considering the supports, what challenges do Muslim students face in the school?

These sub-questions help to answer my main question. It is not enough to simply research support systems offered in public schools without looking at the challenges that Muslim students face. The sub-questions are presented in this sequence because first I report on the perspectives of the educational partners on issues related to Muslim students. “Educational partners” refers to the people who are directly involved in the students’ educational lives—in this case, mainly the teachers, administrators, parents and the local Imam. I use the Ontario Ministry of Education’s terminology “educational partners” as used in their documents to refer to teachers, educational

assistants, paraprofessionals<sup>1</sup>, counsellors, parents, and the community. I included the local Imam as one of the representatives and leaders of the Muslim community. I am aware that not all educational partners see these issues in the same way, so I report on differences when necessary. Then, I present the supports in place at the school from the perspective of all the participant groups (students, teachers, administrators, parents, the local Imam). Finally, I explore what the Muslim students perceive as challenges in their school, considering the supports that are already in place.

Through a social constructivist lens and using a qualitative approach, this study looks at a public school and the role that it plays in supporting Muslim students. While exploring the issues, challenges, and support, this thesis further looks at the educational partners' perspectives when it comes to supporting Muslim students. I utilize Banks's multicultural dimensions and York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) Types of Support as my conceptual framework for the different facets of potential support that may be provided for Muslim students.

### **Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation is organized into nine chapters. In this chapter, I discuss the background of the study, followed by my position within and outside the research. I then present the rationale of the study and the main and sub-research questions.

In Chapter 2, I present some background on Islam and Muslims. I then outline the demographics of Canada and Ontario, especially with respect to the population of Muslims. Next, I address the educational system of Ontario and the importance of keeping Muslims in public schools, both from the schools' and parents' standpoints. I end the chapter with a

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<sup>1</sup> Paraprofessionals are positions in schools responsible for a specific type of assistance for students. I will discuss this in findings chapter.

discussion of the *Equity and Inclusion Strategy* of Ontario and the distinction between accommodating Muslim students versus supporting Muslim students.

In Chapter 3, I define terminology, such as “school”, “Muslims”, “challenge” and “support”. I also articulate the relation between support and inclusion. I then outline my conceptual framework with the six challenges that Muslim youth face, adapted from relevant literature and the corresponding supports from Banks’s dimension of multicultural education and York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald’s (1992) Types of Support. I also discuss the challenges that teachers may face when supporting Muslim students.

In Chapter 4, I provide a detailed outline of the methodology, including the research design and research methods used. I discuss the reasons why I chose to use a case study to interview my 32 participants from different groups, such as students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the local Imam. I further discuss the importance of semi-structured interviews in this study and the different questions asked from each participant group. I conclude with the steps used for a thematic analysis and the use of Dedoose to help with the analysis.

In Chapter 5, I present the background of the school according to the participant groups. I then report on the conception of Islam by the Muslim participants, in this study. The issues related to Muslim students from different educational partners (parents, teachers, administrators and the Imam) are outlined by grouping the different themes depending on the similarities and differences reported by each of the groups.

In Chapter 6, I report on the supports for Muslim students using evidence from all of the participant groups. I present two support systems: explicit and implicit. The explicit supports are the ones that are created with the intent of providing help for the students in general. Implicit

supports are specific to the local context and demographic of the school that provides support for the Muslim students.

In Chapter 7, I present the challenge for Muslim students, according to the Muslim students themselves and the interview transcripts.

In Chapter 8, I discuss how the themes presented in the three findings chapters are connected. I then debunk some of the myths and biases teachers mention about Muslim students. I conclude with a discussion regarding the Muslim students' perspectives on their overall challenges.

In Chapter 9, I summarize my main findings using the three sub-questions of this study. I discuss the implications of the findings of this research pertaining to practice, policy, and future research. I then outline some contribution to the field, and finally end with concluding remarks.



## **Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the literature review pertinent to the discussion of Islam, Muslims, and the school system of Ontario. This chapter is divided into two sections: The first section outlines some background about Islam and Muslims with respect to their beliefs and values; the second section outlines the population of Muslims in Ontario, the education system of Ontario and the policies used to ensure equity and inclusion. Some of the frequently used words are defined in this chapter such as: “hayaa”, “inclusion”, “equity”, “well-being” and “accommodation.”

### **Islamic Faith**

This section of the chapter mainly outlines the Islamic faith and Muslims in Canada. Islam is considered as one of the most misunderstood religions in the world (Mohamed, 1996). Muslims are considered the most poorly understood religious minority in Canada (Environics Institute, 2016). The misunderstandings and stereotypes surrounding Islam seem to encourage more Muslims to further engage in the practice of their religion. Recent survey show that more Muslims increasingly practice their faith, attend mosques regularly, and more of the women wear Hijab (Environics Institute, 2016). I will present some background about Islam in the next few paragraphs to help clarify some basic concepts that constitute the religion.

Islam is the last of the three monotheistic Abrahamic religions. Muslims, the followers of Islam, believe in one God, the Mohammed as His final prophet, and believe in the Day of Judgment. Islam is currently the fastest growing religion in the world, with about 1.6 billion Muslims. (Pew Research Center, 2009). That is 23% of the world population. “Islam” comes from an Arabic word “salima” which has two meanings: “to submit to the will of God”; “to

surrender” and “peace” (Emerick, 2002). “Islam is surrendering your will to Allah and finding peace” (p. 50).

## **Fundamentals**

In this section I have outlined three main concepts in Islam that are important for this study: (a) the five pillars of Islam; (b) Islam is not monolithic; (c) the emblematic character of Islam: Hayaa.

The five pillars of Islam comprise its outward manifestation. I discuss the five pillars of Islam to provide a basis of knowledge from which I expand in the conceptual framework to define three groups: “Muslims”, “practicing Muslims”, and “visible Muslims”. Knowing the five pillars helps to understand these definitions. The five pillars are in a specific order, based on their importance:

1. the declaration of faith “to believe in God and the prophet Mohammed as the final messenger,”
2. the five daily prayers,
3. fasting during the month of Ramadan,
4. alms giving, and
5. performing the Pilgrimage to Mecca (for those who are capable physically and financially).

Some of these pillars directly relate to Muslim students’ challenges in a school setting, while others are not relevant. The first pillar “affirms Islam’s absolute monotheism, an unshakable and uncompromising faith in the oneness or unity (*Tawheed*) of God” (Esposito, 1998, p. 88; Ahmed, 2010). Concerning the second pillar—prayers—only one (sometimes two) of the five daily prayers occur during school hours: those of the afternoon and the late afternoon. The five pillars are contingent upon the movement of the sun. An hour or so before sunrise is when the morning prayer is performed. The afternoon prayer occurs when the sun has crossed the celestial meridian (exactly halfway between sunrise and sunset), followed by the evening prayer, the

sunset prayer, and finally the night prayer. The third pillar of fasting during the month of Ramadan may pose a particularly difficult challenge for students. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic Lunar calendar. Every year it falls on a different month of the Solar Gregorian Calendar, that Muslims in the West follow. In 2016, Ramadan fell within the month of June, when the days were the longest. Fasting is from dawn to dusk for 29 or 30 days (depending when the new moon occurs). For example, Muslims in Canada fasted about 18 to 19 hours everyday in June of 2016. There are primarily two objectives of fasting: (a) to disconnect from the material world and focus on the spiritual world; (b) to experience and understand the struggles of those who are unable to consistently eat and drink. There are many other secondary reasons for fasting, such as detoxifying one's body. The challenges that fasting may pose for students are discussed in the next chapter. The fourth pillar—alms giving or giving charity—is when Muslims give a percentage of their total wealth to charity. This particular pillar is not relevant to the challenges that Muslim students may face in their schools. The fifth pillar of performing the pilgrimage requires a Muslim to go to Mecca and stay from ten days to two weeks, performing various rituals that date back to the Prophet Mohammed and Prophet Abraham. It is mandatory for anyone who is physically and financially able to perform these rituals to do so at least once in his or her lifetime. Students' families who want to travel to Mecca to perform these rituals may ask for time off from school if the time of the pilgrimage occurs during the school year.

All the above are outward manifestations of Islam. When inward manifestations of Islam are practiced, there is a specific guiding principle for behaviour, attitude, and interactions with other people. Islam has a specific character trait that it espouses, and that is *Hayaa*, which is discussed in the following paragraph.

## **Emblematic Character of Islam**

Rights and duties in Islam are categorized as follows: 1) duties to God (*ibadaat*), which include the five pillars of Islam and 2) duties to others vis-à-vis social interactions (*muamalat*), which are dictated by the religion's value systems. Like many other religions, Islam upholds values such as honesty, compassion, truthfulness, and respect (Ahmed, 2010). A value that is distinctly attributed to Islam, but not exclusive to Muslims, is termed as *Hayaa*, which encompasses such concepts as shame, humility, self-respect, honour, bashfulness, shyness, and modesty (Introduction to Islamic character, n.d; Ahmed, 2010). The term, *Hayaa*, comes from the Arabic word, *hayat*, which directly translates to "life" and is that which keeps one spiritually alive. The concept of *Hayaa* is therefore an internal form through which the soul, spirit, and conscience are alive. Such a concept is not usually included in introductory descriptions of Islam, but are mentioned here because of their relevance to Islamic education and schools.

The Prophet Muhammad said: "Every religion has a distinct call, an emblematic quality. For Islam, the emblematic quality is *Hayaa*" (Hadith Database). As such, *Hayaa* is considered to be the cornerstone of Islam. In another narration, Muhammad said, "*Hayaa* (modesty/bashfulness) and *Iman* (faith) are two that go together. If one is lifted, the other is also lifted" (Hadith Database). Jamaluddin Zarabazoni's exploration of *Hayaa* in the *Hadith Database* (2002) identify its four manifestations. The first dimension of *Hayaa* is from God, where a Muslim develops a sense of shame towards committing an act or having a thought that displeases God. This level of shame is more dominant when an individual commits a sin without the presence or knowledge of anyone else. The second dimension of *Hayaa* is from the angels, which are identified in Islamic belief as the supernatural beings that reside over the Earth and across multiple dimensions. This sense of shame stems from an individual's awareness of the gaze of angels. The third level of *Hayaa* is from other human beings, which dictates interactions

that are gentle, kind, and compassionate. This form of *Hayaa* most frequently holds pertinence in contexts of cross-gender interaction, in which normative expectations for cross-gender interactions in Islam are based on mutual respect and non-interference; this concept also applies to teacher-student interactions. The fourth dimension is *Hayaa* toward oneself, wherein an individual feels ashamed when acting inappropriately (Hadith Database, 2002; Ahmed 2010). In the next chapter, the conceptual framework, dress code and sexual ethics, are discussed under the category of challenges faced by Muslim students. Those two specific challenges are the outward manifestations of *Hayaa*.

Even though practicing Muslims around the world may follow the outward manifestation of Islam (the five pillars) and the inner manifestation (the emblematic character trait: *Hayaa*), Muslims are not considered to be monolithic. Muslims are “as diverse as humanity itself” (Gregorian, 2011, p.2). In the following paragraphs, I have discussed the unity and diversity of Islam.

### **Islam is Not Monolithic**

There is one single Islam, meaning the religion is built on a single set of fundamental elements and frameworks, such as the bases of Quranic revelation and prophetic traditions (*Sunnah*); the pillars of Islam, as outline above; and its notions of the state of the world (*al-waqii*):

Sustained by faith, strong in reasoning ability and guided by ethical injunctions, a believing consciousness must live within his own time, at the heart of his society, among other human beings and put his energy into his constant dialectical movement between the essential principles determined by Revelation and actual circumstances. (p.37)

Even in consideration of the estimated 1.6 billion Muslim people worldwide, Islam is *one* and unites all traditions, including *Sunni* and *Shia* practitioners, through its elements of universality and its pervasive definition as a “way of life.”

Evidently, the inherent universality of Islam necessitates diversity across its practitioners, meaning that Muslims are not expected to look, dress, behave, eat, and conduct their lives like one another; that would be unrealistic and absurd. Just because one is a Muslim does not mean anything is known about him or her other than a belief in God and belief in the prophet Mohamed as the final messenger. The Muslim may or may not practice the five pillars of Islam but a Muslim by definition is one who believes in God and the final messenger. In this changing world, with varying climates, terrains, agriculture, histories, and cultures, how one lives requires a variety of interpretations and “plurality of cultures.” Islamic Law (*Shariah*) stipulates that all means and matters through which people live their lives, that are not against established principles, are considered to be Islamic. Therefore, “integrating the good from wherever it may come, which has made it possible for Muslims to settle in, and make their own, without contradiction, almost all the cultures of the countries in which they have established themselves, from South America to Asia, through West and North Africa” (Ramadan, 2004, p. 54). Muslims are therefore established and able to settle themselves around the world and within almost all cultures by integrating the good from wherever it may come. In other words, the fundamentals of Islam, including the Quran and prophetic tradition, permit “a plurality of readings (albeit such reading must, in order to be accepted, respect certain normative criteria” (Ramadan, 1999, p. 238). Even though almost a quarter of the world’s population identify as Muslims, Islam is a religion comprised of a variety of cultures and civilizations. As mentioned above, a Muslim can be defined as one who believes in God and the Prophet Mohammed as the final messenger of God, but that is the only necessary unifying element among Muslims. Everything else, with respect to culture, dress, behaviour, attitude, and history, varies (Gregorian, 2011; Pew Research, 2012) .

## **Muslims in Canada**

The Muslim community, like any other community, has had its fair challenges. Despite the past decade's dramatic increase in Muslim populations, both in Canada and around the world, the Muslim community remains a "poorly understood" religious minority (Environics Institute, 2016, p.1). For example, Muslims are mainly seen as "different from others" and those "who resist the adoption of 'Canadian values'" (Environics Institute, 2016, p.1). Therefore, it is important to present some background information, such as statistics on and misconceptions of, Muslims in Canada. I will also present some statistics specifically on Muslims in Ontario.

### **Statistics of Muslims in Canada**

People who identified themselves as non-white—or people of colour—accounted for 16.2% of the total population of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006), an increase from 13.4% according to the 2001 census. With respect to religion, in 2006, most Canadians identified themselves as Christian (77%), 2% were Muslim, and another 1% were Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist (Statistics Canada, 2006). The remainder of the population did not affiliate themselves with any religion. The 2001 census indicated that there were 579,740 Muslims in Canada, which was less than 2% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2003). Five years later, it increased to 2.6%—to about 800,000 Muslims (Statistics Canada, 2003). In 2011, Muslims represent 3.2% of the total population (National Household Survey, 2011). Furthermore, the NHS (2011) shows that the Muslim population has exceeded the one million mark; the population has doubled for the third consecutive decade. The Muslim population is the largest growing religion in Canada, with a 72.53% increase; the next is the Hindu population, spiking at 67.68%; those reported to have no religious affiliations are at 63.68% (Statistics Canada, 2011). Muslims also have the lowest median age of 28.9 years. All other followers of religions, plus those who do not follow any religion, have the next lowest median age of 32.7 years, followed by the Sikhs at 32.8 years,

and then the Hindus at 34.2 years (Statistics Canada, 2011). There has been a documented increase in religious observance of Muslims, especially between the ages of 18 to 34 (The Environics Institute, 2016).

Muslim arrival to Canada can be traced back to the 1850s, when the first recorded Muslim family arrived in Upper Canada from Scotland (Environics Institute, 2016). The increase in population is largely attributed to immigration, with the largest newcomers over the past five years arriving from Pakistan (Statistics Canada, 2011). The majority of Canadian Muslims live in Ontario, with the Greater Toronto Area having the highest concentration of Muslims in North America—about 5% (Pew Research Centre, 2010).

### **Muslims' Connection to Canada**

In 2006, the Environics Institute conducted the first-ever national survey of Muslims in Canada, this very survey was also repeated in 2016. The findings of both surveys were similar. In the 2006 survey, when representative samples of non-Muslims were asked whether they believed that Muslims in Canada wished to integrate into the “Canadian” way of life, 57% reported that they thought Muslims wanted to remain distinct. The same percentage of Muslims (57%) said that they wanted to adopt a “Canadian” lifestyle. Thirteen percent of Muslims said that they wanted to both adopt “Canadian” lifestyle and maintain their distinct identity. In the 2006 Environics Institute survey, there was no definition on what was meant by “Canadian custom” or “Canadian lifestyle.” In the 2016 survey, the wording changed to “Canadian values,” and a brief list was presented to constitute “Canadian values”: language fluency, tolerance and respect for others, different cultures, appreciation of Canadian history, and respect for the law. I will discuss the notion of “Canadian” in the next section of this chapter.



Furthermore, the survey found that most Muslim Canadians, nine in ten, were born outside of Canada. When asked how strong their attachment to Canada was, 94% said they were proud to be Canadian, versus the national average of 93%. In fact, over 70% reported to be *very* proud. When asked what characteristics of Canada they were proud of the most, their responses matched the rest of the population's. They were proud of Canadian freedom, democracy, and multiculturalism, that Canada is a peaceful country, that it is caring, friendly, and safe (Adams, 2007). Thirty-one percent stated that they had a "bad experience" with respect to their race, ethnicity, or religion within the past two years. Adams (2007) reported that the survey indicated that Muslim women wearing Hijab—the veil—experienced more discrimination than men. Furthermore, younger Muslims reported to have been more likely discriminated against than older Muslims. "Generally, adults who decide to immigrate to a new country expect to put up with a certain degree of hardship and prejudice ... but their children, raised, educated, or even born in Canada are less likely to suffer discrimination without feeling considerable disappointment" (Adams, 2007, p.100). Like other newcomers, most Canadian Muslims have come to Canada "to build better lives for themselves and their children—not to dismantle Canadian society by violence" (Adams, 2007, p. 107). Other recent polls also showed that "Canadian Muslims are proud to be Canadian, more so than the average Canadian, and Canadian Muslims very much want to integrate and be part and parcel of the society" (Press, 2013, para.15). The Environics Institute released its second recent findings on Muslims in Canada—a decade after its first release on Muslims in 2006. Similar to its first findings, Muslim Canadians appear to be prouder to be Canadian than their non-Muslim counterparts, up by 10 points from their 2006 survey findings. Muslim Canadians' sense of belonging has also increased from a decade ago. When asked about their personal identity, Muslim Canadians said that both their

Islamic and Canadian identities were important; however, 50% said that their Islamic identity was very important versus the national average of 28% of the non-Muslims surveyed (Environics Institute, 2016). The survey also suggests that Muslim Canadians are not resistant to adopting “Canadian values”, as was the perception of the non-Muslims in the survey (Environics Institute, 2006; 2016). I will discuss “Canadian values” in the next section.

Muslims, whether indigenous, immigrants, or refugees, seem to have similar trajectories of integration, and similar affinities toward Canada as other indigenous, immigrant, and refugee groups. Saunders (2007) wrote “once we get past the hysteria and look at the facts ... something becomes apparent about Muslims: They’re just like any group of immigrants, except for the stories we tell about them” (para. 20). He further elaborates that they follow the usual “patterns of integration” of religious minorities.

### **Canadian Values**

A discussion regarding the definition of “Canadian values”, and whether such a thing even exists, is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to briefly explore the concept of “Canadian values” relevant to this paper and the use of “Canadian” in the survey above. Depending on whose perspective, different scholars and politicians view Canadian values differently. The Environics Institute (2016) enlists a few “values” that its survey deemed “Canadian”; they are: language fluency, tolerance and respect for others, different cultures, appreciation of Canadian history, and respect for the law. There was no other description or discussion around this notion of “Canadian” in the survey. Furthermore, “adopting the customs of the country” has been a common survey question by other public opinion polls such as the Pew Research centre that looks at global and American issues, attitudes and trends (Pew Research, 2016). None of the values enlisted by the Environics Institute are in conflict with

Islam. However, “language fluency” and “appreciation of Canadian history” may not make the list of “Canadian values” in many other discussions and studies (Zine, 2012; Hildebrand; 2007; Tetley & Puplampu, 2005).

Recently, with the Conservative Leadership Candidate Kellie Leitch screening immigrants for anti-Canadian values (Campion-Smith, 2016), the discussion of “what are Canadian values?” was once again brought to the forefront. Is the common narrative of “Canadian values” used by dominant groups to maintain social differences and therefore oppressive practices? To claim that one (minority) group of people’s core-values go against a dominant group is not a new phenomenon. Huntington’s (1996) *Clash of Civilization* and Caldwell’s (2009) have clearly stated that Muslims are unable to assimilate into European (or Western) societies because there is a conflict in the beliefs and values.

It seems that being “Canadian” or having a “Canadian” lifestyle or value or custom varies depending on who is talking about it. Is it defined by the dominant white anglo middle class? Is it rural or urban? Is this an actual useful construct, if yes how so? Or is it a discursive strategy to assert the dominance of certain class? If we leave it to the politicians, Stephen Harper, the former prime minister of Canada, considers *niqab* (the veil some Muslim women wear, which covers the face) as anti-Canadian (Chase, 2015), while Trudeau, the current prime minister of Canada, is seen in selfies with many veiled Muslim women (Grenier, 2016). Pierre Elliot Trudeau, the prime minister of Canada in 1971, when announcing the Multiculturalism policy in the House of Commons said “for although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other. No citizen or group of citizens is other than Canadian, and all should be treated fairly” (Colombo, 2000). It is not just politicians who have weighed in on the ambivalence of the notion of being “Canadian,” journalist like John

Meisel, cultural critic Northrop Frye spoke about the confusion: “One disadvantage of living in Canada is that one is continually called upon to make statements about Canadian identity, and Canadian identity is an eminently exhaustible subject” (Colombo, 2000). Also, contemporary journalist Neil McDonald, a senior correspondent for CBC, challenges many presumed “Canadian values.” He settles for one citizen, one vote; equality of men and women; equal benefit of the law, regardless of “race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability; the protection of the most vulnerable as the “truly universal Canadian values” (McDonald, 2016).

The discussion surrounding whether Canadian values exist, and if so what constitutes them, seems to periodically surface and die down in the media. Is there such a thing as “Canadian” value or custom or lifestyle? In light of these debates, Muslims, in general, and Muslim youth in specific, find themselves fighting a core belief that Islamic values and Western values are not mutually exclusive. Many researchers, in this field, have challenged the clash of civilization phenomena (Nagra & Peng, 2013; Kibra, 2010; Sirin & Fine, 2008) demonstrating that one can be both Muslim and a Westerner, even though with so many cultures, languages and social differences, the Western hemisphere and those who are Muslims are hardly homogeneous. Muslim youth are at the forefront of these discussions, when they are faced with Islamophobia, or even genuine Islamic inquiries by their peers and educators.

### **The Changing Face of Ontario**

Ontario is Canada’s most diverse province. The following are some quick background to illustrate how Ontario has changed between 2001 and 2006 according to Census of Canada (2006). These data are a decade old. With the upcoming results of the Census of 2016, the diversity of Ontario may be more pervasive. Ontarians reported over 200 languages as their

mother tongue; 69.1% of Ontarians speak English as their mother tongue and 4.2% reported French as their mother tongue. These numbers are in decline. Ontario's aboriginal population grew almost five times faster than its non-aboriginal population. Also, more than a third of the aboriginal population constitutes children—teenagers aged 19 or under. The number of same-sex couples increased by 40% between 2001 and 2006. Half (52.3%) of the 1.1 million newcomers to Canada chose to reside in Ontario during 2001 and 2006. An estimated 2.7 million Ontarians identified as a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2006), which is over half of Canada's visible minority. The visible minority population has increased four times faster between 2001 and 2006 than the rest of the population, excluding aboriginals. It is predicted that by 2017, about 20% of Canada's population will be members of diverse faith communities such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism, as well as there being an increasing number of people who identify themselves without a religious affiliation (Statistics Canada, 2006). A survey in 2006, conducted by The Environics Institute, reported that about 60% of the Muslims who have immigrated to Canada reside in Ontario. The recent data on Muslim population is from 2011 National Household Survey, which puts the Muslim population over the one million mark (1,053,945), making up around 3.2% of the national population (Environics Institute, 2016). Such changes pose challenges and provide opportunities for policy makers to ensure that “the policies evolve with changing societal needs” (Ontario's Equity and Inclusion Education Strategy, 2009, p.9). According to the data that reflects an increasing Muslim population, providing support for Muslim students in their respective schools is becoming more pertinent.

Unfortunately, in recent years, increased numbers of anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia discriminatory incidents have been documented in Canada. Incidents of discrimination are prevalent and “its existence should be treated as a social fact” (Ontario

Ministry of Education, 2009, p.7). Many Muslims in Canada reported that they felt discrimination toward them after 9/11 (Helly, 2004; CAIR-CAN, 2002; Adams, 2007). A commissioned poll conducted by The Environics Institute Research Group in 2010 showed that one in three Canadians reported that aboriginal people and Muslims are considered “frequent targets of discrimination” (Hildebrandt, 2010). The poll further suggested that 28% of Pakistani/East Indians suffer from intolerance, as well as 20% (the next highest) of blacks (Hildebrandt, 2010). A poll by Ipsos Reid suggested that 60% of those surveyed felt an increase in discrimination toward Muslims as compared to 10 years ago (Chung, 2011). Muslim youth who grow up in this climate vary in their responses to negative images, stereotypes, fear, and marginalization. However, their need for well-being, defined as “sense of belonging” and “acceptance” in Ministry of Education documents (2014), is evident; therefore, their level of need for support is necessary.

### **Public Schools in Ontario**

A “public school” is defined as “a school under the jurisdiction of the public board” (Education Act, 2009, c.25. s.1). Many scholars and politicians have weighed in on what they believe to be the purpose of public schools. According to the education historian and philosopher, R. Freedman Butts (1973), one of the original intents of public schools was “to make them universal, free, and compulsory (p.208). However, there also was a political purpose: “to enable peoples who came from diverse national, religious, and cultural backgrounds to achieve a sense of community and to acquire the common values of a democratic polity” (p. 208). Other educational scholars agree with Butts’s envisioned purpose of public schools in order to ensure pupils’ acquisition of norms and contribute to the cohesion of society (Dreeben, 1968; Katz, 1976; Baergen, 1982). Ontario’s Ministry of Education articulates that the purpose of

public schools is “to help students develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring citizens who contribute to our strong economy and a cohesive society” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p.2). Acquiring “values” or “norms” seems to be replaced by acquiring “skills, and knowledge”; however, “cohesive society” is still a key term. How schools will achieve this is articulated in the ministry’s vision by attaining four main goals through education in public schools, as documented in *Achieving Excellence: A renewed vision for education in Ontario*: (a) achieving excellence, (b) ensuring equity, (c) promoting well-being, and (d) enhancing public confidence (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The existence of appropriate supports for all students, including Muslim students, is an important component for successfully reaching all four aforementioned goals. By the same token, all of those goals are undermined when specific groups of individuals are excluded or feel unsupported in their schools. For example, appropriate supports help ensure equity (articulated in “b”) and promote well-being among different groups (articulated in “c”), which enhances public confidence in public schools (articulated in “d”) and provides students a better place to learn, likely leading to higher academic achievements (articulated in “a”). Publicly funded schools are required to attain those goals to increase public confidence in the schools.

The K–12 public education system in Canada is fully funded by provincial governments, or in some provinces (Saskatchewan and Manitoba) it is partly levied by local property taxes (Garcea & Munroe, 2014). Education is considered a *public good* where every member of society benefits (Sen, 2000; Kaul et al, 1999, Stiglitz, 1999); students and their families are not the sole beneficiaries. There is a common belief that “a more educated population will be better for all of us” (Young, Levin, Wallin, 2007, p.146). The educational impact does not stop at the individual level; it affects subsequent generations (Glaze, Mattingley, & Levin, 2011, p.2). The

Education Act of Ontario declares in its very first section that “the foundation of a prosperous, caring, and civil society” is a “strong public education system” (2009, c.25, s.1). In the past 10 years, Ontario has become one of the best education systems in the English-speaking world, together with Finland, Singapore, and South Korea (Fullan, 2012).

Ontario has four types of school boards in its publicly funded education system: (a) 31 English Public, (b) 29 English Catholic, (c) 4 French Public, and (c) 8 French Catholic (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). The total number of students attending Ontario publicly funded schools is a little over 2 million, specifically 2,043,117 students. More than 90% of children attend government-financed and regulated public or separate schools. Separate schools are the English Catholic and French Catholic schools. Public schools, which enrolled 68% of students attending government-financed schools in 2005–06 (Ontario, 2008), are secular, and thus are prohibited from including religious instruction in their curriculum or sponsoring religious observances. Separate schools, which account for 32% of provincially funded school enrollment in 2005–06, are authorized to provide Protestant or Roman Catholic religious instruction and to sponsor appropriate religious observances. Many non-Catholic parents choose to send their children to Catholic schools for reasons other than religious instruction, and Roman Catholic secondary schools are required under the *Education Act* to accept such students. Other than the prohibition of religious instruction, public schools are mandated to follow the social norms, expectations, and behaviours that conform to community standards, or standards proclaimed by the state. An example that is relevant to this study is that the progressive attitudes toward sexual norms and homosexuality are in direct contrast to mainstream Islamic values. Therefore, certain beliefs and practices of Muslim students may not align with those “generally espoused in secular public schools or within non-Muslim societies” (Chan & Schlein, 2010, p.264). Furthermore,



recently with the introduction of the new sexual education curriculum in Ontario, polls show that one in six parents considered to pull their kids from the publicly funded schools (Csanady, 2016). Three percent of those parents actually removed their kids from their schools (Csanady, 2016). The new curriculum includes anatomical names for bodyparts, the existence of multiple gender identities, and conversations around masturbation. Muslim parents find themselves at a cross-road.

Parents in Ontario wishing to provide any other kind of religious education, besides Catholicism and Protestantism, for their children must seek out an independent school operating outside the public system (Allison, 2015). This means that parents must pay out of their own pockets for their children's education. However, due to affordability and accessibility, many Muslim parents do not have the choice of private Islamic schools. At the same time, public schools cannot afford to lose more students to private schools due to declining enrolment (Howlett, 2015). The number of students enrolled in independent private schools in Ontario has increased "from 1.9 percent of the student population in 1960 to 5.6 percent in 2006" (Van Pelt, P. Allison, & D. Allison, 2007, p.3). One of the many factors for declining enrolment maybe loosing students to independant schools (Levac & Newman, 2009). According to the Ministry of Education, one in eight schools in Ontario are less than half full. In 2015 the Toronto District School Board reported one in five schools as underutilized (Howlett, 2015). It is of mutual benefit for both Muslim parents and the public boards/schools in Ontario to keep children in their respective public schools. This demonstrates "the need for schools to ensure educational equity and access for Muslim students" (Chan & Schlein, 2010, p.253) and the need for intercultural knowledge and understanding so that Muslim students feel connected to their schools.

Research suggests that students who feel a connection with other students, with teachers, and with their school are better off academically (Goleman, 2006). Similarly, rejection, exclusion, and estrangement are linked to behavioural issues in the classroom, decline in student achievement, and an increase in drop-out rates (Ostermann, 2000, p. 323-367). Researchers (Ryan, 2006, 2002; Dei, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2002; Byrne, 1999) maintain that those who feel or are seen as “different” usually find it difficult to gain access to opportunities and resources available to the majority. Muslim students need to feel included in their schools and be involved in the curriculum. Inclusion has many definitions, a simple and profound perspective on inclusion is that when one is not included, then one is excluded; inclusion and exclusion are closely related (Ryan, 2006, p.19). Some groups of students who are “different”, such as “recent immigrants, children from low-income families, aboriginal students, boys, and students with special needs”, do not just suffer at the well-being level but also are at risk of lower academic achievement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p.1). Black/African Canadians, First Nation/Aboriginals, and Portuguese Canadians have disproportionately higher rates of drop-out than the rest of the population (Dei, 2003). Although there has been no official data collected on Muslim students’ achievement levels in Ontario public schools, the challenges that Muslim youth face that risks their well-being is documented (Kahf, 2006; Beshir, 2004; Zine, 2001; Stonebanks & Sensoy 2009; Chan & Schlein, 2010; Sisak, 2015; Nuttall, 2016).

Student achievement “has always been systematically related to characteristics that have little or nothing to do with a student’s ability or motivation” (Glaze, Mattingley, & Levin, 2011, p.1). Yet personal circumstance, such as socioeconomic status, is still a strong indicator of educational outcome (Mayer, 2002; Levin & Riffel, 2000), which widens the gap in achievement for all students. One of the shared beliefs and intrinsic assumptions that all

ministry documents uphold is that “all students can succeed” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011, p.6). Adequate support for disadvantaged students more likely would lead to equity of outcomes (Learning for all, 2011; Glaze, Mattingley, & Levin, 2011; Blum, McNeeley, & Rinehart, 2002; Schargel, Thacker, & Bell, 2007). The Ontario Ministry of Education states, “in a truly equitable system, factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status do not prevent students from achieving ambitious outcomes . . .” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p.8). By extension, factors such as religious affiliation should also not become a barrier for achieving higher outcomes.

### ***Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy***

All publicly funded schools in Ontario are mandated to “develop, implement, and monitor an equity and inclusive education policy” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 3). However, only twelve boards out of seventy two, in Ontario, reported “that they have policies or guidelines relating to religious accommodation, and only three of those could be considered comprehensive” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 9). One aspect of a strong public education system is to work toward supporting all students, including Muslim students, regardless of personal circumstance, background and religious affiliation (Ministry of Education, 2014). A document released in 2009, in response to these challenges, was the *Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, with its motto “realizing the promise of diversity.” In the paragraphs below, I use this document from the Ontario Ministry of Education to draw evidence for Muslim students’ right to be supported in the public school system. This 2009 document ensures that everyone, regardless of their ability or disability, race, gender, sex, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation, is accommodated and is well supported in the public school system.

The strategy provides direction for schools in Ontario to move beyond tolerance to acceptance and respect. *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009), referred to as "the strategy," is in sync with legislative and policy documents such as the *Ontario Human Rights Code* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, where respect is its overarching principle. The vision cradled in *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* posits that "all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected; every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations of learning" (Ministry of Education, 2009, p.1). UNESCO (2008) clarifies that some countries view inclusion to be exclusively for students with disabilities; "internationally, however, it is increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity among all learners" (Ministry of Education, 2009, p.5). In Ontario, equity is also seen to include all students, irrespective of background, ability, or religious affiliation. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Muslim youth are more sensitive to discrimination and lack of respect than the rest of the Muslim population (Adams, 2007; Environics, 2016).

*Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Strategy* (2009) document outlines action items for the Ministry, school boards, and schools to be implemented over a four-year period (2009-2012). Kathleen Wynne, the current premier of Ontario and the former Minister of Education, shared that "students who feel welcome and accepted in their schools are more likely to succeed academically" (Ministry of Education, 2009, p.2). She emphasized that increasing student achievement, which is one of the first core priorities of the Ministry of Education in Ontario, be closely associated with identifying and removing barriers to inclusion. Inclusive Education is defined as:

Education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the

broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p.4)

There are seven guiding principles of the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*:

- is a foundation of excellence;
- meets individual needs;
- identifies and eliminates barriers;
- promotes a sense of belonging;
- involves the broad community;
- builds on and enhances previous and existing initiatives; and
- is demonstrated throughout the system.

The strategy also draws from a body of research that correlates students who feel a sense of connection with their school with those who do better in school academically (Blum, McNeeley, & Rinehart, 2002; Schargerl, Thacker, & Bell, 2007). The document concludes with “A Culture of Continuous Improvement”, where the commitment to students’ well-being is clearly articulated. The guidelines and action items for schools and school boards posited in this document are the very reasons why this study is timely. By supporting marginalized students, in this case Muslim learners, in order that they feel connected to the school—with their peers and with the staff—the students are more likely to do better academically. In Year 2 (2009–2010), the action item suggested that the school boards “have religious accommodation guidelines in place, and communicate those guidelines to the school community” (p.21). In other words, the action plan demonstrated a commitment to “respecting diversity, promoting inclusive education, and identifying and eliminating discriminatory biases, systemic barriers, and power dynamics that limit student learning, growth and contribution to society” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, p.2). The fore mentioned barriers are to be identified and addressed; these may range from intentional or unintentional, overt or covert (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, p.2). Due to these barriers, investments in education are not “reach[ing] every student,” as espoused by the Ontario Ministry of Education (McMurtry & Curling, 2008). The objective of this thesis is

to identify both the barriers and the supports for a specific group of students who do not feel included—the Muslim students.

Prior to the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, the *Policy/Program Memorandum* (PPM) No. 119, which was entitled *Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity*, was released in 1993 and went beyond the scope of multiculturalism and race relations to concentrate “on identifying and changing institutional policies and procedures, as well as individual behaviors and practices that may be racist in their impact” (p.2). PPM No. 119 was renamed 16 years later to *Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools*. A further revised document was released in 2013, referred to as “the guidelines”, entitled *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation*.

The three goals of the strategy should be a shared and committed leadership by the ministry, boards, and schools to eliminate discrimination; equity and inclusive education policies and practices conducive to a positive learning environment that is respectful and welcoming to all; and both accountable and transparent. To achieve these three goals, eight areas of focus were identified in the strategy, the guidelines, and PPM No. 119:

1. board policies, programs, guidelines, and practices;
2. shared and committed leadership;
3. school-community relationships;
4. inclusive curriculum and assessment practices;
5. religious accommodation<sup>2</sup>;
6. school climate and the prevention of discrimination and harassment;
7. professional learning; and

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<sup>2</sup> The *Ontario Human Rights Code* provides the right to be free from discrimination. The duty to accommodate is an obligation on employers, schools, and institutions. The duty arises when a person's religious beliefs conflict with a requirement, qualification, or practice. Accommodation may modify a rule or make an exception to all or part of it for the person requesting accommodation. (OHRC, 1996, p.7)

8. accountability and transparency.

In summary, the three documents: the guidelines, strategy, and the PPM No.119, are used by school boards to develop, implement, and review equity and inclusive policies and practices. The three legal references from which the above school policies and guidelines have emerged are: the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Section 15), the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, and the *Education Act*.

Initially, I haphazardly chose the term “accommodate” Muslim students instead of “support” Muslim students when I initiated this research proposal. However, over time I realized the limits of the word “accommodate”. Specifically, “accommodation” in the curriculum documents refers to assessment accommodations that allow pupils “to participate in the curriculum and to demonstrate achievement of expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p.72). These changes may include “visual supports to clarify verbal instructions, assistive devices, or some form of human support” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p.72). The Ontario Human Rights Code (OHRC) provides the “duty to accommodate,” which refers to the “modif[ication of] a rule or [to] make an exception to all or part of it for the person requesting accommodation” (*Ontario Human Rights Code*, 1996). Muslim students in the public school systems may need accommodation for prayers, for instance, which is one form of support (see the conceptual framework), but the distinct challenges of Muslim youth necessitate more than accommodations. Furthermore, some Muslim students may experience a “compounding impact” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, p.2) due to additional barriers and intersecting factors such as race, gender, and class. I, therefore, carefully selected the word “support” rather than “accommodation” because modification of a rule does not “promote sense of belonging” in a population, as mentioned in the seven guiding principles of the *Equity and Inclusive Education*

*Strategy* above. Furthermore, “accommodation” also does not “promote well-being” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014), it merely provides a quick fix to a problem. “Support”, on the other hand, is a commonly used term in Ontario Ministry of Education documents; the motto in each ministry document states “support every student.” Therefore, “support” seems like a more fitting word when it comes to helping Muslim students feel safe, included, and connected. In the next chapter, I explain further why I used the word support.

At the federal level, policies and legislations such as the *Charter of Rights and Freedom*, and the *Multicultural Act*, require religious accommodations to be made for individuals who need them. The *Canadian Multicultural Act* is a federal law passed in 1988 that recognizes minorities’ rights and the multicultural heritage of Canada. At the provincial level, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* mandates accommodations for religious purposes. At the ministry level, the *Equity and Inclusion Strategy* mandates that school boards create “religious accommodation” policies. Each board is expected to have a document that provides guidelines and procedures for the accommodation of religious requirements, practices, and observances. Therefore, by law, at all different levels of government, schools are required to accommodate Muslim students’ religious needs. Additionally, the latter document by the Ontario Ministry of Education, *Equity and Inclusive Education*, further specifies the importance of feeling included, having a sense of belonging and well-being in a school setting to ensure that each student reaches his or her full potential.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented some background surrounding Islam and Muslims. I presented the emblematic character of Islam and how it relates to the challenges that Muslim students face in their schools. Next, I reported some statistics on Muslims in Canada and Ontario. I then



addressed background relating to Ontario's education system and the policies surrounding religious accommodations. I ended the chapter by utilizing ministry documents to make a case for the importance of supporting Muslim students using Ontario Ministry of Education documents.

## **CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Introduction**

The conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1 with a three-dimensional matrix representing York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) four Types of Support, the five dimensions of Banks's multicultural education, and the common struggles that Muslim students face in schools, adapted from literature (Ramadan, 1999, 2009; Espisoto, 2002; 2004; Emerick, 1997; Shah, 2006; Chan & Schlein, 2010; Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2009; Zine, 2012). The aim of this study is to explore how a public high school supports its Muslim students. The conceptual framework provides categories of support systems, that potentially could exist within the context of a school, for Muslim students. First, I define the concepts "school", "Muslim", "challenge" and then explore what is meant by the word "support" in the context of education and Ontario ministry documents. Discussion of the main support systems follows, and finally a representation of how these are connected is shown within the conceptual framework.

### **Defining "School"**

In the previous chapter, I explored the concept and goals of "public school" and further presented the Ontario context of public schools. Here, I would like to clarify who I mean by "school" as mentioned in my research questions. There are many definitions for what is meant by a "school" in literature; however, I chose a simple definition, as it serves the purposes of this study: "a school is a place where teaching and learning go on, steadily and systematically" (Barzun, 2002, p.1). Everyone who is involved in the school's teaching and learning is considered to be part of a school. Using this definition, I specify what I consider a "school" in my research question and sub-questions. The overall research question is the following: How does a public school support Muslim students? In this case, I mean everything that leads to the support of Muslim students within a school. This may include (a) supports created for Muslim

students by teachers, administrators, school boards, and policy makers that take place in the school I have selected, (b) supports created by the students in the school, and (c) supports that help Muslim students, in their school, created through the culture or demographic of the school.

I have outlined which of the participant groups I interviewed for each of the sub-questions below:

1. How do educational partners of the school understand issues related to Muslim students?

In this question, “educational partners” refers to the people who are directly involved in the students’ educational lives—in this case, mainly the teachers, administrators, parents and the local Imam. I have included the local Imam, the Muslim leader of the local mosque in the city, because the Imam is involved with the board of the school in helping formulate policy and inform educators of Muslim beliefs, practices and values. I ask the teachers, administrators, parents and the Imam to identify any issues they witness Muslim students facing in the school. These educational partners are considered stakeholders in the Muslim students’ education, therefore it is important to capture their view of the issues that face those pupils. I also want to see if there are any similarities and differences between what the teachers and administrators see as issues and what the parents and the Imam view as issues, as each participant is interviewed separately.

2. What kinds of supports are in place, in the school, to help Muslim students?

This question takes into account all participants’ perspectives—teachers, administrators, and students, including the parents and the Imam—in order to find answers.

3. Considering the supports, what challenges do Muslim students face in the school?

In question 1, I asked the educational partners to identify issues that the Muslim students face in the school; in this question, I ask Muslim students themselves what they identify as challenges they personally encounter in school.

The sub-questions are arranged in this format because the first question explores how educational partners see the challenges of Muslim students. Once the challenges are identified by the educational partners, the subsequent supports employed to help with the challenges are reported. Finally, the challenges of Muslim students that still surface, after considering the supports in place, are noted.

### **Defining Muslim**

I start with answering the question “who is a Muslim?”. This discussion could easily get very complex; however, for the purposes of this thesis, I define some basic criteria as a foundation of knowledge by which we can avoid confusion.

### **Defining Muslim, Practicing Muslim, and Visible Muslim**

The legal definition of a Muslim, according to Islamic jurisprudence, is anyone who believes that “there is no God but God, and Muhammad is his final prophet.” This belief in Islam is called the *Shahada* or the declaration of faith. However, for the purposes of this thesis, anyone who identifies himself or herself as Muslim is considered to be a Muslim. This may include, but is not limited to, Muslims who are born to Muslim parents and believe in the declaration of faith but choose not to practice the five pillars, and Muslims who are born to Muslim parents and do not believe in the declaration of faith or practice the five pillars. Or individuals who are not born to Muslim families but identify as Muslims.

For the purposes of this thesis, a “practicing” Muslim is one who practices the five pillars of Islam discussed in the previous chapter and/or follows the Islamic dress code. The extent to

which they practice some or all the five pillars is irrelevant to the discussion of this study. Therefore, a practicing Muslim does not automatically mean that he or she readily identifies as Muslim. Practicing Muslims also vary in their opinions of dance, drama, and music. Some may hold the opinion that any kind of dance, drama, or music is forbidden in Islam; others may adhere to opinions that dance, drama, and music within a certain framework are permissible, and anything outside of that is forbidden. There are also other Muslims who see all forms of dance, drama and music to be permissible.

“Visible” Muslims are those who can be identified as Muslims because of their dress (wearing the Hijab, *kufi*, *shilwar kameez*, niqab, *thawb*<sup>3</sup>), by the way they wear their beard, or how they overtly practice their faith (e.g., they pray anywhere (in malls, on the street, in public parks, in restaurants and so on); they let others know they are fasting, and so on). A practicing Muslim is not necessarily always a visible Muslim.

### **Defining Challenge**

The word “challenge” is used in this study frequently. The definition of “challenge” varies depending on how it is used in a sentence. In this thesis, and in Ontario Ministry of Education documents, the word “challenge” and “challenges” as nouns usually refer to “difficulty/difficulties.” The reason why the word “difficulty” is not used in ministry documents is because of its negative connotation. “Challenge”, on the other hand, connotes a difficulty or a problem that can be overcome. I use the word challenge in my third sub-question (what are the challenges of Muslim students?) to mean this very definition of difficulty: that which can be overcome. When I present the challenges faced by Muslim students in the conceptual

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<sup>3</sup> A *kufi* is a kind of a hat Muslim males choose to wear. A *thawb* is a kind of man-dress men wear. A *shilwar kameez* is a long shirt (or man-dress) and loose pants that men wear mostly from South Asian countries. A *niqab* is a veil Muslim women choose to wear to cover their face.

framework, I mainly use the word to mean the difficulties that Muslim students face in their respective public schools—as adopted from literature in the field—which is mainly experienced by those who adhere to the Islamic faith. I have explained those difficulties in detail toward the end of this chapter.

### **Defining Support**

Before I explore the concept of “support” in this study, I would like to briefly discuss equity and inclusion. Why do I use the word “support” rather than “inclusion” in this study? How are these words different? How are they the same? The Ministry of Education defines equity as “a condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 9). Equity focuses on the distribution of resources according to differential needs, whereas inclusion ensures “representation: a multiplicity of perspective in academic discourse, knowledge and texts” (Dei, 1996, p.176). In other words, inclusion promotes a broad-based curriculum and diverse teaching strategies (Dei, 1996). One way to discover if students feel included in their school is to ask students if they “see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 9). The goals of inclusive curriculum are to “understand, identify, address, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning” (p. 6). This thesis will provide some insight into understanding and identifying the challenges that Muslim students face in an urban Ontario public school. However, in the case of Muslim students, inclusion may not be the only answer. Providing relevant knowledge—including familiar symbols, significant contributions of Muslims, and Islamic history—is both important and necessary for Muslim students. However, inclusivity may not be sufficient (Dei, 1996).

“Support”, in this study, entails inclusion. However the concept of “inclusion” does not capture what is meant by support in this thesis. Muslim students’ needs go beyond mere “inclusion”. Muslims need to be actively and meaningfully “supported”.

My research question uses the word “support” frequently. But what does it mean? I would like start by exploring the word “support” in Webster’s New World College Dictionary (2014) constitutes the following definitions:

1. to carry or bear the weight of; keep from falling, slipping, or sinking; hold up or to give courage or bear (a specified weight, strain, pressure, etc.);
2. to give courage, faith, or confidence to; help or comfort;
3. to give approval to or be in favor of; subscribe to; uphold;
4. to maintain or provide for (a person or institution, etc.) with money or subsistence;
5. to show or tend to show to be true; help prove, vindicate, or corroborate (evidence to support the claim);
6. to bear, endure; submit to; tolerate.

The above definitions are relevant to the discussion of supporting Muslim students. In other words, all those varying forms of support refer to different variations of “help.” However, “help” assumes that the person is in need of immediate and short-lived assistance, and support denotes a continuous and long-term process in place. There are two ways of looking at “support” from the perspective of supporting individuals: real support and intended support. Real support is “contingent, in part, upon a mutual understanding of the outcomes sought as a result of support” (York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald, 1992, p.103). On the other hand, intended support mainly depends on the provider’s view of offering help and assistance. Individuals such as teachers and administrators can provide “intended” support to Muslim students, “but unless those behaviors result in supportive effects for the recipient” it is not deemed as a “real” support (York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald, 1992, p.103). Those who are on the receiving end of the support have to see it as “support” for it to serve as a success.

The education system, specifically in the context of Ontario, where this study was situated, employs the concept of “support” often in its documents. I surveyed the website of the Ministry of Education in Ontario and I did not find any attempts to define support, even though it is used pervasively. However, after reading many Ontario Ministry of Education documents—*Learning for All* (2013); *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education* (2008); *Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education* (2009); *Growing Success* (2010), *School Effectiveness Framework* (2013); *Closing the Achievement Gap: Advice from Expert Ontario Principals* (2012), *Individual Education Plan: A Resource Guide* (2004) — to name a few *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education* (2008) captures to what end support is required: “to help students become the best they can be individually” and “to help students develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring citizens who contribute to our strong economy and a cohesive society” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p.2). The *Education Act of Ontario* uses the exact phrase of the latter statement as its defining purpose of education; the difference is that the Ontario Ministry of Education uses “to help students” and *The Education Act* uses “to provide students with opportunities” (2009, c.25, s.1). It is safe to say that supporting students in general, including Muslim students, in the Ontario context, refers to continually *helping* them attain the purpose of education articulated in the *Education Act*: The purpose of education is to provide students with the opportunity to realize their potential and to help them develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring citizens who contribute to their society (2009, c. 25, s. 1).

### **Well-being Support**

There are many different ways to support students. As mentioned above, support, in school settings, are provided to ultimately give students the opportunity to realize their potential and develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, and caring citizens who contribute to their society. The type of support I refer to in this study, pertaining to Muslim students, mainly draws on one



of the four revised goals of promoting well-being—which is referred to as the development of an “enhanced mental and physical health, a positive sense of self and belonging, and the skills to make positive choices” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p.3). Due to the distinct challenges that Muslim students face, the need to support their well-being by developing their sense of self and sense of belonging is required. I will refer to this as the *well-being support*.

### **Developing sense of self and sense of well-being**

Muslim students, like other students, need all kinds of support simply because of their status as students. However, due to their adherence (or their identification) to the Islamic faith, and the corresponding challenges that come with it (such as islamophobia, dressing different, praying different), a special kind of support is needed for them to develop a “positive” sense of self and belonging related to well-being. In this study, by “positive sense of self” I mean having a positive outlook on him or her identifying (or adhering) to the Islamic faith, so he or she can see themselves as confident, competent, and contributing Canadian-Muslim citizens.

In order to function effectively, individuals need a safe and secure sense of self (Erez & Earley, 1993; Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Developing a sense of self constitutes the idiosyncratic attributes (such as being ambitious or shy) and the social identities (such as one’s gender and faith-affiliation) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). One’s sense of self is crucial because it creates for a person a space where they can situate themselves, which determines how one feels, thinks and does (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Wiley & Alexander, 1987). Individuals build their sense of self in relation to their social identities, which also means that one’s sense of self is influenced by the perception of those around them (Felson, 1992; Weigert, Teitge, & Teitge, 1986). Muslim students, in public schools, are surrounded by peers and teachers who are non-Muslim. They spend about thirty-five hours of their week with those individuals. Naturally, part

of the Muslim students' sense of self will be influenced by how those around the students treat them and perceive them. Therefore it is important that they have the well-being type of support in place to help them develop the "positive" sense of self and belonging I mentioned above.

With respect to my second sub-question (What kinds of supports are in place, in the school, to help Muslim students?), "supports" here refers to those that were intentionally created for Muslim students, but also those that serve the Muslim population at the school but were not exclusively created for them. I will be further looking for supports that were perhaps not created by anyone, but were still identified as a support by the participant groups.

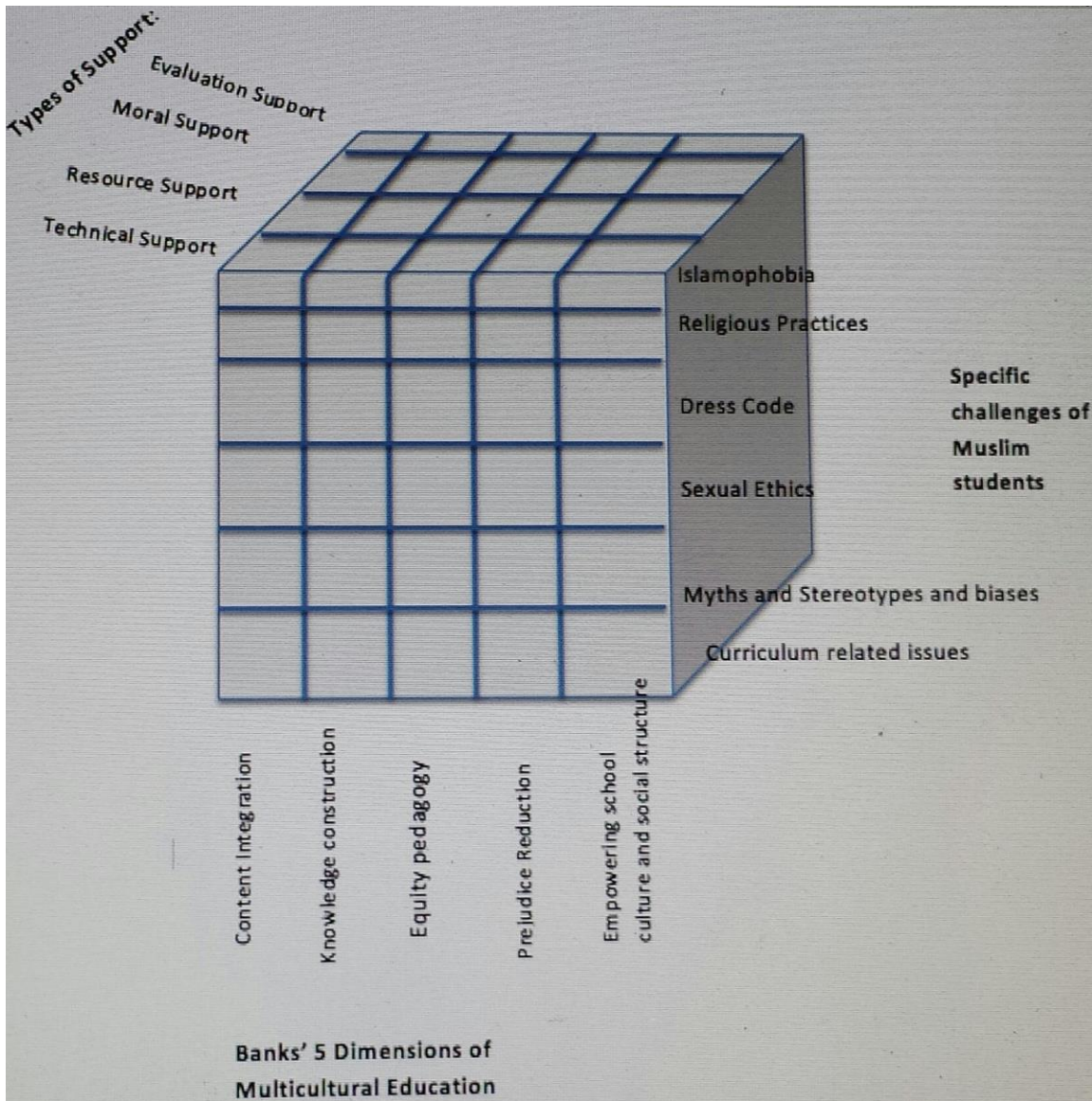
In the definition and conceptualization section above, I have defined four key terms related to this study: "school", "Muslims", "challenges" and "support". Below, I discuss the use and importance of a conceptual framework for the purposes of this thesis and have further elaborated on the distinct challenges of Muslim students.

### **The Conceptual Framework: Challenges and Potential Supports**

A conceptual framework was an effective tool to use for my study because it helped structure my interviews, my findings, and my analysis. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework I used to drive my interviews and my analysis.

**Figure 1.**

**The Six Challenges of Muslim Students and the Corresponding Potential Supports.**



A conceptual framework is a tool used by researchers. It is not meant to be “totems for them to worship” (Weaver-Hart, 1988, p. 11). Therefore, as research evolves, so does the conceptual framework (Miles and Huberman, 1984). In my case, the challenges that were outlined prior to the analysis of the interviews were not as complete as I had thought they would be. I added the

word “bias” in conjunction with “myths and stereotypes.” When I reviewed my findings, I realized that teacher bias was a challenge for Muslim students. Additionally, I added a new category—Islamophobia—to the challenges. I thought it was appropriate to add this challenge to the conceptual framework because of the numerous incidents of Muslims being assaulted on the streets of Toronto (Mehta, 2015; Fine, 2015; Miller, 2015) and surrounding areas recently (in 2016), as well as recent polls showing people’s anxiety toward Muslims (Helly, 2004; CAIR-CAN, 2002; Adams, 2007; Hildebrandt, 2010; Chung, 2011; Mehta, 2015; Fine, 2015; Miller, 2015; Hammer, 2011; Environics, 2016). I discuss bias and Islamophobia further in the challenges below.

Conceptual frameworks are also seen as a “structure for organizing and supporting ideas” (Weaver-Hart, 1988, p. 11). I used the framework as a guide to help with both formulating my questions in order to assist my data collection, and also to provide a basis that I could utilize during the analysis process. Robson captured my usage of the conceptual framework in his quote:

“developing a conceptual framework forces you to be explicit about what you think you are doing. It also helps you to be selective; to decide which are the important features; which relationships are likely to be of importance or meaning; and hence, what data you are going to collect and analyze” (1993, p. 150–151).

The framework provided a structure that gave me the best chance at answering my main research questions: How do educational partners understand issues related to Muslim students? What supports are provided in a school for Muslim students? What are the challenges of Muslim students? The framework mainly helped me answer the research question regarding support. After a few interviews, I realized I had to be very explicit when identifying direct supports provided by the schools. The interview probes in the appendix show the questions I asked in order to get more specific answers. The conceptual framework has complex, dynamic, and also

interrelated key concepts to guide me (the researcher) in focusing my work, and you (the reader) in making sense of where this research is headed.

The conceptual framework is an adaptation of the theories of support and literature review of potential challenges within the context of schools. Theory plays an important role in helping individuals understand, organize, and explain the world. According to Creswell, theories are a systematic explanation for the observations that relate to an aspect of life (2007). I chose Banks's multicultural education (2004) and York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) Types of Support as the lens through which this research was conducted. I will first introduce the four Types of Supports and Banks' Multicultural dimensions and then discuss why I have selected those for my study.

#### **York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald 's Four Types of Support**

One form of potential support that I utilize in this study is York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) four Types of Supports: resource support, moral support, technical support, and evaluation support. Resource support provides the student with tangible material, financial resources, information resources, or human resources. Examples of resource support are: the provision of a laptop, or hiring professionals. Resource support does not provide adequate support by itself, other supports are conjunctively needed. Moral support is when there is person-to-person interaction "that validate[s] the worth of people as individuals [who are] knowledgeable" (York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald, 1992, p.105). Moral support can mean active listening, even if the listener does not agree with the ideas the speaker is presenting. However, providing a non-judgmental, safe space constitutes an aspect of moral support. Technical support specifies strategies, methods, approaches, or ideas, such as training and coaching. Evaluation support "refers to assistance in collecting information that allows support to be monitored and adjusted"; it further evaluates outcome of the educational experiences

(York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald, 1992, p.105). This thesis study can be used by schools as an evaluative support, as it may help the school to determine the impact of the current supports, or lack thereof, it is providing.

### **Multicultural Education**

I selected “multicultural education”, as opposed to “anti-racist education”, as one of the frameworks through which I analyze my findings. *The Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* defines “multicultural education” as “a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates for this purpose content concepts, principles, theories, and paradigms from history, the social and behavioural sciences, and ethnic studies and women’s studies” (Banks & Banks, 2004, xii). Whereas anti-racist education is defined as “the practice of identifying, challenging, and changing the values, structures and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism” (Ontario Anti-Racism Secretariat, 1992). Multicultural and anti-racist education have different focuses, for example, multicultural educators emphasize “educational underachievement” (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1989) whereas anti-racist educators focus on “educational disadvantage” (Wright, 1987). Anti-racist education explores a deeper layer of discrimination or inequity. There are also many similarities between the two approaches: both deem their initiatives a mandatory application to the entire curriculum of the school (Fillipoff, 1983; Troyna & Carrington, 1990) as opposed to being optional or requiring partial integration in the curriculum. Multicultural and anti-racist educators also work diligently against any bias or ethnocentrism in the curriculum (Moodley, 1983; Thomas, 1984). Furthermore, both promote working in small groups and dialoguing to increase interaction between the students (Troyna & Carrington, 1990), and building stronger connections between the home and school environments (Darder, 1991).

Nonetheless, I selected multiculturalism education for numerous reasons. First, I was not concerned with looking at systemic barriers in the school (Troyna, 1982), exploring institutional racism, or looking deeply at assessment inequalities (Thomas, 1984), which are the focuses of anti-racist education. I was more interested in the goals and focuses of multicultural education: identifying culturally-relevant teaching strategies (Gay, 1979) and curricula (Fleras & Leonard-Elliott, 1992) for Muslim students, providing basic knowledge of (Muslim) students' own backgrounds (Hoopes & Pusch, 1979), providing a positive sense of self for Muslim students (Fleras & Leonard-Elliott, 1992). My main goal when starting this study was to explore supports provided in the public school for Muslim students, not to discuss past and present racism and discrimination in schools (McGregor, 1990) or help students find examples of institutional racism and confront them (Thomas, 1984) which are associated to anti-racist education. Second, the way I set up my research study, to explore the supports and challenges for Muslim students through semi-structured interviews (30- to 40-minute interviews with different participant groups) would not have been appropriate for an anti-racist education approach. I looked at some curricular activities that could be implemented to achieve some of the outcomes of anti-racist education (such as analyzing social and power relations), however, I did not find they were sufficient for answering all my research questions on issues related to Muslim students, supports provided at the school, and the challenges that Muslims faced at the school. Third, I was the only interviewer, and I did not have the training or experience to conduct a study that would uncover and examine the focus of anti-racist education. Anti-racist education is required to be “meaningful if the objective and process of research lead to social transformation” and that ensuring “there is genuine power sharing among stakeholders” (Dei & Johal, 2005, p.12). The time constraint of my study, and the limited funding, did not allow me to conduct such an

investigation. Below, I further describe how the five dimensions of Banks's multicultural education provided a sufficient framework to analyze my findings.

Banks is considered the founding father of multicultural education. Multicultural education in Canada focuses on equivalency in achievement, intergroup harmony, and cultural heritage and pride (Mansfield & Kehoe, 1994). However, other scholars purport that multicultural education is an umbrella term that means different things to different people. Supporters advocate a "greater equality of opportunity" (Mansfield & Kehoe, 1994, p.419) for academic excellence through countering discrimination against individuals and institutions (Banks & Banks, 2001; Lynch, 1992; Short & Carrington, 1992). The Ontario Ministry of Education speaks to intergroup harmony in that students should be equipped "with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed to live and work effectively in an increasingly diverse world, and encourage them to appreciate diversity and reject discrimination attitudes and behaviours" (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1993, p.5). I chose the working definition of multicultural education encapsulated by Banks and Banks (2001) as:

An idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school. (p. 1)

Some of the terms associated with multicultural education are also associated with multiethnic education, antiracist education, and culturally responsive education. Mostly the differences seem to be a matter of emphasis (Mansfield, Kehoe, 1994; Lund & Carr, 2008) as mentioned above. Banks (1994, 2004) developed a model to assist educators and school leaders; it is based on his work in the field, his research, and his observations since the 1960s. There are many different theories, typologies, and models such as those referenced by Sleeter & Grant (1999) and Burnett (1994) of multicultural education. All those would fit into one or more of Banks's



multidimensional frameworks. Banks outlined five dimensions of multicultural education: (a) content integration; (b) knowledge construction; (c) equity pedagogy; (d) prejudice reduction; and (e) empowering school culture and social structure (Banks, 1995; Olneck, 1995; Adams, 2000; Banks, 2001; Banks & Banks, 2004). Banks suggests that all the above dimensions have to be espoused to create and implement a comprehensive multicultural educational program. These dimensions are distinct, but they are interrelated and part of a whole. Each plays a role to level the playing field for students; however, none of them are sufficient on their own (Banks, 2004). First, content integration refers to the extent to which teachers use symbols and examples from an array of cultures. The Ontario curriculum is viewed as having a Eurocentric lens and colonial contexts (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, & Muir, 2010; Wane, Kempf & Simmons, 2011; Guo, 2012; Hopson, 2013), thus alienates students, including Muslim students, whose cultural and religious practices are at odds with the dominant culture (Rezai-Rashti, 1994, 2004). The diversity of the student population is not reflected in the curriculum. “Students who do not belong to the dominant group have a hard time finding themselves and their communities in the curriculum ... when they see themselves it will be through the distorted lens of the dominant group (Nieto, 2000, p.97). The *Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009) mentions “when students see themselves reflected in their studies, they are more likely to stay engaged and find school relevant” (p.15). By drawing on students’ experiences and backgrounds, teachers seize opportunities to help students feel connected to their learning (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli, 2009; Kugler & West-Burns, 2010; Toulouse, 2013). Second, the knowledge construction process moves a step further, whereby teachers help students to understand and investigate implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, and perspectives of the specific topic they explore. Third, equity pedagogy refers to teachers who change their

teaching approach to match students' learning styles. Fullan (2012) states that student achievement can be improved by "a sustained and deliberate focus on individual students' strengths and needs" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011, p.10). Fourth, prejudice reduction focuses on reducing racial attitudes and finding ways to use teaching approaches and materials to develop positive attitudes (Levy, Rosenthal, & Herrera-Alcazar, 2010). Research shows that "adolescent prejudice is very real, and that kids come to school with prejudices toward different groups" (Banks, 1998). Fifth, empowering school culture refers to grouping and labelling practices outside the classrooms, as well as sports participation and interaction among staff members. It focuses on the culture, policies, practices, and procedures of the school. Multicultural education is founded on the belief that all students, irrespective of their backgrounds (ethnicity, race, religious affiliation, gender, cultural orientation, language, social class, or exceptionality) should be provided with equal opportunities to access school knowledge (Banks, 1996; Banks, 2001; Bennet, 2002; Basadur, 2004; Chamberlain, 2005; Ernst-Slavit & Slavits, 2007; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, 2014). In other words, individuals should not be marginalized or excluded from accessing the knowledge and skills provided at the school because of who they are.

As shown in figure 1, each of York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald (1992) Types of Support can be directly related to each of the potential challenges Muslims face, discussed below, and each of the five dimensions of multicultural education. There are three differences between the two approaches of support. First, the five dimensions are usually associated with schools and other educational institutions; they encompass the construction of knowledge, school-related activities, and speak to the delivery of curriculum, and so on. The four Types of Support (York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald, 1992), on the other hand, do not

exclusively apply to educational settings, it can be applied to any type of setting. Second, the five dimensions focus on how the support is provided, whereas the Types of Support focuses on where the support is coming from. For example, it can be through class discussions on providing contextual framework for certain cultural practices (as in knowledge construction), or by utilizing policy to involve students outside their classrooms to celebrate the month of fasting—Ramadan—with their extended school community (as in empowering school culture). These examples can further be connected to the Types of Support categorized by York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald (1992). The former example of discussing and contextualizing refers to technical support, and the latter example of celebrating with the extended school community may refer to the evaluative and/or resource support. The Types of Support explores the direct source of support: a person (as in moral support), a result of some sort of training (as in technical support), a tangible resource, such as a prayer room (as in resource support), or finally, the support might have been as a result of a survey or evaluative process (as in evaluative support). Third, and most important, York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) Types of Support do not require a shift in thinking or questioning one's assumptions, or an effort to respect others' life choices. However, Banks's multicultural dimensions force one to reframe their thinking, and require both self-reflection and conscious re-thinking to deconstruct biases and stereotypes. Superficial supports or quick-fix accommodations can be categorized as one of the Types of Support coined by York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald. However, supports that require one to "dig in" and understand and investigate implicit assumptions may be categorized by one of Banks's dimensions. Furthermore, it is important to ask 'why' questions in the interview to help figure out where specific Types of Support come from.

These two approaches of potential supports will help in analyzing the findings. If most of the Support provided are York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) Types of Supports, then perhaps assumptions and prejudices against Muslim students are not being challenged directly. In addition, individuals at the school (such as administrators, teachers, and students: Muslim and non-Muslim) may not be positively exposing students to their own cultural references and to other people's knowledge production. However, if multicultural dimensions are also part of the supports in the findings, then perhaps students coming from different backgrounds (in this case, Muslims) will have an equal chance to have a positive sense of self and belonging.

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 is intended to be interrelated, complex, and also dynamic. All of the four Types of Support, the five dimensions of multicultural education, and the possible challenges of Muslim students are interconnected with each of the other supports, the other dimensions, and the other challenges. Each cell represents an intersection of all the three components (the four Types of Support, the five dimensions of multicultural education, and the challenges of Muslim students) to assist in analyzing the findings. By filling the cells in Figure 1 as themes emerge in the findings, it will become apparent where the supports are concentrated and where they are lacking, and which of the challenges faced by Muslim students need more support.

### **General Potential Challenges of Muslim Students**

Muslims in the West face many challenges due to their religious practices, their creed, and their identification as Muslims, especially nowadays—in 2016—with the media's negative portrayal of Muslims. This is not limited to immigrant Muslims but also those, who were born and raised in Canada, are now, more than ever, afraid to practice their religious beliefs and adhere to a

certain dress code (Helly, 2004; CAIR-CAN, 2002; Adams, 2007; Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2009; Hildebrandt, 2010; Chung, 2011; Environics Institute, 2016). There are numerous reasons why Muslim students, specifically high school students, seem more vulnerable than the rest of the Muslim population. First, for Muslims, high school is a time when they are mandated by their religion to practice their beliefs. Once a Muslim reaches puberty, he or she is obliged to consistently pray five times a day, fast the month of Ramadan, perform the pilgrimage (if physically and financially capable), and give alms. The word *baligh* in Islam refers to the time when a person reaches puberty and therefore is held accountable for observing the religious practices of Islam. Second, research has shown that the adolescent years are a difficult time for youth, given the multitude of pressures from society, home, and school. “Navigating puberty is one of the major challenges faced by adolescents (Silbereisen & Kracke, 1997, p.75). Adolescent years are known for experimenting and also for establishing boundaries:

Adolescence represents a crucial period in preventing health compromising and problem behaviors. Many of these critical health-damaging behaviours—such as substance use and abuse, unsafe sexual practices, and dating violence—begin largely during adolescence and can form basis of lasting behavioral patterns.... (Wolfe, Jaffe & Crooks, 2006, p.46–47).

In addition to the pressures of practicing their beliefs and the challenges that come with practicing those beliefs, Muslims also feel the challenges that all other adolescents feel. Third, Muslim students may feel more vulnerable during this stage because they are not well versed about their religion and its corresponding practices (Ghanea-Bassirri, 1997; Mohamed, 1996). Therefore, navigating not being able to articulate complex reasoning from their faith to use as evidence when asking for a prayer room, or time off for Eid, or to dismantle the stereotypes about Muslims in a class discussion, are difficult challenges. Fourth, adolescents are known to stay under the radar and avoid unnecessary attention on themselves during this time of life when they are trying to “figure things out”, and while their bodies are undergoing “rapid physical,

cognitive and emotional maturation” (Wolfe, Jaffe, Crooks, 2008, p.47). Asking for accommodations and support to practice their faith can be a daunting and draining task. Fifth, Muslim students feel that they are “different” from their counterparts. A phase in children’s lives where they want to “fit in” the most is during the adolescent years, and Muslim students feel that if they practice their faith or are identified as Muslim, they will be seen as “different.”

Adolescent years are known to be a vulnerable and anxious time; when coupled with additional pressures to practice a faith that has been stereotyped and demonized by the media, Muslim youth are faced with challenges many adults would struggle with.

Reviewing the literature and the *Guidelines and Procedures: For the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices, and Observances* (discussed below) circulating school boards in Ontario, I have categorized the potential challenges that Muslim students face in their schools in six categories: religious practice, dress code, sexual ethics, myths and stereotype, Islamophobia, and curriculum-related issues (Ramadan, 1999, 2009; Esposito, 2002; 2004; Emerick, 1997; Shah, 2006; Chan & Schlein, 2010; Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2009). These challenges are all intertwined; they are all interrelated. Also, Muslim students may or may not feel all/some/none of those challenges. I have compiled this list as potential challenges adapted from the literature review and the guidelines circulating the school boards. The horizontal rows of the conceptual framework, in figure 1, show the overt differences that demarcate the additional potential challenges that face Muslims versus their peers. There are other case-by-case differences that may emerge on a day-to-day basis. For example, Sabry (2007) recalls when her then sixth-grade daughter came home from school and asked for a Christmas stocking. When Sabry refused on the grounds that Muslims have different celebrations, the daughter was distraught the next day for not getting candy because she did not bring a Christmas stocking to

school. However, I have focused on the general overt practices and challenges that distinguish Muslim students from their non-Muslim peers. These potential challenges are directly related to Muslims' adherence to their faith and their outward visibility as "Muslims".

Research on Muslim students shows that Muslims tend to highlight their religious identity, unlike other faith groups (Brah, 1996; Jacobson, 1998; Modood, 2005; Shah, 2006). The Environics Institute survey (2016) shows that Muslims are more likely to place a higher importance on their religious identity over their Canadian identity. It is difficult for a practicing Muslim who is in continuous contact with other non-Muslim individuals (e.g., at work, in school, in residence) to practice his or her religion without being a "visible" Muslim; someone who is identified and seen as a "Muslim".

Regarding the potential challenges of Muslim students in schools, a guideline surfaced in the early 2000s and was adapted by the District School Boards in Ontario, entitled *Guidelines and Procedures: For the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices, and Observances*. This document is geared toward all faiths: Bahai, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Jehovah's Witness, Judaism, Rastafari, Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Sikhism, and Church of Christ-Scientist. The guideline is divided into two sections. One section gives general guidelines and procedures on multiple topics, such as religious holidays, dietary requirements, religious attire, and so on. The second section gives a description of each religion and the corresponding challenges that students may face, along with suggestions for accommodations. The section on Islam has about 13 pages entailing challenges and corresponding accommodations that Muslims may face with respect to their everyday school activities. This guideline is a resource used by principals and administrators when a student asks for an accommodation. I looked at all the potential challenges to Muslims listed in the guideline, and

the potential challenges listed in the conceptual framework of this chapter captures the challenges categorically. The challenges enlisted in the conceptual framework also include “myths, stereotypes and biases, and Islamophobia,” which the guideline does not mention. I have listed, in detail, a breakdown of the six challenges that Muslim students may face in their schools. All the challenges are related to one another; one challenge does not stand alone without the others. For example, the challenges of the Islamic dress code and Islamic sexual ethics are interrelated with curriculum-related issues. However, I have discussed each challenge below, separately, for clarity purposes. These challenges are mainly associated with students in a public school in the West because of their adherence, in varying degrees, to their faith. Other faith groups may face one or more of these challenges; however, they are more specific and relevant to those who adhere to the Islamic faith—Muslims.

### **Religious Practice**

Religious practices refer to all the challenges that Muslims face when it comes to the five pillars of Islam, articulated in the previous chapter. Mainly the three relevant pillars of Islam in relation to schools are prayers, fasting, and perhaps performing the pilgrimage.

With respect to prayers, Muslim students may face the challenge of where and when to pray. The two main prayers that fall during the school hours are the afternoon (*dhuhr*) and the evening (*‘Asr*) prayers. Prayers can be performed anywhere. students may pray in a corner in their cafeteria, in their classrooms, in the school yard, in the school parking lot, and so on. However, students may not feel comfortable performing their prayers unless there is a specific space designated to do so. Muslim prayer takes five to ten minutes, and students may feel distracted, anxious, self-conscious or they may be interrupted if they pray in a space that is not specifically designated for prayers. Therefore, students may require a quiet space to pray during



the allocated prayer times. Also, prior to performing their prayers, students are required to do a ceremonial wash called *wudu*, or an ablution, and they may not feel comfortable performing that in the regular school washrooms. This wash includes the washing of the face, hands, and feet.

Because of the fasting requirement, students may need extensions on assignments, exams postponed, or a physical education class cut short. Ramadan is the month when Muslims, who have reached puberty and are physically able, are mandated to fast 29 or 30 days from everything (food, drink, and sexual activity) from dawn to dusk. Islam follows the lunar calendar, so in 2016, Ramadan fell in June. In 2017, it will fall in May. In the summer, which is an accumulation of 18 to 19 hours from dawn to dusk, it may be difficult for some students, who choose to fast, to focus during class or exams. The sick, the pregnant, breastfeeding and lactating mothers, the menstruating women, the elderly, and travellers are exempt from fasting, if needed.

The pilgrimage (*Hajj*) is mandated on anyone who is physically and financially able to participate. It takes place in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, once a year. Students who go with their families to perform this ritual ask for two weeks or so off from school. This is only mandated once in the lifetime of a Muslim.

### **Islamic Dress Code**

Men and women in Islam have a certain dress code to follow. This is part of the emblematic character of Islam, *Haya*, mentioned in the previous chapter. Men's and women's Islamic dress codes are different. This mainly depends on what constitutes as private areas of the body (*'Awra*). For a man, the private area of his body, according to Islamic jurisprudence, is from the naval to the knee. For a woman, it is the same area when she is in the presence of other women. Breasts are not considered private in the company of other women in order to make it easier on lactating mothers to breastfeed in front of female friends and family members without

any restrictions. In the presence of men who are not family members, women cover all their body parts except for their hands and face. Some Muslim women choose to cover their hands and face as well, because they adhere to different schools of thought. Men and women are also required to dress modestly by wearing loose and non-transparent clothes. Although not mandatory, some Muslim males choose to wear a kufi, or a thawb and Muslim women choose to wear a niqab.

There has been increasing media attention regarding the dress of Muslim females. In 2015, a controversy stemmed over a woman wearing niqab during a Canadian citizenship ceremony (Chase, 2015). Recently, the news reported the introduction of a Burkini ban in France: Muslim women who wanted to go to the beach were not allowed to wear a special kind of swimsuit (Burkini) that covered them from head to ankle (Yakabuski, 2016). Even when swimming at public beaches or public pools, Muslim women cover. Women are also required to cover their head with a veil called Hijab, which means “a cover.” Research shows that the wearing of Hijab in a non-accepting environment may lead to low self-esteem, and not conforming to dominant social rules of dressing can compromise one’s academic achievement (Berry & Annis, 1974; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1998; d’Amato, 1993). Therefore, supporting Muslim students requires an environment where Muslims feel welcomed to wear what they want, or are required, to wear.

### **Islamic Sexual Ethics**

The challenges of Islamic sexual ethics mainly revolve around cross-gender relations and modesty in clothing, as well as the issue of modesty in behaviour. I use the word “modesty” here, but the correct term in Arabic and Islam—Hayaa—does not have an equivalent word in English, as discussed in the previous chapter. There are a few issues in sexual ethics that apply within a high school context, after reaching puberty:

- The rules of cross-gender relations in Islam stipulate that men and women try not to engage in any body contact such as playing tag, high fives, pats on the back, shaking hands, and so on;
- Islam prohibits any intimate relations before marriage; therefore, having a boyfriend or a girlfriend is not allowed in Islam; and
- Muslim males and females who adhere to Islamic sexual ethics do not change their clothes in front of one another, because their body from the navel to the knees is considered private (Awra).

Granted, not all Muslims follow these guidelines. Some Muslims follow more restrictive rules, while others are more lenient. When it comes to Muslim youth in high school and perhaps beyond, these specific challenges surrounding sexual ethics are the most difficult to adhere to, mainly because the “mainstream” culture in the West seems to uphold the opposite of Islamic sexual ethics mentioned above.

### **Myths, Stereotypes and, Personal Biases**

The negative portrayal of Muslims in the media may lead individuals to believe the negative myths and stereotypes suggested about Muslims. A stereotype is when one perceives another person based on a specific category; thereby, squeezing him or her into a limited definition (Gamble & Gamble, 2002). Human beings stereotype all the time; making a general statement about something is to stereotype. This kind of stereotyping helps to reduce the complexity of the information we receive (Hewston & Giles, 1986). However, stereotyping becomes problematic when one stereotypes other people because of their membership to a certain group. For example, a common stereotype about Muslims is that men dominate women (Sultana, 2012). Myths, on the other hand, are beliefs held about other people that do not exist (Stephan & Stephan, 1984). For example, people may believe that all Muslims are Arabs, whereas in reality, only 24% of Muslims are Arabs. Lack of correct information, leads to both stereotyping and developing of myths (Fisk & Neuberg, 1990). Those stereotypes and myths become a personal bias, which may lead one to treat or think of another person unfairly. Even

people who have strong egalitarian values and believe that they are not biased may unconsciously behave in discriminatory ways (Dovidio, 2001). It is difficult to rid oneself of personal bias. However, research shows that when one group interacts with a member of another group, one may deconstruct their personal biases. This kind of contact between a marginalized and non-marginalized group is summed up in the intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), which states that the more contact an in-group (non-Muslims, in this case) has with an out-group (Muslims), the more improvement in attitudes and fewer biases occur against them. However, this is not the case all the time. Further, research suggests that when there are preconceived notions or negative stereotypes of an out-group, then there is increased public anxiety, which reduces the beneficial effects of contact with the out-group (Stephan & Stephan 1985; Stephan & Renfro 2002), as well as increases the in-group's reliance on negative stereotypes. Personal biases do not just cause anxiety; some researchers even suggest increased hostility occurring against the out-group (Plant & Devine, 2003). Nonetheless, the ideas that "familiarity breeds liking", or what social psychologists call the "mere exposure effect" (Bornstein, 1989), and the intergroup contact theory explained above, seem to be evident in today's emerging surveys regarding Muslims (Chalabi, 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Interestingly, Chalabi (2015) states that her survey demonstrated that younger non-Muslims who are in continuous contact with Muslims tend to have a more positive view of the Muslim population than the older non-Muslims. The age that separates the young from the old was not specified in the aforementioned survey.

When it comes to schools, studies have been conducted on teachers' attitudes toward Muslims; results of the studies show that some teachers in public schools hold negative attitudes toward Muslims (e.g., Merry 2005; Richardson 2004; Zine 2001; Niyozov, 2010). Teachers'

preconceived notions, attitudes, and biases affect curricula and their relationships with their Muslim students at both conscious and subconscious levels. (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). Teacher attitudes and worldviews are considered to be part of the hidden or deep curriculum of the school (Mukherjee & Thomas, n.d., p. 7; Bhyat, 1993). The *Ontario Royal Commission on Education and Hope* (1950) spoke highly of the importance of teachers in students' lives: "the teacher is the keystone of the educational arch: in the final analysis, the fulfillment of educational aims rest with him/her" (p.564). Teachers are an integral part of the education system. The way they perceive and interact with their students manifests in the pupil's emotional and academic well-being. Furthermore, studies have shown that positive relationships lead to better academic outcomes (Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008; Ladd et al., 1999; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). However, conflict in this relationship also leads to antisocial behaviour and aggression from the students (Ladd et al., 1999; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003). Teachers' personal biases may result in unfair treatment or prejudgment of students and may cause tension in student-teacher relations. A pertinent study by Niyozov and Pluim (2009) extensively reviews comparative and international literature on teachers' views of Muslim students in public schools, and acknowledges that there are negative biases held by teachers. However, the researchers also conclude that the teachers in public schools, in Canada, and in the West, are trying "to understand and accommodate the needs of Muslim students...it is important to acknowledge the progress and the system's willingness to accommodate" (p. 660).

### **Islamophobia**

Recent polls have shown that there is an epidemic of Islamophobia in Ontario. According to the survey published by Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, half of Ontarians in 2016 feel that Islam promotes violence (Keung, 2016). One in three Canadian Muslims have

experienced discrimination (Environics Institute, 2016). Muslim women and Muslim youth are the main recipients of this discrimination (Environics Institute, 2016). Visible Muslims are immediately identified due to their appearance, and therefore are at a higher risk for being victims of hate crimes. Islamophobia is defined as “the dread, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims perpetrated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims” (Runnymede Trust Commission, 1997). Individuals who choose to adhere to the Islamic dress code can be easily identified as Muslims. Such a choice may come with risks and challenges—risks of discrimination and of being the target of hate crimes—in addition to the challenges internally and socially of feeling accepted, respected, and having an “equal status” to the majority, as suggested by Banks (2006). Just to mention a few examples, in the past year, in Toronto—a city that is considered the most diverse in Canada—multiple hate crimes have been committed against women wearing Hijab (Mehta, 2015; Fine, 2015). A woman was punched and had her Hijab removed from her head when she was picking up her child from school. Another woman wearing Hijab was pushed and called a terrorist on a Toronto bus. Yet another woman, who was not Muslim, was assaulted because she wore a scarf similar to a Hijab (Miller, 2015). The negative portrayal of Islam in the media feeds these hate crimes and the pre-existing stereotypes and myths about Muslims.

In schools, Islamophobia can manifest in different ways. One example of this is the controversy that arose when Valley Park Middle School’s principal allowed 400 Muslim students to perform their Friday prayers in the cafeteria in March of 2012. The majority of students in Valley Park, which is in Markham, Ontario, were Muslims—over 800 students (Hammer, 2011). The controversy around this erupted when some members of the community feared that having Muslim prayers in the cafeteria could “spread their (Islamic) ideology” (impose their Islamic

view) and open doors to other “50 different ethnicities and religions asking for different accommodations” (Hammer, 2011, p.1). Though holding Friday prayers in schools has become common practice for most schools in Ontario, increased scrutiny and negative stereotyping and discrimination are experiences that Muslims still feel within their communities.

### **Curriculum-Related Issues**

There are two types of curriculum in schools: the explicit curriculum and the implicit or deep curriculum. Curriculum is defined in many different ways (Barrow & Milburn, 1990; Beauchamp, 1977; Goodson, 1994; Longstreet & Shane, 1993; Marsh, 1997; Wood & Davis, 1978). In simple terms, a curriculum is everything a student experiences in a school (Foshay, 1969; Tanner & Tanner, 1975; Su, 2012). The explicit curriculum is what is observed in ministry documents and teachers’ plans. The educational environment in which the actual, or explicit, curriculum is taught is referred to as: the implicit curriculum (Goldstein, 2001), the deep curriculum (Dei, 1996b, p.177), or the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968).

The explicit curriculum includes accommodations required by Muslim students in drama, dance, music, and physical education. Some schools of thought in Islam have stricter guidelines when it comes to drama, dance, and music. Adherences to those schools of thoughts see drama, dance, and music as prohibited in Islam, especially if they are performed in front of the opposite gender. Zine (2001) mentioned the reason why Muslim children are not allowed to dance or participate in cross-gender activities that involve close contact: “physical contact between males and females is allowed only among close family members.... Social distance within the Islamic tradition is therefore also gendered and situations of casual physical contact between males and females violate Islamic moral codes” (p. 407). With respect to music, the content and instruments used are a matter of contention for some schools of thought. That being said, the

specific guidelines for the permissibility of musical instruments, and the reasoning behind them, are beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, the Islamic dress code and sexual ethics both play a role in the required curriculum-related supports for students. One such opportunity for support may arise in physical education classes. Muslim students may ask for permission to wear clothes that are within the guidelines of Islam, and may also request more privacy and time to change and shower.

With respect to the implicit curriculum, intentionally or unintentionally neglecting to represent other communities' societal and historical contributions in both the curriculum and the classroom affects the learning environment for students of those communities (Dei, 1996). In Canada, Eurocentric knowledge continues to be the starting point for all sciences, social sciences, and literature in the curriculum (Rezai-Rashti, 2004; Zinga, 2006; Guo 2001, 2012; Dei, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2001; Hopson, 2013), which can be alienating for Muslim students (Anwar, 1986; Murad, 1986; Parker Jenkins, 1995; Rezai-Rashti, 2004; Yousif, 1993; Zine, 1997; Sweet, 1997; Berns McGown, 1999; Shamma, 1999b). Research has shown the negative impacts of a Eurocentric curriculum on those who do not identify as European or "white" (Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, & Muir, 2010; Kempf & Simmons, 2011; Guo, 2012; Hopson, 2013). Gay (2000) suggests that classrooms be more consistent with students' cultural orientation. Classrooms should be more reflective of the students and their identities so that students can self-identify with their learning and in their classrooms.

Integrating Muslim knowledge and contributions, and representing them in the "mainstream" curriculum, is part of an inclusive education and is one of the tenets of multicultural education. The integration process does not just involve celebrating Ramadan and Eid, accommodating daily prayers, and celebrating a Diversity Day; rather, it should go beyond



superficial and sentimental efforts, and involve a more meaningful discussion (Dei, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000; Donald & Rattansi, 1992). By including Muslim perspectives, teachers can help engage Muslims in the learning process by providing them with content relevant to their experiences and culture, which would increase their sense of belonging and improve their self-esteem. Other students can benefit from Muslim knowledge, contributions, and symbols by being introduced to intercultural knowledge and experience, and also by sparking meaningful dialogues among different cultural groups, as well as among teachers and students. Such knowledge can also challenge the dominant Western paradigm and expand a learner's horizons beyond that which is familiar to them (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). Furthermore, "the inclusion of Muslim history and Muslim contributions in Western public school curricula is surely legitimate, not only for affirming Muslim students' self-esteem and identity but also because it is part of the antihegemonic discourse" (Niyozov & Plum, 2009). This is not intended to exclude other knowledge; other non-Western knowledge also would challenge the current discourse—"but to contribute to a plurality of perspectives and knowledge about schooling in the Euro-Canadian context" (Dei, 1996b, p.177). Especially in lieu of the negative portrayals of Muslims so prominent in the media, knowledge of Muslims and their contributions may act as a healthy barrier against fear, racism, and discrimination.

### **Other Relevant Studies on the Experiences of Muslim Students in Public Schools**

There are numerous other studies that have looked at Muslim students' experiences. However, I will just draw on research that has been done in Canadian public schools, mainly high schools, as that is most relevant to my study. Earlier researches conducted by Zine (2001), an anti-racist researcher and an ethnographer exploring, among other research interests, Canadian Muslim studies, interviewed Muslim students and Muslim parents and recruited

students and graduate students. Her research questions revolved around the experiences of her participants, who identified themselves as committed to their religious practices, in negotiating their Islamic identity in Canadian public schools. In her studies, Zine reported that building a strong Muslim peer system, both inside and outside their respective schools, was one of the main supports for Muslim students. Moreover, a recent study by Ali (2012) investigated Muslim girls' experiences in their public schools. Her findings indicate that her participants had an overall positive experience in their respective public schools and they felt both respected and validated. However, the study does not state how those girls felt validated and what part of who they were was validated. Ali's study also shows the challenges that Muslim girls face in their schools with respect to prayers, Hijab, and "fitting-in". A similar study conducted in Toronto by Chan & Schlein in 2010, explored a female Muslim student's experience in a public school, although in this case it was a longitudinal study of the girl attending kindergarten through grade 8. Interviews were conducted with the stakeholders (parents, administrators, teachers) around the female student throughout her schooling. The findings of this study revealed the "difficult balance that school staff need to achieve between Muslim values and non-Muslim influences" (p. 264), and the importance of Muslim students seeing themselves in the curriculum. Furthermore, Stonebanks and Sensoy (2009) published a compilation of works from other authors on Muslim students' voices in Western schools. Those voices include parents, teachers, and school leaders, who are all Muslims affiliated with a public school in the West. One of the peer support stories presented in the book featured the voices of girls who were not allowed to play soccer while wearing Hijab for safety reasons, and the positive response of the team, who forfeited and stood in solidarity with their Muslim teammates. With respect to the media portrayal of Muslim struggles, in a study conducted by Mahmud (2012), eight individuals from a public school were

interviewed — including students, former parents, community volunteers, and the school principal — on their experiences with having a congregational prayer in the school, which received nation-wide media coverage. Her findings showed “the persistence of post-colonial discourse and prejudice towards Muslims and Islam in media and public perspective” (p. ii).

Each of the above studies lends some relevance to my study. The common thread between all these studies and my investigation is that it is based on Muslim students’ experiences in their respective public schools. All the above studies discuss challenges (Zine, 2001; Ali, 2012; Chan & Schlein, 2010; Stonebanks and Sensoy, 2009; Mahmud, 2012) that Muslim students face, and some of them explore how individuals are able to negotiate those challenges in the context of an Ontario public school (Zine, 2001; Ali, 2012; Stonebanks and Sensoy, 2009).

### **Challenges Associated with Supporting Muslim Students**

The sheer number of cultures represented in a typical classroom in Ontario makes it difficult, for the teacher, to cater to each culture effectively. The work intensification and increasing demands on teachers make it extremely difficult for them to find time to take workshops on teaching equitably. Given the increasing demands and the intensification of teachers’ work, how realistic is it for teachers to meet the “evolving and complex social, academic, and religious needs and aspirations of diverse Muslims and non-Muslim religions or communities”? (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009). Other than the work intensification of teachers, there are three main challenges associated with supporting Muslim students: (a) lack of knowledge to teach in multicultural classrooms; (b) lack of knowledge about Muslim students; and (2) lack of Muslim teacher representation.

### **Lack of Knowledge to Teach in Multicultural Classrooms**

According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2012), Ontario's immigrant population has continued to increase more than other provinces. Most of those immigrants from diverse backgrounds are children and youth entering the public school systems (CIC, 2012). Ontario classrooms are becoming more diverse with students coming from different ethnic, cultural, religious, language, and economic backgrounds (Egbo, 2011; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel & Campbell, 2005). It is unfair to students of diverse backgrounds to be taught in such a way that their unique identities are negated. In order for students to feel "engaged, included, and respected" they need to "see themselves reflected in their learning environment" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p.5). Furthermore, including students not only helps them feel a sense of belonging, it also translates to higher academic achievement. Students who come from schools that acknowledge different facets of their identities tend to achieve higher academically (Taylor & Cummins, 2011). However, Gay and Kirkland (2003) indicate that teachers have limited experience with people who are different from themselves. Numerous research shows that teachers are not well prepared to work with the ever-increasing immigrant population (Malatest & Associates, 2003; Turner, 2007; Palmer, 1998). Moreover, documents have surfaced indicating teachers' fear of Muslims after 9/11 (McDonough & Hodfar, 2005). I mentioned that recent surveys show that Islamophobia is on the rise. However, it is detrimental, to young Muslim students attending public schools, to have teachers who feared Muslims or Islam.

### **Lack of Knowledge about Muslim Students**

Numerous research shows that teachers in public schools show racism and Islamophobia toward their Muslim students on both the conscious and unconscious levels (Alladin, 1996; Abu el-Haj 2002, 2006; Abukhattala, 2004; Lynch, 2007; Zine, 2001, 2008). Not having a deep understanding of Muslims and Islam may cause other problems. For example, Rezai-Rashti

(1999) reported on an incident when a Muslim student knew that his principal lacked understanding and had stereotypical views of Islam and Muslims, so she used that as an excuse to convince the principal that studying math was against Islam (p.53). This mainly stems from a lack of knowledge of Muslim values, beliefs, and practices. Some teachers who work with Muslim students may require special training to help them recognize the Muslim struggle and worldview. Although Muslim students come from all walks of life, there are specific challenges that arise for them when practicing their faith. It is important that teachers know and understand these challenges. A superficial understanding of Islam may not be sufficient. One can easily develop prejudices against Muslim students by just knowing the do's and don'ts of Islam—the bare minimum, often without context, vital background knowledge, or credible sources. Meaningful discussions surrounding Islam and Islamic contributions would help teachers acquire an appreciation for Muslim students' history, experiences, struggles and cultures.

### **Lack of Muslim Teacher Representation**

The background of Ontario teachers does not reflect the background of the students in their respective schools. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) identified one of the contributing factors to the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of racialized students as a lack of teacher representation (OHRC, 2007). Despite the increasing number of diverse students in Ontario public schools, the majority of teachers continue to be from white, middle class, monolingual backgrounds (Childs, Broad, Gallagher-Mackay, Sher, Escayg & McGrath, 2010; Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005). Having a greater representation of teachers reflective of the student body not only helps students see themselves in their teachers but also acts as a support for the students of that specific background and worldview. For example, some studies have shown that Muslim teachers have friendlier attitudes toward Muslim students than non-Muslim

teachers (Selby 1992; Zine 2008). Unfortunately, recent studies have found that the gap of representation between teachers and their students is widening. (Ryan, Pollack & Antonelli, 2009). There have been attempts by the Ministry of Education to combat this problem by changing their hiring process. The Ministry Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119 of April 22, 2013 (*Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario*), called on boards to ensure that the workforce is reflective of the diversity of students within their communities.

### **Islam is not Monolithic**

A word of caution: while Muslims have a shared Islamic history, beliefs, and practices due to their religion, they also encompass a broad racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity (Sirin & Balsano, 2007). Also, just like other youth, Muslim students “vary in terms of the salience of religious beliefs and practices in their lives” (Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2009, p.5). I refer to “Muslim values, practices, and beliefs” often in the following chapters. However, this is not to assume that Islam is monolithic. I focus mainly on the shared beliefs and practices between Muslims and do not delve into cultural or ethnic diversity of Muslims for the purposes of this paper. When I use the words “beliefs and practices,” by beliefs I mean the creed, or the first pillar of Islam “of the belief in one God and the Prophet Mohamed as the final Messenger,” and by practices I am referring to prayers, fasting, alms giving, and the pilgrimage, as presented in the Literature Review. Furthermore, the values that I refer to when I mention “Muslim values” is the emblematic character of Islam—Hayaa—translated as bashfulness and modesty in the previous chapter. This study mainly focusses on how Muslim values, beliefs, and practices, in their varying degrees, may pose additional challenges in a Muslim student’s life while attending public school.

## **Summary**

This chapter defined some key terms related to the thesis, such as: “school”, “Muslims”, “practicing Muslims”, “visible Muslims”, and also explored the word “support”. I presented the three-dimensional conceptual framework, which constitutes the six potential challenges Muslim students may face in their schools, and the corresponding support adapted from Banks’s multicultural dimensions and York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald ’s Types of Support. Furthermore, challenges of supporting Muslim students in schools were discussed, and a word of caution was offered regarding the diversity of Muslims, while stating the importance of not painting all Muslims with the same brush.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

The main inquiry of my study is: How does a public school in Ontario support Muslim students? To investigate my question, I conducted a qualitative study. I selected social constructivism as my epistemological perspective; my interviews were driven by the shared experiences of the interviewees. I used a case study to provide an in-depth understanding of how a public school supports Muslim students and utilized semi-structured interviews with 32 participants, which included students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the local Imam, all from a school in Maingate, Ontario, Canada. The name of the city in Ontario—Maingate—and the district school board—Maple Grove District School Board—are pseudonyms used to protect the privacy and anonymity of this case study.

### Social Constructivism

The paradigm that I chose to use for this investigation is social constructivism. A paradigm is “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p.17). The idea of social constructivism was articulated by Mannheim and the works of Berger and Luckman’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) and Lincoln and Guba’s *Naturalistic Inquiry* (1985). There are other researchers who have crystallized the paradigm of social constructivism, within different approaches, such as Guba and Lincoln, (2000); Schwandt (2000, 2003); Neuman (2000); Crotty (1998); Young & Colin (2004); Hammersley & Atkinson, (2007).

Social constructivism fits well with my research as it focuses on the subjective meaning of individuals’ experiences of certain things. This worldview mainly relies on the participant’s view of the situation, or his or her reality in relation to the situation. Mertens (1998) suggests, “reality is socially constructed,” which means the social world is considered as non-existent unless one



experiences it or creates meaning. Therefore “meaning” is seen as something that is constructed.

The individual’s mind and perception play important roles in constructing their reality.

(t)here is no objective truth waiting for us ... Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct different meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomena. Isn’t this precisely what we find when we move from one era to another or from one culture to another? In this view of things, subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning. (Crotty, 1998, p.9)

One’s perception of a phenomenon can be attributed to the nature of one’s engagement with an object or event, as well as how one actually relates to individuals. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This approach to research, in the attempts to understand the challenges of Muslim youth and the supports that the participants view as helpful, is paramount to this study. Understanding the youth’s perception of how they relate to their schools and how they engage in their respective schools helped advance the goals of the investigation. In this study, I used the terms “Muslim youth” and “Muslim students” interchangeably.

Moreover, social constructivism does not start with a theory but rather generates “a theory or pattern of meaning” (Creswell, 2007, p.21). With this approach, open-ended questions allow the researcher to listen carefully to what individuals say. Although asking questions is one method of understanding participants’ perceptions, constructivists rely on the “process” of the participants’ interactions with others as well. Researchers “focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (Creswell, 2007, p.21). The researcher’s own background is taken into account; constructivist researchers recognize that their own interpretation and experiences is a lens through which they view the participants’ perceptions and their world. The goal of the researcher

was to interpret the constructed meaning of the participants regarding the phenomenon under study. The constructivist's worldview is demonstrated in studies where individuals speak of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994), and in this investigation the goal was to capture the views of participants. Therefore, the questions asked by the researcher were broad and open-ended (Creswell, 2007) to better explore how individuals interpret their reality.

To understand the challenges of Muslim youth and the supports in place in a public school, I ensured that I had multiple people's perspectives included in my research. I have also utilized a case study to develop an in-depth description and analysis of how Muslim students are supported.

### **Case Study**

I chose to use a case study to assist in answering my research questions. The approach that drove my case study inquiry was social constructivism, with its subjective "meaning" that the participants' make meaning of their world. Such meaning-making varied from one participant to another and thus became an integral aspect of social constructivism. This approach helped me explore the challenges of Muslim students and the support provided for them from different participants' viewpoints. These individuals included Muslims from different upbringings (such as different family structures or different socioeconomic statuses) and levels of practice, as well as from participants with different roles in the school.

Furthermore, a case study was a good fit for my study because its focus developed an in-depth description and analysis of how Muslim students were supported in a specific "case." My unit of analysis (case) was a high school with a high population of Muslim students in Maingate, Ontario, Canada. A case study provided the parameters within which the study took place, as well as the details and in-depth data collection needed for this study.

Stake (2005) categorizes case study as a strategy or method, exclusively as a unit of study—in other words, a case within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007, p.73). According to Yin (1994), case study has a distinct advantage for “how” and “why” questions (p.9). Case studies are best suited to provide an in-depth understanding of a case or cases. Merriam (2007) lists three special features of case studies, stating that they are: particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic.

My case study meets all three of Merriam’s criterions:

1. It is particularistic in that it is focused on the support for and challenges of Muslim students in a specific public school;
2. It is descriptive in that it includes a thick description of the case; and
3. It is heuristic in that it gives the reader a better understanding of the supports and challenges offered to Muslim students in a specific public school, and thus can contribute to literature on supporting Muslim students.

Heuristic case studies shed light on the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon; its “insights on how things get to be the way they are can be expected to result from case studies” (Stake, 1981, p.47). Case study allows for the exploration of beliefs and practices of participants in depth, over time, and through various contexts (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). Generally, case studies are more effective than other research designs in the analysis of human interaction (Sjoberg, Williams, Vaughan, & Sjoberg, 1991).

Furthermore, employing a case study allows for investigating complex social units (Merriam, 1998). My case study is positioned in real-life situations and contexts, which offers a rich and holistic description of the case (Yin, 2003). The rich, thick description provides a means of studying complex social units with multiple influences. Selecting a case study also helped me as a researcher play the role of an active listener and therefore try to simulate the role of a public school in supporting Muslim students from the participants’ perspective, while also honoring the level of complexity that the participants encounter in their daily lives (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Stake, 1995).

According to Stake (1995), there are three types of case studies: (a) intrinsic, where a case is selected for an intrinsic interest in the case; (b) instrumental, when a case is selected to explore an issue in order to gain understanding and insight into the inquiry; and (c) collective, when several cases are studied to form a collective understanding of the specific issue. My investigation is an instrumental case study where I studied a specific public school and aimed for some kind of insight into the challenges facing Muslim students and the support system provided for them. I report my findings in the context of one specific school.

### **Background of the School**

I searched the school's website for some basic background on the school. The school in my study is part of the Maple Grove District School Board. The capacity of the school is around 1,200 students, but only around 600 students are currently enrolled at the school. Half of the students that attend the school come from different parts of the region. In other words, the students do not necessarily live in close proximity to the school; they come from different residential areas.

There were three main distinct features of the school. First, it was considered small with respect to the number of people attending. Other high schools in Maingate have higher populations than the school in this study. Second, the school is known to be a composite school, which is an institution where there are many different programs, both academic and non-academic. Some examples are the special needs programs, the ESL program, an adult education program, and the different pathways. A pathway is a term used for a multiyear plan that prepares students for a transition from high school to their chosen destinations. Third, the school is considered one of the more diverse schools in the city. Below, I explore the details of the semi-structured interviews in-depth.

## **Data Collection Methods**

I pursued my investigation as a case study drawing on semi-structured interviews. I selected interviews as a data collection source because one-to-one interviews helped me understand the meaning of what the interviewees were trying to say (Kvale, 1996, 2003, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviewer can probe for in-depth information, as well as request clarifications. In addition, looking into the supports for Muslim students in a school and the challenges that those youth face are sensitive topics that some individuals may not want to share with others present; the interview process ensured privacy for the participants. Focus groups were also utilized and were mostly useful when there were power differences between the participants and another group of people, and/or when one wanted to explore the degree of consensus on a specific topic, and/or the intent was to look at the group's language and culture (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Berg, 2007). I interviewed participants and analyzed their responses to understand thoroughly how the school supported Muslim students and what issues the educational partners associated to Muslim students' challenges. In the following sections, I discuss how and why I selected a specific high school as a site and case for this study. I then outline the steps of data collection and selection of participants, followed by the details of the semi-structured interviews.

### **Selection of Site**

I chose to look into a public school because numerous studies show that public schools are a place where Muslims start to face challenges with respect to asserting their faith and practicing their beliefs (Collet, 2007; Sarroub, 2005; Zine, 2008). The reason why I selected a high school rather than an elementary school was because high schools in the city of Maingate are composed of grades 9 through 12, and recent data shows that the average age of when

puberty occurs is 10 or 12 years of age (Gluckman & Hanson, 2006; Steingraber, 2007). In Islam, once individuals reach puberty, they are accountable before God to observe the religious practices required of them. It is also during this time that individuals start to consciously shape their worldviews and make important choices that will shape who they become as adults (Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008). High school is also known to be a place where Muslim students face more pressure with respect to the different standards of cross-gender interactions and dress code from an Islamic standpoint, in contrast to the “mainstream” popular culture of high schools (Collet, 2007; Elnour & Bashir, 2003).

My next step was to find a high school with a high Muslim population. Since my study revolves around looking at support for Muslim students, my assumption was that a school that has many Muslims would have distinct supports in place to cater to their large Muslim population. I explained in earlier chapters how Muslim students may potentially face distinct challenges due to their religious practices and the negative images portrayed by Muslims by the media. I spoke to many people regarding which school to select in order to meet the purpose of my study. Those individuals included Maple Grove District School Board employees working with minoritized<sup>4</sup> students, Maple Grove District School Board teachers, Maingate’s Muslim community leaders, and the Imam of the local mosque. All of them agreed that a school with a high Muslim population would best serve the purpose of my study.

Although boards do not keep track of how many students in a school are of a specific religious background, when I spoke with a member of the Maple Grove District School Board, a general sense was conveyed that there were one or two schools in the Maingate area with a high

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<sup>4</sup> McCarty (2002) coined the term “minoritize” to explain the power relations and processes that marginalize certain groups within the larger society.

population of Muslims. By “high” he clarified that he meant 20% or more of the student population were Muslim.

### **Data Collection**

I selected one school in Maingate, Ontario, and conducted semi-structured interviews of various participant groups to collect data. I interviewed the principal; the vice principal; a sample of: teachers, students over 16 years old, parents of the students of the school; and the local Imam. Utilizing maximum variation sampling, which is a type of purposeful sampling, I recruited participants. Merriam (1998) posits that “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p.61). Selecting a high school with a high Muslim population would serve this purpose of understanding and gaining insight into supports offered to Muslim students.

I applied for an ethics approval from Western University and when I was granted approval in October 2014, I applied to Maple Grove District School Board to conduct external research at one of their sites. A few months later, after receiving an approval letter, I contacted the principal of one of the high schools with a high Muslim population in the Maingate area. The interviews took place between February 2015 and April 2015. Interviews were conducted over the phone, and via Skype. Face to face interviews were a challenge because some interviews took place early in the morning and others took place later in the evening. For some participants it was more convenient that I call them on weekends or in the evenings while they were home and others wanted to do the interviews while they were at work. Interviews were scheduled so that it was convenient (both with respect to time and location) and comfortable for the participants.

## **Selection of Participants**

I contacted the principal of the school, who extended his full endorsement for this study. I then sent a letter of invitation, and information letters to all the teachers and students in the school, requesting their participation. Non-Muslim students also received letters of invitation. I also contacted the Muslim Students' Association (MSA) at the school to recruit participants through them. I reached out to the principal and vice principal, who spoke to the teachers to help encourage participation. The principal and vice principal suggested certain teachers that I should speak with who were known to be supportive and empathetic toward Muslim students. Over the course of a few weeks, I received emails and calls from potential participants. I received a few of the parent participants through the settlement worker at the school. I also got some help from students who encouraged their parents to participate in the interview.

A purposeful sampling approach to selection of the participants was employed. The participants selected were seen as individuals with rich information regarding the topic at hand (Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, purposeful selection “means that the inquirer selects the individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and a central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p.125). Both my site of study and the participants seemed to have met the requirements to help me answer my research problem. Maximum variation sampling, which is a type of purposeful sampling, allowed me to “capture and describe central themes” across the different participant groups (Patton, 1990, p.172). Naturally, it is difficult to achieve variety in a small sample; however, with maximum variation “any patterns that emerge ... are of particular interest and value” for this study (Patton, 1990, p.172). Therefore, in order to maximize variation, I began with some specific criteria for recruiting my sample. The participants fell



under one, two, or all three of these categories—they may have information on or experiences with the following: (a) challenges encountering Muslims; (b) challenges encountering administration with respect to Muslims; and (c) support systems provided for Muslim students. By employing maximum variation sampling, I was able to capture different experiences from different participant groups, and also was able to “investigate core elements and shared outcomes” (Patton, 1990, p.172). Additionally, all of the teachers and administrators interviewed were non-Muslim except for one teacher. All the other participants (parents, students and the Imam) were Muslim.

The sample size for each participant group depended on a number of criteria, including the size of the school and the diversity of the school. Kvale (1996) suggested that “the number of interviews tends to be around 15 or 10” (p. 102); therefore, the number of group participants in this study was set at 12, with a caveat that if no new themes were generated, then the number might be as low as 8 or as high as 15 until there was saturation within each participant group. This was a sample large enough to demonstrate saturation and/or to capture a fulsome example of the various views around this topic. The purpose was to derive holistic, rich, and in-depth data required to answer the research questions. I tried to select teachers from each department and from a diverse ethnic and cultural background, as well as both males and females. Table 1 shows the planned number of interviewees in each participant group and the actual number of participants. When I started to hear the same themes emerging, I knew I did not need to recruit more participants than those interviewed. My main concern when recruiting participants was to ensure appropriate representation from each participant group, but I did not notice a developing gender imbalance in the student and parent interviewees. When all the interviews were completed, there were three (33%) male students and six (67%) females students who

participated in this study. Females were particularly over-represented among parents—eight (80%) females and two (20%) males. With respect to staff members there were six (55%) males and five (45%) females (which also included the paraprofessionals). I tried to recruit equal numbers of males and females in each participant group; however, getting in touch with fathers was very difficult. Even those interviews that were held with fathers were shorter than average. Females in both the student and parent categories were more available to participate.

Table 1

PLANNED NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES AND THE ACTUAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

**TABLE 1**

**PLANNED NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES AND THE ACTUAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Planned Interviewees by Participant Groups</b>		<b>Actual Interviewees by Participant group</b>
<b>Muslim Parents</b>	12	10
Male: 6		Male: 2
Female: 6		Female: 8
<b>Muslim Students</b>	12	9
Male: 6		Male: 3
Female: 6		Female: 6
<b>Teachers</b>	12	8
Male: 6		Male: 6
Female: 6		Female: 3
<b>Paraprofessionals<sup>5</sup></b>		Female: 2
		Male: 0
		Female: 2
<b>Vice Principal (Male)</b>	1	1

<b>Principal (Male)</b>	1	1
<b>Local Imam (Male)</b>	1	1
<b>Total Participants</b>	38	32

As shown in Table 2, a code has been assigned to anonymously identify each participant in a way that indicates his or her participant group and gender. These codes are used in this chapter to attribute quotations to the respective participant.

TABLE 2  
REFERENCE TABLE FOR PARTICIPANT GROUPS' INTERVIEWS

<b>Table 2</b>	
Reference Table for Participant Groups' Interviews	
<b>Acronym for Participant</b>	<b>Description</b>
FP	Female Parent
MP	Male Parent
FS	Female Student
MS	Male Student
FT	Female Staff
MT	Male Staff
MI	Male Imam
MA	Male Administration (principal and vice principal)

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

The purpose of interviewing is to obtain a detailed description of individuals or events. Interviews are used “to access the perspective of the person being interviewed” (Patton, 1990, p.278). It is a way to explore information from the participants that is not apparent in mere observation (Merriam, 1998; Schostak, 2006). Interviews are known to be one of the most

important sources of case studies, as they generate first-hand responses from the very subjects of the research. Semi-structured interviews provided an appropriate forum for the open-ended questions that were required for this kind of research, and also allowed for impromptu flexibility and prompting when needed (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Semi-structured interviews constituted key questions that helped guide the interview, but they also provided the participants and me the flexibility to delve into an idea or a response more thoroughly. This approach allowed me to ask certain questions to clarify responses. The prompting was intended to be non-leading in nature; examples of prompting were the following: What do you mean? Tell me more about that. One-to-one interviews also helped build rapport with the participants to increase both their confidence and trust in me, the interviewer.

During the 30 to 40 minute interviews with the participants, I asked about existing programs in the school and classroom, the supports employed, and the challenges faced. I started with at least three open-ended questions related to the research sub-questions to allow for opportunities to explore interpretations (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and “subjective understandings” (Schutz, 1967). The main goal of the interviews was to capture the meaning of what the interviewees were saying (Kvale, 1996, 2003, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009)—usually the story behind the participants’ experiences (McNamara, 1999). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Code names were given to the participants for anonymity. The questions were asked in a systematic and consistent order. Interviewees were asked the sub-questions of this study:

1. How do you understand issues related to Muslim students?
2. What kinds of supports are in place in the school to help Muslim students?
3. Considering the supports, what challenges do Muslim students face in the school?

I was cognizant that each participant group brought a different perspective to my case study and therefore my questions to each group were tailored to capture different viewpoints. Furthermore, in order to ensure that I generated a rich description of (a) the challenges that face Muslim students, and (b) the support systems provided for the students to feel supported in their endeavours, I asked each of the parents, teachers, and the principal about the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy to explore whether the support provided for Muslim students was as a result of the policy, a need, or a moral imperative. This helped me understand if the support was superficial or symbolic, or perhaps a ground-up approach to supporting Muslim students.

I began the interviews with general and non-leading questions for each party. Below are some of the questions I asked. The sequence of the questions was structured strategically to maximize response and garner a variety of perspectives. Appendix A shows the specific interview questions for each group of participants. Conducting interviews is not an easy task, and therefore requires researcher astuteness (Bourne and Jenkins, 2005; Silverman, 2006). The questions started with some straightforward background questions to help ease the interviewee into the interview, followed by more broad and open-ended questions. Developing rapport was an important aspect of the interview (Palmer, 1928; Douglas, 1985; Blohm, 2007). Other than the sequence of the questions, developing rapport also included building trust and respect. Building rapport also helped ensure that the interviewees felt safe and comfortable so that they were able to share their experiences comfortably. The interviews took place in person or over the phone or by Skype. Participants who were interviewed by phone felt comfortable to conduct interviews via telecommunication.

The questions were open-ended, and thus not binary “yes”/“no” answer questions, in order to ensure a more explorative approach. Furthermore, the conceptual framework guided my

interview questions. For example, when I asked about the challenges of youth or students, I looked for answers that had been already mentioned in the literature, as shown in the conceptual framework, but I was also open to other answers that may not have been included in the framework. The words “youth” and “students” were used interchangeably in this study.

I interviewed four participant groups to maximize opportunities for responses to my main research questions. I interviewed teachers and administrators mainly because studies show that teachers think about helping their students problem solve and live in diverse societies (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2003; Derman-Sparks, 1993). I wanted to explore if teachers and administrators understood the needs of their Muslim students and what support was offered to help them live in plural societies. I interviewed students because they were the recipients of any support offered at the school and I wanted to see how they perceived this support, or whether they were aware that support even existed. Interviewing the providers of support was as important as interviewing the recipients of support, as each group may perceive support differently. I also interviewed parents to understand their perspective of their children’s challenges and also see how they perceived the public school that their children attended. Children’s elementary and secondary schooling usually revolves around the choices of the parents. Therefore, the parents are seen as the “clients” of public schools. Finally, I interviewed the Imam to get his perspective on the challenges that youth faced. The Imam usually is well aware of challenges of youth as he is considered a religious advisor to the Muslim community and to the school board at Maingate. I knew that he attended social events in schools and had a good rapport with the youth. I was also aware that religious leaders of different faiths met with the local district school boards to help build bridges between the school and the community.

While all interviewees were asked a common set of questions, members of some participant groups were also asked specific questions specific to their experiences. I asked the Muslim participants about their conception of Islam. The reason why I asked this question of the Muslim participants (students, parents, and the local Imam) was because studies show that Muslims, more than any of the other major religious groups in Canada, deem their identity as Muslims as very important (Environics Institute, 2016). I wanted to explore Muslims' level of affinity toward their religion in my study. I decided not to ask teachers a similar question because when I conducted a pilot interview with a teacher and asked a question regarding the teacher's understanding of Islam, especially given the political climate, the teacher became uncomfortable. Moreover, the discussion of this study was not about Islam; it was focused on the support for Muslims in the school. The political climate during the time of my interviews, which took place between February 2015 and April 2015, seemed hostile toward Muslims. This was during a time when numerous terrorist attacks were committed in the name of Islam, such as the 2015 Copenhagen shooting, the Boko Haram attacks in Cameroon, and the France Dijon attacks. Below are some specific details related to each participant group. While these events may not have influenced how all teachers viewed their Muslim students, or felt about Islam, the general public and media atmosphere appeared hostile towards Muslims.

#### *Interviews with Principal and Vice Principal*

The interview with the principal was straightforward. I contacted him initially by sending him the standard letter of invitation for an interview, accompanied by a standard letter of information regarding my project. The principal and vice principal were very helpful and inviting. We had a few conversations before I got started with the interviews at the school. They both offered any support needed to help me recruit participants. The vice principal suggested

specific staff with whom I could speak. He also spoke to these staff members to give them notice that I would be emailing them individually to invite them to the study.

I interviewed the principal and vice principal separately. I asked them to describe the Muslim community in the school. Then I asked if there were any programs specifically in support of Muslim students. I also asked if they were aware of any challenges that Muslim students faced. Did they encounter any requests for accommodations or support? If yes, how did they deal with them? What was the due process for such requests? Were there any proactive measures they took to ensure the support of Muslim students, in light of the negative media representation of Muslims? I further asked a question regarding school culture, as it was directly related to the fifth dimension of Banks's multicultural education. Furthermore, I probed for any policies, practices, and procedures undertaken to ensure an empowering school culture, as these are all related to the fifth dimension.

Issues related to students and accommodations were mostly referred to the vice principal. The vice principal had an interesting connection with the Muslim students because he had lived in the Middle East for some time, so he was familiar with their culture and Islamic practices. He also spoke some Arabic with the students and the parents when greeting them in the hallway.

#### *Interviews with Teachers*

I sent all the staff letters of invitation and letters of information regarding an interview. The principal mentioned that during a staff meeting he encouraged staff to participate in the study. Two staff members came forward voluntarily to participate in the study. The rest of the staff, whom I interviewed, were referred by the vice principal. During interviews with the staff, I asked general questions such as the following: Generally, how did they describe their students? Did (Does) she/he have any Muslim students in the past (present)? Were they aware of any



challenges that the Muslim youth faced during their time at the school? Also, I directly asked the staff if, collectively or individually, they had come up with any “supports” to ensure that the Muslim students felt that their religious creed/practices were not impeding on their academics and their sense of belonging at the school.

### *Interviews with Parents*

I mainly recruited parents through students and through the settlement worker. During interviews with the parents, I asked how they felt about their child attending the public school, and why they felt that way. I also asked if the school that their children attended was a choice for the parents or the default community school. If it was their community school, would they have preferred a different school, and if so, why? They were asked if they were aware of any supports, and the affordances and constraints offered by the programs. Parents were asked whether the school’s practices had been helpful or a hindrance in supporting their students through their school journey. I probed for examples or anecdotes of when parents felt their children were supported and understood in the school.

### *Interview with Students*

I recruited some students through the Muslim Students’ Association (MSA) at the school. The president of the MSA helped me with the recruitment process. I was connected with the president through my contacts with the broader Muslim community. I interviewed the students and asked them general questions, such as: How did they feel about their school? Had they ever been to a school other than public school? I also asked them what they thought the challenges were of youth in general, and Muslim youth specifically. Such questions were directly related to my conceptual framework. Furthermore, I asked what general programs (curricular/non-curricular) they were involved in, why were they involved in these programs, and what benefits

the programs offered. Another question I asked was: What challenges had they faced due to their affiliation with Islam? Questions such as—Do you see yourself in the curriculum? Do you relate to the curriculum? —helped explore any of the five dimensions of Banks’s multicultural education adopted in my conceptual framework. Students were also asked about the schools’ practices and what the students viewed as helpful or a hinderance to their faith and religious practice. I asked students about their sense of comfort outside the classroom or in after-school activities, as this related to the school culture stated in Banks’s fifth dimension. I probed for examples or anecdotes of times where the students felt supported and understood in the school.

#### *Interview with the Imam*

The Imam was easy to contact. I contacted him through the local mosque website and he responded to my email within 24 hours. We set up a time to conduct the interview. The Imam was asked questions specifically related to his extent of interactions with schools and school administrations: What challenges do Muslims face in the community? What did he perceive as ways that schools or educational institutions could support Muslims? Had the Imam been involved in any consultations or mediations to help with accommodations of Muslim students or further support of their educational experience? Did he visit any schools regularly or had he done presentations in the past at schools or for school leaders?

#### **Analysis**

Data collection and data analysis are usually conducted simultaneously in case studies (Merriam, 1988). According to Rossman & Rallis (2003), data analysis starts when the research starts, with the research questions and the research design, as they all “provide preliminary foreshadowing of the analysis” (p.270). The analysis process was an inductive process where

themes were generated using the data collected. I outline below the step-by-step process employed for data analysis.

### **Steps of Analysis**

I used Dedoose, a qualitative research software, to mainly organize the data so that it could be easily searched and examined to set the stage for data analysis. Dedoose allowed the storage of information and coding of the data in a spreadsheet. A code is “a word or short phrase that captures and signals what is going on in a piece of data in a way that links it to some general analysis issue” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.286). The Dedoose software program was utilized to electronically organize the transcripts. The codes were analyzed based on descriptors, and the software provided options for generating graphical displays. The analysis was an inductive approach where a systematic analysis of data took place, keeping in mind the conceptual framework discussed earlier in this paper. Stake (1980) suggests that the aim of the analysis using case studies is to uncover patterns of meaning or themes. I kept track of my data, focused on the main research questions, and probed for deeper meaning (Creswell, 2003; Miles & Hubberman, 1994; Stake, 1995); I also made notes after every interview to document any reflections I had.

I followed a few steps when analyzing the data from the semi-structured interviews. Merriam (2001) articulates two stages for a case study analysis: (a) organization of the data into a cohesive case study database; (b) development of the final case study, where patterns and themes emerge from what the participants report in the interviews and the conceptual framework delineated above. The data acquired were in the form of interview quotes. The analysis followed the steps delineated by Marshall and Rossman (1999) and Miles and Hubberman (1994). The data were broken down into groupings of words and sentences by highlighting and labelling

them using the Dedoose software, in order to identify emerging themes. The data were clustered into the themes, as well as my research questions, which shared “certain patterns or configuration” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.174). Emergent themes were compared across groups of interview participants and to concepts identified in the conceptual framework. A matrix was created, in which I presented the questions lined up horizontally and the participant groups lined up vertically. I used point-form to “differentiate the responses of each participant within that group. This format helped to distill the major themes and responses to each question by participant groups” (Ahmed, 2010, p.24).

Each cell in the conceptual framework was an intersection of a challenge, a type of support, and one of Banks’s five dimensions of Multicultural Education. The framework helped to categorize the data in the analysis stage. If the principal or the teacher mentioned that he/she conducted an activity in their media literacy class to dispel some of the myths and stereotypes associating Muslims with terrorism, then this would have fallen in the intersection of myths and stereotypes (in the challenges category), specifically knowledge construction and prejudice reduction. Furthermore, this example would also be categorized in the cell that intersects both empowering school culture (in the five dimensions category) and technical and moral support (in the Types of Support category).

Interview data constituted audio digital recordings and notes taken by myself for each of the questions. The audio digital recordings were transcribed by the researcher and then read and re-read (Creswell, 1998), together with any pertinent notes from the interview, to identify recurrent and/or contrasting themes and ideas with respect to the research questions. Lincoln and Guba posit that data analysis “involve[s] taking constructions gathered from the context and reconstructing them into meaningful wholes” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 333; Erlandson et

al.,1993, p.116). Where possible and useful, appropriate tabular and graphical data displays were constructed for inclusion and discussion in the thesis.

Dedoose provided visual tools, such as charts, tables, and plots, to show the number of individuals who spoke to the emerging themes. For example, Dedoose displayed which of the themes were mentioned most frequently in the data. The capacity to filter an entire subset from the overall data gave a deeper meaning to the data at hand.

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research is usually questioned by positivists for not meeting validity and reliability measures in the same way that quantitative research does. However, qualitative researchers are more concerned with trustworthiness. There are four criteria that qualitative researchers take into account to ensure that their studies are trustworthy: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Guba, 1981; Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). I have taken each of those concepts and presented how my study considers these criteria in order to reach trustworthiness.

### **Credibility**

One of the aspects of trustworthiness in qualitative research is to explore its credibility. Merriam asks a question to help researchers with credibility: “How congruent are the findings with reality?” (1998). MacDonald and Walker (1977) articulate that by interviewing “what people think they’re doing, what they say they are doing, what they appear to others to be doing, and what in fact they are doing, may be sources of considerable discrepancy . . .” (p.186). I used rich, thick data from multiple participants from different groups in the school to lend credence to the overall data collection. Furthermore, I employed member checking, to determine if my interpretations were aligned with the participants’ experience. This helped explore the

complexities of the interpretations. I used member checking by restating and summarizing the participants' answers, and asked further questions to ensure accuracy (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Transferability**

Merriam (1998) states the transferability of qualitative research means the extent to which the findings of one study can be generalized to other studies. This study looked at one school in the Maingate area, and I cannot assume that the practices and experiences that were highlighted at this specific school represent those in other schools. Case studies are not meant to be generalizable. However, rich, thick descriptions of the context of the participants and the interview data have provided the reader sufficient information to decide whether the case has transferability to other cases. If the reader finds similarities in the detailed description, then this case study may have transferability with that specific reader's case (Creswell, 2003; Stake, 1995).

### **Confirmability**

In quantitative research, objectivity in one's findings may be less difficult than qualitative research. Confirmability refers to ensuring that the findings are actually captured by the experiences of the participants rather than the background or meaning-making of the researcher. One way, according to Miles and Huberman (1994), is for the researcher to be forthcoming about their positionality. Furthermore, due to the nature of interviews, one cannot foresee all the consequences that might occur. While interview schedules did not include overly intrusive questions, I began all the interviews by reminding the participants of the voluntary nature of their participation and that it was best that they give answers reflective of their thoughts, rather than what they perceived to be acceptable to the researcher. All potential interviewees had to be fully informed of confidentiality. I was committed to treating all information obtained with proper and

professional care, sensitivity, and respect. Furthermore, I ensured that all the interview data came from open-ended questions to allow the participants to express their views. I was also cognizant of my interpretations of the findings, that it may be shaped by my personal experiences and background.

### **Dependability**

Dependability in qualitative research refers to obtaining similar findings if the same methods and the same participants were employed. With respect to qualitative research in general, I was considered an instrument of data collection and analysis. Minimal training and guidelines are provided for novice investigators prior to embarking on interviewing. I conducted interviews during my masters program for my thesis, and I also conducted some interviews as a Research Assistant in the education department at Western University. I read an array of research papers that conducted similar studies and I also discussed the skills and steps required to conduct semi-structured interviews with my supervisor and colleagues, who have had experience collecting data through semi-structured interviews.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I provided a detailed outline of the methodology, including the research design and the research methods used. I discussed the reasons why I chose to use a case study for the purposes of my study. I then presented how I interviewed 32 participants from different groups of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the local Imam. I presented the importance of semi-structured interviews in this study and provided a sample of the questions asked of each participant group. I outlined the steps used for a thematic analysis and the use of

Dedoose software to help with the analysis of the interviews. I concluded with presenting how I ensured the trustworthiness of this study.



## **CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS: ISSUES RELATED TO MUSLIM STUDENTS**

### **Introduction**

The findings were organized according to themes that emerged in the interviews. Some of these themes appeared to represent broadly shared views or conceptions, while others were distinctive of a particular participant group or perspective. In essence, each “theme” was a pattern or emphasis that appeared to provide meaningful insight into my research problem. There are three findings chapters corresponding to the three sub-questions. This chapter primarily answers the sub-research question: (a) How do educational partners of the school understand issues-related to Muslim students? In this chapter there are five findings: specific curriculum-related challenges; contrast between the home and “mainstream” culture; Muslim students’ lack a deeper knowledge of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices; distinct gender roles and expectations; teachers speaking about other teachers’ biases.

In the next findings chapters, I report on the findings of my second and third research questions: (b) What kinds of supports are in place in the school to help Muslim students? (c) Considering the supports, what challenges do Muslim students face in the school? The reason I structured my questions in this order is because generally, from working in a school and working with youth, I noticed that the way Muslim youth perceive their challenges is very different from the perspectives of those around them. In the second findings chapter (Chapter 6) I explore all the supports available to Muslims that I learned about during the interviews. I present the supports that were in place at the school from the perspective of all those involved (students, teachers, administrators, parents, the local Imam). In the final findings chapter (Chapter 7), I present the challenges that Muslims students face, using the students’ own quotes, considering there are some supports that are already in place. I start this chapter by reporting on some information about the school, which was not available on the website.

## Background of the School

I gave some background information on the school in the methodology chapter; in this section I provide more details about the school, which were gathered during the interviews. Not all the information I required was available on the website, so I asked the teachers and administrators to provide me with some background first-hand. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, Maingate is in the Maple Grove District School Board in a city in Ontario. The capacity of the school is around 1,200 students, but around 600 students are currently enrolled at the school. Half of the students that attend the school commute from different parts of the region, as mentioned by one of the administrators: “a lot of our students, more than half I would say are bussed from outlying areas” (MA2). Therefore, the students do not necessarily live in close proximity to the school, but rather come from different residential areas. Table 3, below, shows some of the main distinctive features of the school in this study.

TABLE 3 DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE SCHOOL

TABLE 3 DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE SCHOOL	
<b>Distinctive features</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Relatively small school with a big facility</b>	600 students Capacity: 1,200
<b>Composite School</b>	Special Needs Programs ESL programs Adult education program Different pathways
<b>Very Diverse</b>	Middle Eastern Korean Central American Colombian Mexican Peruvian Indian and Pakistani Somalian
<b>High Muslim Population</b>	Over 40% Some staff have suggested 60% to 80% of the

According to the administrators, the school did not keep data on which countries students originate from; however, by talking with the staff, I was able to come up with a general list, which included the Middle East, South Asia (Pakistan, India) Korea, Central America, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Somalia. The school is also known to have a high Muslim population. Some staff have estimated the Muslim population to be as high as 60% and others have estimated it at 40%. The following is a quote by one of the administrators regarding the diverse demographics of the school.

The vast majority of our immigrant students are Arab and Muslim. We do have a smaller number of Latino students and also of Korean students. The vast majority are Muslim students and Arab students. And once again at the top of my head, I would say probably 80–90% Middle Eastern and maybe 10–20% South Asian, so we have a few Pakistani, Indian Muslim students, but the majority are from the Middle East (MA2).

When I asked how the school was different from other schools, all participants mentioned that there was a high percentage of Muslims in the school.

Furthermore, there were two features of the school's Muslim population that the participants spoke about. First, that the Muslim population at the school had a great rapport and reputation with both the teachers and administrators. One of the teachers gave examples of how the Muslim students had a positive reputation: "I would say our Muslim students tend to be more respectful and more helpful. I can actually give examples, today when I was trying to carry stuff, I had a bunch of [Muslim] students help me put stuff up on the walls for me, I had them open doors for me, carry stuff." (MT). The administrators also spoke about how the Muslim students were generally pleasant: "[Muslim] kids here more than any other school are lovely and respectful and hold doors open for you. It took me a month to realize that when [Muslim] kids come into my office and stand they are just waiting for permission to be seated, you know it's

things like that.” Second, the Muslims students, generally, were known to be academically oriented. Teachers and administrators mentioned this: “I would say the Muslims students are more driven, they tend to be more disciplined” (MT3). The physics teacher also insinuated that the Muslim students were focused on academics when he mentioned that most of the students in his physics class were Muslim. He was suggesting that those who enrolled in physics usually have high academic expectations: “my classes, especially physics, I have a large number of Muslim students (MT). Other teachers suggested that the parents propel their kids to work hard and achieve high grades: “their parents want to provide them with opportunities they never had” (FT).

### **Conception of Islam**

Students, parents, and the Imam were asked “what is Islam?” and the more personalized question “What does Islam mean to you?” I discussed in the Methodology chapter why I did not ask the teachers and administrators about their understanding of Islam. During the time of the interviews, in the beginning of 2015, the topics of Islam and Muslims were unsettling due to the terrorist attacks recently committed in the religion’s name. Thus, I resorted to asking only the Muslim participants about their perception of Islam. This thesis revolves around Muslims and Islam and the challenges associated to adhering to the Islamic faith, therefore I thought it was important to explore what, at least, the Muslim participants thought of Islam. Did they view it as a burden? Or did they adhere to it because of their fathers and forefathers? Were they comfortable with Islam? or did they feel it challenging to follow? This section will be a shorter section than the rest of the findings sections because only two participant groups (Muslim parents and Muslim students) and the Imam were included and their answers were very brief and to the point.

Three main themes emerged from this question:

1. Islam is a way of life;
2. Islam is peace; and
3. Islam is all about having good manners.

### **Islam is a Way of Life**

One of the most frequently mentioned themes was that Islam is a way of life. Most of the student participants mentioned Islam as a comprehensive and all-encompassing aspect of their lives. One of the female students described her view of Islam as "... a way of life, it is my religion, it means a lot to me and what I do with my life" (FS6). Even though some participants did not use "way of life" specifically, they mentioned that it was a major aspect of who they were. For example, one parent said, "Islam means everything. I love to be Muslim; it is like everything in life; it is the praying, the faith, and you can feel secure in Islam, and you can find everything in Islam" (FP7). Others have suggested similar feelings regarding their view of Islam:

My whole life revolves around Islam. That is my faith and everything I am doing in life is depending on this, like asking myself is this the right thing which I am doing, is that the right thing by my faith, by my Islamic rules or not that is what I always think of before I do anything. (FP1)

This mother expressed how Islam is the lens by which she views everything. This finding is similar to the survey that surfaced a few months ago about Muslims, stating that Muslims tend to highlight their religious identity (Environics Institute, 2016; Brah, 1996; Jacobson, 1998; Modood, 2005; Shah, 2006). The second most-mentioned response regarding the participants' views of Islam was that Islam is synonymous with peace.

### **Islam is Peace**

Another frequently mentioned theme by the participants was the word "peace" when it came to Islam. As reported in the literature review, the word "Islam" in Arabic means "peace"

(Emerick, 2002). Most of the participants mentioned the word “peace” almost as a knee-jerk reaction to the word “Islam”. As soon as I asked the question, “What does Islam mean to you?” the word “peace” was the first word that those participants articulated.

One of the students mentioned peace as one of the major aspects of Islam: “I think the biggest thing that it [Islam] has to do with me is peace ... I looked into it deeply to some extent, and it is a peaceful religion” (FS1). One of the parents voiced that the message of peace is not just for Muslims but for the world: “It carries a message of peace to everybody” (FP5). Others consistently emphasized the concept of peace and their affinity to the religion: “It’s a peaceful message to all humanity. It’s the religion of peace to everybody, to the whole humanity” (FP5). This parent wanted to make sure that it was clear that the message of peace in Islam was not exclusively aimed at a particular group of people; rather it is a message of peace for everyone.

### **Islam is All about Having Good Manners**

Most of the parents mentioned good manners in relation to Islam. They said that the way they viewed Islam was dependent on one’s manners. Most of the students spoke about Islam in a more general way; however, the parents seemed to mention Islam as a set of rules relating to good manners. One mother captured this theme by mentioning that the religion “... is all about good treatment [of others], so you represent your Islam through the way you are acting and dealing with others because that is what our religion is all about” (FP3). The parents’ main focus was to highlight the code of conduct of a Muslim. One parent even suggested that he witnessed good manners in Canada more than his home country, which he attributed to Canada being more Muslim. “Islam is my religion; it is about good manners so it teaches us how to be good people; we found in Canada that people behave like Muslims” (MP1). Others mentioned the importance of treating everyone, without exception, in a “good” way: “It guarantees good treatment of

everybody no matter who they are, and their religion” (FP5). One of the parents also suggested that in his view there was no point to education if it was not married to good behaviour: “A person can be very well educated but if he does not have good manners then his education is not important like his manners” (FP3). When I asked what the parents meant by good manners, all the parents mentioned that good manners was directly related to respecting others. Equating Islam with respecting those whom we interact with is related to the third dimension of Hayaa (Hadith Database, 2002), elaborated on in the chapter on literature review. Hayaa, in the context of interacting with others, is associated to common courtesy and respect.

Interestingly, despite all of the teachers I spoke with suggesting that academic achievement was one of the important priorities of Muslim parents, the findings of this study shows that the parents were more concerned about the manners of their children than their academics. Below, I discuss teachers, administrators, parents, and the Imam’s views on Muslim students’ challenges.

### **Issues-related to Muslim Students**

One of the core subjects of this research and undertaking is how educational partners understand the issues related to Muslim students. When I use the term “educational partners” I mean teachers, administrators, parents, and the Imam. In this section, I explore what teachers, administrators, parents, and the Imam, of this study, think the challenges are that Muslim students face within their school. It is important to note that all high school students face challenges and struggles, and some of these challenges are very similar due to the developmental changes that students undergo and the societal pressures that are placed on them. Therefore, I prompted teachers and administrators to speak of issues that were not generally applicable to all

teenagers in high school, but rather were specific to Muslim students. I was also cognizant to see how, and if, there was a difference between what parents viewed as challenges and what teachers/administrators perceived as struggles for the Muslim students. Five issues related to Muslim students are presented in this section. Two of these issues were agreed upon by all the educational partners, two other issues were agreed upon by just teachers and administrators, and one issue was agreed upon by the parents and the Imam. Educational partners (parents, teachers, administrators, and the Imam) found that Muslim students face specific curriculum-related challenges and a contrast between their home and “mainstream” cultures. With respect to teachers and administrators, two issues were raised: a distinct gender role and expectation among Muslim students and some teachers spoke about other teachers’ biases. The Muslim parents and the Imam noticed that Muslim students lacked a deeper understanding of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices. Table 4 shows the similarities and differences of how each of the educational partners views the issues regarding Muslim students.

Table 4

EMERGING THEMES ON ISSUES FACING MUSLIM STUDENTS IDENTIFIED BY EDUCATIONAL PARTNERS

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<b>Table 4</b>
Emerging Themes on Issues Facing Muslim Students, Identified by the Educational Partners

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**Teachers, Administrators, Parents, and the Imam:**

Specific Curriculum-related Challenge  
 Contrast between the Home and “Mainstream” Culture

**Parents and the Imam only:**

Muslim Students’ Lack a Deeper Knowledge of Islamic values, Beliefs and Practices

**Teachers and Administrators only:**

Distinct Gender Roles and Expectations  
**Teachers Speaking About Other Teachers’ Biases.**



## **Specific Curriculum Challenges**

There are general challenges that Muslim students face regarding curriculum expectations in high school. Regarding this theme, I discuss specific examples that teachers, administrators, parents, and the Imam mention in relation to curriculum challenges for Muslim students.

### **Drama and dance.**

Teacher participants reported that some of the female Muslim students seemed to be restricted on what they could and could not do when it came to certain curriculum activities:

... a student was in a certain class—the drama dance class—and her older brother wanted her to drop the class; they're a more strict family and they don't like the dancing [of boys and girls] together... I told the parents how much she loved the class and how much she loved the dancing, but I felt there's a gender issue there and I couldn't understand why.  
(FT1)

This teacher saw talent in one of her students in her dance class. She was disappointed to see the student stop dancing because the parents did not see any value in dance for their daughter. The parent made his daughter drop dance and drama, as mentioned by the teacher, based on a school of thought in Islam that teaches that females are not permitted to dance in front of non-family males. In the Islamic faith section of the literature review, I mentioned the different schools of thought within Islam and how the religion is not monolithic (Gregorian, 2011). Some parents adhere to a stricter school of thought when it comes to drama, music, and physical education. For example, one of the parents mentioned that she does not want her child to participate in dance and drama “I don't like it if one of my kids wanted to dance or [audition] for a play or stuff like that. I will not be content about it and I don't think that they [the school] force them to do that. it is optional you can take it or leave it.” (FP1). One of the teacher recognize the parental restriction and suggested an alternative “we have some students where their parents say that they

can take the dance class but they will not appear on the stage so we find them another job” (FT2).

Even within this specific strict school of thought, there are varying levels of strictness. The Imam also mentioned his experience with schools and school boards asking him for evidence of the Islamic faith when parents requested curriculum-related accommodations:

The administration will get in contact with myself to say that okay you know we have this concern with a parent; is this something that’s a valid concern or is it just whatever. And so based on communication we are able to accommodate for the parents to say that yes they have a right that they follow this opinion. (Imam)

The Imam is generally referring to administrators from different schools who contact him about accommodations with respect to curriculum. The administrators also ask for the Islamic reasoning for such accommodations.

### **Physical education.**

Physical education in this high school is mandatory for grades 9 and 10. Physical education teachers and coaches in this study mentioned that accommodations were made a few years ago, where the department of physical education split the classes into exclusively males and exclusively females, starting from grade 9. According to the physical education teacher, the split between males and females was made “in particular for the female students, where some of them don’t believe that they are supposed to participate in front of males.” He explained that some of the female Muslim students believed that they were not permitted by their religion to play sports and perform physical education curriculum expectations in front of their male counterparts. He also mentioned that the school struggled, and continues to struggle, to fully engage Muslim females in physical education: “I am not sure what the root cause is; we struggle to get females on teams compared to the percentage of male students.” He further elaborated that another reason the school made the split a few years ago was because of the drop in female

enrollment in physical education “... the percentage of females that take phys. Ed. after grade 9 drops dramatically and we knew that they don’t want to participate in front of the males.” When I asked if he thought this was a Muslim-related issue, he paused and reaffirmed that the drop was significant among female Muslims. Another example was when a coach suggested that during physical education, Muslim men dominated the field and did not “allow” the females in their team to participate. When I probed further and asked if this was an exclusively Muslim male issue, the teacher thought it through for a few minutes and said that it may be a male issue rather than a Muslim issue.

Parents also mentioned some accommodations their children require in physical education. One parent specifically spoke about the segregation of males and females in physical education:

...and it’s girls together...the area is closed and nobody can see and they’re comfortable ... no man can come from anywhere and look at them from any windows. It’s kind of hard and they don’t understand. Not all the teachers have fully understood or have respect for this point (FP5).

The parent here says that although the classes are segregated, teachers may not fully understand what it means for the gym to be completely out of bounds for the males in the school. She is referring to all the glass or see-through walls in the gym to be covered. Usually Muslim girls, in their segregated physical education classes, take their Hijabs off when they are playing sports. So, in her view, segregation is not just having males and females in separate gym classes but also for the teachers and administrators to ensure that no male is allowed to enter or see the Muslim girls playing sports.

During Ramadan, teachers were well aware of their students’ fasting situation. One coach knew that fasting meant “... not to eat or drink during the day” and understood that it would take a toll on the students’ performance. “I know they are not participating at a 100% today ...

because they are starting to run out of energy here.” In physical education and in sports teams, teachers and coaches consistently mentioned that they tweaked their curriculum expectations during the month of Ramadan to alleviate any undue hardship on the students.

Some of the previously stated curriculum challenges also relate to the challenge of “myths, stereotypes, and biases” category of the conceptual framework, such as the physical education teacher attributing the drop in Muslim female enrollment in physical education.

### **Contrast Between the Home and “Mainstream” Culture**

Teachers, administrators, parents and the Imam reported that Muslim students were trying to navigate between two different systems. I use the word “mainstream” here for lack of a better word. Each participant uses a different word, such as “popular” culture, “Western” culture, or “Canadian” culture, to show the contrast they mean when they speak about the differences between the Muslims’ home (and family) culture and the outside culture.

Teachers and administrators framed this issue through the lens of freedom—that the home culture and faith expectations are more restrictive than the expectations of their non-Muslim counterparts. One teacher’s explanation of navigating through the two systems: “I see girls struggling with wanting to be loyal to their faith and families but also wanting to embrace and fit in with less conservative popular culture” (FT3). Another teacher specifically spoke directly to this difference:

... it is the conflict between the two cultures. The parents are more often more restrictive, in what they allow them [their children] to do, and who they can hang out with, and the way they dress ... so the Muslim girls are going on this slide and they have this tremendous guilt that they are doing those activities that are counter to the way they have been raised. But they also have been living in this culture for so long ... it is living a double life. (FT4)

The teacher discusses the conflict in the two cultures as students are part of both their home culture and the freer culture outside their home. This may drive them to lead double lives.

Another example of the contrast that the teachers see between the home and the “Canadian” culture:

the Canadian culture becomes difficult for them [the Muslims] to balance the two... the parents don't like to accept the norms of the Canadian culture, it becomes difficult for the student, for they are forced into it on a daily basis (FT1)

The teacher uses a specific understanding of “Canadian” that seems to be drastically different from the way Muslims are, in the school. Other teachers have used the word “Canadian” to refer to those who are not Muslim, or perhaps those who are white and Christian. Another teacher speaks about the population of the school, that it is not all white, or Christian, or English-speaking: “I don't know, maybe because of the population of our school not all like Canadian English speaking kids. I don't know” (FT 2). A few of the teachers I interviewed seem to not refer to Muslim students as “Canadian”.

Similarly, most Muslim parents did not see their children as “Canadian” either. Parents referred to people in the school who were not Muslims as “Canadian”. In this example, the parent is saying that she is trying to expose her kids to other Muslims and to family members so that her children do not start comparing themselves to “Canadians”:

I tell my kids about Islam and about our traditions, so they can see it besides their friends, so they are not going to say: why me I am around Canadian and they are not doing that or they are not doing this. I have family here so I am around my family, my nephews and nieces more than anybody else (FP6)

The parent above is showing the contrast between the two cultures and explaining her way of solving the conflict, which is by ensuring that her kids are surrounded with people who are from the same culture or religion. Parents also spoke regarding their children in an “us versus them” mentality when it came to culture, beliefs, and values: “our gender interaction is very different from them. They can play with each other they joke with each other, you know like touch each

other, give high fives” (FP 5). Another parent specifically mentioned “we are not like them” (FP6) or “we don’t do that,” (FP6) referring to having a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Although, parents, that I have interviewed, do understand that other non-Muslim parents may have similar values as them, they still see them as the “other”, as in this example: “you know kids here they want to go out, as a mother not just me even my kids’ Canadian mothers who are non- Muslim.” (FS1). Parents, teachers, and administrators seem to view the Muslim students as living in two parallel, non-intersecting, cultures.

### **Lack of Deeper Knowledge of Islamic Values, Beliefs and Practices**

Muslim parents and the Imam have frequently mentioned that the students do not have a deep understanding of Islam. In other words, Muslim students may know that it is mandatory to wear Hijab or to pray five times a day, but they may not know the reasons behind these rituals:

And unfortunately we understand that youth, they are bright and they’re intelligent and they have lots of potential but at the same time there’s been a tendency for things to be watered down a lot, to become you know, consumerist’s, superficial human beings which don’t think which don’t necessarily give things a lot of deep thought. And when I say that don’t think meaning to reflect deeply upon certain matters of life. And so for the Muslim youth it becomes a challenge when that in and of itself as part of their identity but if they don’t realize it and they have a superficial understanding of Islam, and unfortunately a lot of times they simply don’t know, there’s a lot of ignorance, you know (Imam).

The Imam here is suggesting that superficial understandings of Islam do not help Muslims understand the nuances of their faith. He mentions below why it is important to have deeper meaning of Islam:

But it’s, there’s a meaning behind that. And so for a person to be able to understand the meaning behind that and to be able to take it on and feel proud that this is who I am this is part of my identity, this is a liberating factor (Imam).

Some view Islam as restrictive. The Imam is saying that if a deeper understanding of the religion was attained, the youth would appreciate the essence of Islam as a liberating factor, rather than a

restrictive one. Additionally, the Imam was disappointed to see that some youth did not even have a superficial understanding of Islam:

when I was at the dinner they had a number of trivia questions that they were asking the students and some of these questions were very basic and a lot of them weren't able to answer them, you know. One question that was brought up was to name the five pillars of Islam, and of course you saw a bunch of hands go up but then the individual that was chosen to answer struggled to name the five pillars and they had to get help from the audience. And so this is just to show the reality of the you know the circumstances that they are in, there is a lot of work that needs to be done (Imam).

Knowing the five pillars would be considered a bare minimum of knowledge about Islam, and the Imam saw that the youth present in the dinner lacked that kind of basic understanding of their religion.

On this note, a few of the parents were saddened that the choice of public education meant that their children did not get their dose of Islamic studies and Quranic studies. One parent, whose child came from a private Islamic elementary school, was disheartened that the cost of giving up Islamic private school was that her child did not get daily lessons about her faith: "if she [her daughter] were in [private Islamic school) she would be better ...she would have benefit more if she took more Quran and Arabic and Islamic studies (FP5). When I asked one parent what his suggestion was to make the school more supportive for his kids, he said to give the kids "an hour for Arabic language class or Quran or doing something like that" (FP7). Usually Muslim parents want their kids to learn the Arabic language because that is the language that the Quran, the holy book of Muslims, was revealed in. Another parent suggested that one of the reasons why her children may not follow the Islamic practices is because they don't understand them at a deeper level: "main challenges that our kids want to do like western people are that they are doing things without any strong understanding" (FP 3).

## **Distinct Gender Roles and Expectations**

Multiple times during the interviews, stories emerged regarding the distinct gender roles the teachers or administrators witnessed when it came to the Muslim students and their parents at the school. Half of the teacher participants suggested that they saw a trend regarding the respective roles of Muslim males and Muslim females. The main specified roles, observed by teachers, were twofold: (a) male students (in one case a male parent) not showing the same respect to female authority as they showed to male authority, or male students not behaving in the same way with female authority as with the male authority; (b) female students (or female parents) are not comfortable around male students (or male teachers). I have elaborated, below, on the specific incidents the teachers observed those roles of Muslim males and Muslim females. Parents and the Imam did not mention any faith-based gender expectations that, they thought, may pose an issue for Muslim students in the school.

### **Muslim males.**

Teachers and administrators suggested that some Muslim males (students and parents) did not show respect to female teachers the way they showed respect to male teachers. One of the teachers mentioned that her female co-worker noticed in a meeting with a Muslim father and another male teacher that the father did not acknowledge her opinions, whereas he was receptive of the other male teacher's opinions:

... he upset me so much 'cause we were in a group and he was not acknowledging my and the other lady's opinions; but he would only put his opinion [forward] and the other males'. And when it's time to present, he wouldn't present any of my ideas or the other lady's, only his own ideas. (FT1)

In the case above, teachers and parents were in a brainstorming session. A Muslim male father was sitting with two female teachers and a male teacher. When it came time to present ideas, the Muslim male father, according to the female teacher, dismissed the ideas presented by the female teachers and presented his ideas, as well as the ideas of another male teacher. She interpreted his



behaviour as purposely rejecting the female teachers' ideas because they were female. When I asked why she thought his dismissal of her ideas was related to her gender, the participant responded that she has heard Muslim males behave in such disrespectful ways toward women.

Another male teacher recollected an incident that happened with his wife with respect to Muslim males disrespecting female authority:

Some of them can be very disrespectful toward female teachers and give them a much harder time than male teachers. So, and again I don't find that so much a problem here in our school, I find the students are very respectful and fun. But that might be coming from the fact that I am a male teacher. But I do see, and I have seen, and I have heard about it as well.... My wife used to teach at this school also and she was a female teacher and she had run into some issues. (MT4)

Although this teacher has had positive experiences with Muslim students, both male and female, he has heard that there has been some disrespect toward female teachers by male students. He also attributed the respect that the students have shown him to the fact that he is a male. The discrepancy between how Muslim students treat male and female teachers seems to have been a reputation the school was known for a few years ago, and still continues to , but to a lesser degree. "I think we found, back then more so than today, that the Muslim students, the men, didn't have a lot of respect for the female teachers. I wouldn't say that is so much the case today, but it was more so when I started" (MT5). This teacher did not give any recent examples of discrepancy in the treatment of male and female teachers; however, he mentioned that the reputation still stands.

Additionally, one teacher talked about how Muslim boys were disciplined very differently than girls " ... mothers aren't getting them in trouble because they are a boy" (FT1). This teacher noticed that the Muslim girls were more well-behaved than the boys, and he attributed it to the different approaches of discipline at home for boys versus girls. Teachers and administrators also witnessed a divide in the degree to which males and females spoke in public:

“Most of the time, it’s the father figure doing the speaking, and the mother figure not necessarily saying much” (MA2). And some teachers seemed to be caught off guard when they would see Muslim female students who were outspoken: “They were very outgoing is the impression that I got” (MT3). On the other hand, teachers noticed other Muslim females following stereotypical roles.

### **Muslim females.**

In the case of Muslim female students, teachers and administrators in this study reported that there were specific gender roles that the parents expected and enforced on their girls. For example, females were seen, by some teachers and administrators in this study, to have less freedom with dress, with going out, with engaging in school activities (including dance, drama, physical education, and music), and also with interacting with the opposite gender.

... as for gender, a lot of the time, the parents can’t... I don’t know how to say that—a lot of the time, the parents don’t like to accept the norms in the Canadian culture [with respect to gender roles], it becomes difficult for the student, for they are forced into those roles on a daily basis. (FT1)

One teacher participant hesitantly mentioned that she observed some distinct differences between the way males and females were viewed or treated by their parents. Another teacher also reinforced this point speaking from her experience when talking to Muslim girls on a regular basis about their challenges: “To a great extent, for the females, it is the gender role, for the [Muslim] girls; it is much more narrow than for the Canadian girls” (FT4). The teacher meant “Canadian girls” as girls who are treated the same as their male counterparts. She seem to be suggesting that Muslim female students appeared to have much less freedom than their non-Muslim female counterparts.

The stereotype of Muslim males and Muslim females reported in this section aligns with the “myths, stereotypes, and biases” section of the challenges that Muslim students face in the

conceptual framework. There are specific gender stereotypes that are associated with Muslims. Some of those are mentioned above by the teachers. I will discuss each of the aforementioned stereotypes in detail in the discussion chapter.

### **Teachers Speaking About Other Teachers' Biases.**

Multiple teachers in the study have suggested that there are specific teachers in the school who have negative attitudes toward Muslims. These attitudes have translated into teachers trying to assimilate Muslim students to the “Canadian” culture:

I think there's an attitude especially among older teachers that their job is to assimilate students into Canadian culture and to, it's almost like the way they treat first nations students ... our job is to make you into white people ... (MA1)

An administrator used the analogy of aboriginals who were assimilated into the “white” culture to show how some of the teachers were pushing Muslim students in similar ways. When I asked what they were referring to when they said “Canadian” culture, the administrator explicitly said “white, Christian society” (MA1). Furthermore, teachers mentioned in the interviews that they have heard other teachers say things about Islam that were inappropriate. Another teacher also spoke of the bigotry he heard from his colleagues: “There will be teachers who say stupid things and that gets to the community” (MA1). Individual teachers' actions and words can have a negative impact on how supportive a school culture is toward its Muslim student population.

Besides assimilation, other teachers said that they had seen a different attitude toward newcomers. When I asked teachers to describe the Muslim students in their classrooms, some teachers suggested that there was a “newcomer attitude” by certain teachers toward new students. The school has many newcomers who are Muslims. These teachers who have the “newcomer attitude” place students who are new to the school or new to Canada “into a box and have low expectations for them” (FT1). The teachers suggested to the students that “they cannot become a

doctor or a lawyer or an engineer cause there's the language barrier ... they say you cannot ever do it" (FT1). One of the teachers who works closely with newcomers spoke of the unfair attitude that some teachers have toward newcomer students.

After interviewing teachers who had specific biases against Muslims, or who had certain attitudes, I asked the administrators if there were any mandatory workshops or intercultural training available to teachers. One of them responded that the "... union may not allow sensitivity training ... the union says it's not our job to protect students; it is our job to protect teachers and their working conditions ... educating staff; that becomes political" (MA1). Administrators did not mention any special training or workshops held at the school for teachers. I further explicitly asked if any workshops were available that were related to help teacher awareness about Muslims in the school. The administrators' answers were that they held none at the school.

### **Summary**

In this first findings chapter I answered the first sub-question of my research questions: How do educational partners of the school understand issues-related to Muslim students? I presented the background of the school, according to the participants, and reported on the themes emerging regarding Muslim participants' conceptions of Islam. I then outlined the findings of the issues related to Muslim students. In this chapter, there were five findings reported by the educational partners: specific curriculum-related challenges; contrast between the home and "mainstream" culture; Muslim students' lack a deeper knowledge of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices; distinct gender roles and expectations; teachers speaking about other teachers' biases.

## CHAPTER 6 FINDINGS: SUPPORTS

### Introduction

This findings chapter reports on the existing supports for Muslim students in the school. These supports may not have been created specifically for Muslim students; nonetheless, participants acknowledge them as a support. My second sub-question pertains to the supports available to Muslim students in the high school of my case study. I present supports that are in place at the school from the perspective of all those involved (students, teachers, administrators, parents, the local Imam). I also make note if one group speaks about one specific support more, or exclusively, than the other participant groups. I report on two kinds of supports in this chapter: explicit support and implicit support. The explicit supports are: (a) the formation of the Muslims' Students Association (MSA) and the Diversity Club, (b) the hiring of paraprofessionals, (c) supportive administrators and teachers, and (d) the provision of specific accommodation for Muslims from the school's board level all the way down to the classroom level. The implicit supports are divided into three sections: (a) the diversity of the school, (b) the small population of the school, (c) the high Muslim population of the school.

I refer to the word “support” in this study to mean something designed to “help” Muslim students and provide them opportunities: “to realize their potential and develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring citizens who contribute to their society” (Education Act, 2009, c. 25, s. 1). There are many supports in place for Muslim students in school. Some of these supports are specifically geared toward Muslim students, such as providing a prayer room. Others are beneficial for Muslim students, but are not exclusively provided for the Muslim needs—such as access to paraprofessionals. Furthermore, some of the supports are not created purposefully to support students per se, but are implicit support systems due to the demographics

and location of the school. Table 5 shows a summary of all the emerging themes of supports accessible to Muslim students in the school.

TABLE 5  
SPECIFIC SUPPORTS IN THE SCHOOL

<b>Table 5 Specific Supports in the School</b>			
<b>Themes</b>	<b>Mainly identified by</b>	<b>York, Giangreco, Vandercook, &amp; Macdonald's (1992) Type of Support</b>	<b>Dimension of Multiculturalism</b>
<b>Explicit Supports</b>			
<b>Clubs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslim Students' Association</li> <li>• Diversity Committee</li> </ul>	Students, Staff, Parents, Imam	Moral Support Resource Support	Prejudice Reduction Empower School Culture and Social structure
<b>Hiring Paraprofessionals</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SWIS and Support Counsellor</li> </ul>	Students, Staff, Parents	Moral Support Resource Support	Empower School Culture and Social structure
<b>Supportive Administration and Teachers</b>	Students, Staff, Parents, Imam		
<b>Specific Accommodations for Muslim students</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board-level</li> <li>• School-level</li> <li>• Teacher-level</li> </ul>	Students, Staff, Parents, Imam	Evaluation Support Moral Support Resource Support	Prejudice Reduction Content Integration
<b>Implicit Supports</b>			
<b>Diversity of the school</b>	Students, Staff	Moral Support	Prejudice Reduction Empower School Culture and Social Structure
<b>Small population of Students</b>	Students, Staff		
<b>High-Muslim population</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims feel they can be themselves</li> <li>• Muslims feel that the student population does not pay attention to the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media</li> </ul>	Students, Staff		

As stated earlier, there are many supports available to Muslim students in the school. The following section enlists two Types of Supports. The first support is deliberately provided (explicit support) by the school. The second support originated from the local school context (implicit support) due to the unique characteristics of the school: its demographics and location.

The explicit supports are divided into four sections:

1. clubs;
2. paraprofessionals;
3. supportive administrators and teachers; and
4. specific accommodations for Muslims.

The implicit supports are divided into three sections:

1. diversity of the school;
2. small population of the school; and
3. high Muslim population of the school.

I have discussed each of the supports in detail, referring to York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) Types of Support and Banks's dimensions of multiculturalism for each support.

### **Explicit Support**

Explicit supports help Muslim students in their schools. I call these kinds of supports “explicit” because they are created or performed by individuals in the school to assist students. Some of these are specifically directed toward Muslim students, such as certain accommodations, and others are created for all students, with Muslim students—according to the interviewees—being beneficiaries of those general supports. There are four explicit supports: (a) clubs, (b) specialized teachers, (c) supportive administrators and teachers, and (d) specific accommodation for Muslims.



## **Clubs.**

One of the main themes that emerged with respect to supports provided for Muslim students are the two student associations. One of them is the Muslims Students' Association, created and led by Muslims, and the other is a diversity club that is created and led by non-Muslims. Clubs are an example of moral and resource support, as outlined by York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald (1992), mentioned in the conceptual framework.

### ***Muslims Students' Association.***

All participant groups mentioned the existence of a vibrant Muslim Students' Association (MSA) as one of the major supports for Muslim students. When asked what role the MSA played, the students and teachers mentioned five roles: (a) representative of Muslim students' voice, (b) emotional and social connections for Muslim students, (c) a means to represent Islam and Muslims in the school, (d) encourage and support Muslims in their faith and practice, and (e) a resource for the school.

First, the MSA represents the "Muslim" voice of the Muslim students. Students feel that a student body like the students' council is not a sufficient vehicle for the voice of Muslim students' and their needs and wants:

Just because there is a student body, which is represented by the student council ... not everyone is included in the student council, not everyone's voices, specific voices are heard. Whereas the MSA, it is more direct. (FS1)

Another student suggested that without the MSA, Muslim students' voices might not have a platform in which to express their views and opinions: "... it is a voice which wouldn't have the chance to be heard" (MS3). It is this very student's voice that has served as an impetus for the school to provide areas for Muslim Friday prayers and for Muslim daily prayers. The Muslim student body requests this space every year and those spaces are listed as "reserved by the MSA." Second, the MSA provides emotional and social connections for Muslim students: "... it

is another place to feel that sense of belonging. It is a place for camaraderie, for sharing beliefs, common beliefs” (MA2). Students recognize the importance of having an area set aside for them to talk about Muslim-related issues, to hang out with like-minded people who have the same struggles regarding their faith and background, and also to put together events that meet the expectations set by their faith. Students mentioned that being part of the MSA made them happy, and increased their sense of belonging and satisfaction in the school: “... it is a fulfilling thing to be part of the MSA” (FS3). Third, Muslim students feel that they need to represent Islam in a positive way given the negative portrayals of Muslims in the media: “I thought I had an obligation ... I want people—when they look to our MSA—especially people who aren’t Muslims ... to see it nicer and appealing” (FS5). Fourth, those students who are members of the Muslims Students’ Association feel that they have a role to also support other Muslims who are struggling with their faith and practices.

... just motivate those people and get them interested in the MSA and interested in Islam, like we always encourage people to come to our Friday prayers, even if they won’t pray but just listen to Friday khutbah (sermon). (FS1)

The MSA stands as a support for both practicing and non-practicing Muslims. Fifth, teachers and administrators have mentioned the MSA to be a support for them as well. It provides the teachers a means to talk to individuals on the executive board of the MSA to inquire about Islam and issues related to Muslims. Besides providing individual teachers support when needed, the MSA also schedules open-invitation events. Such events help build a bond between Muslim students and the rest of the school community, while raising awareness of Muslim issues. Some of these events are weekly and others are annual, as shown in the Table 6. When asked what kind of events the MSA puts together, all the students interviewed mentioned the events presented in the table.

TABLE 6

**Table 6 Some MSA Events**

<b>Weekly Events</b>	Friday Prayers
<b>Annual Events</b>	MSA Dinner Ramadan Iftar (Breakfast) MSA Coffee Night Multicultural Show
<b>New Events put together in 2014–2015</b>	Breast Cancer Fundraising Green Day

The MSA provides one weekly event on Fridays for Muslim students to attend, which is held in the drama room after school. This event, like all other events, is open to the entire student body. Muslim students stated that about one or two non-Muslim students attend this weekly event. A teacher supervises the Friday prayers, usually the same teacher every week.

The MSA outwardly appears to stand as a “religious and social support, as a means to help them [the Muslim students] maintain their identity and practices as Muslims” (Zine, 1997, 153). Zine explains that another implicit goal of the MSA is “transforming negative social perceptions of Islam and disseminating knowledge of Islamic beliefs, practice, and history” (Zine, 1997, p.155). Students mentioned a few venues for the dissemination of knowledge and Islamic beliefs: during Friday prayers and superficially during the MSA dinner through a question and answer game-like show. Regarding “transforming negative social perception” that Zine (1997) speaks about, the MSA appears to present a positive image. One explicit example is when Muslim students had a Green Day where the MSA handed out green ribbons to show people that Muslims “appreciate everyone’s life in the world” (FS1). Green Day was a reactionary event put together by the MSA after the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media following numerous terrorist attacks committed in the name of Islam, such as in the 2015

Copenhagen shooting, the Boko Haram attacks in Cameroon, and the France Dijon attacks—just to name some that took place around the interview period.

The MSA has established itself as an active students' association with regular weekly meetings and regular events for both Muslims and non-Muslims. The MSA also has a positive relationship with administration; the MSA executive and the administrators spoke well of their relationship with one another. The MSA is seen as a legitimate student body that can book a prayer room for every school day of the academic year, as well as a prayer area for every Friday of the school year.

Therefore, the MSA can be listed as providing two of York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) supports: moral and resource supports. It serves as a moral support for Muslim students by providing person-to-person interactions and validating the worth of each person during their weekly, monthly, and annual events. The MSA further serves as a resource support by providing tangible material during its Friday prayers, such as pamphlets and rave cards; it also provides a human resource for the student body, both Muslims and non-Muslims, to ask questions and bring forth concerns.

With respect to Banks's five multicultural dimensions, the presence of the MSA and its events help reduce negative racial attitudes by being a positive model in the school, which also builds positive attitudes toward Muslims. For example, teachers and administrators spoke highly of the level of organization the MSA upheld in its events. The MSA also serves to empower school culture and social structure through its positive reputation, organized events, and its continuous representation of Muslims in general.

### ***Diversity Committee.***

Another club that serves the diverse needs of the school is the Diversity Committee. This club represents all different faiths, races, ethnicities, and gender and sexuality needs. For example, one of the events that the diversity committee puts together each year is a multicultural show. This brings together different cultures and portrays them in a celebratory way. Here a student speaks of the event and how it helps build bridges:

... they had foods from different countries. And then at night at the school there was a multicultural celebration in the auditorium of the school and there were parents and staff and students and they had a slide show that showed all the different cultures in the school and they had dancers from different cultures. And it was, you know, kind of breaking down those walls; an event like this is very nice. (MT4)

A committee like this helps include all different cultures. It is not specific to Muslims, but it has, in the past, carried out one or two activities and fundraisers exclusively for the Muslim population. Similarly to the MSA, the Diversity Committee serves both as a moral and resource support according to York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) support types. The committee also helps with prejudice reduction and empowering school culture and social structure by providing the school with positive images of different races, ethnicities, cultures, genders, and sexualities.

### **Paraprofessionals.**

Paraprofessionals are positions in schools responsible for a specific type of assistance for students. The school in this study hired two individuals specifically to support students with certain needs. One is the SWIS (Settlement Worker in Schools) and the other one is the School Support Counsellor. The SWIS worker works with students who are newcomers very closely and is in continuous contact with newcomer Muslim students and their parents. The School Support Counsellor mentioned she worked with a few Muslim students. She recounted a few incidents with Muslim students that are relevant to this study. I interviewed both of these

paraprofessionals, but I have referred to them as teachers in the rest of this study to maintain their anonymity. Both of these services provide one-to-one interaction and are not usually directly related to academics.

***Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS).***

The Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) program places settlement workers from community agencies in elementary and secondary schools that have high numbers of newcomer students. They are funded by the CIC (Citizenship and Immigration Canada). The SWIS worker provides support for the whole school, including students, staff, and parents. Mainly they assist newcomers in their transition to Canadian society, which may include providing information on how to attain health cards, driver's licenses, or maybe even where to purchase groceries. SWIS workers help mediate meetings between parents and staff, and provide some interpreting services to help with language barriers.

At the school, the current SWIS worker is, and the past SWIS workers were, fluent in the Arabic language, mainly because of the high population of Arabs in the school. When I asked the SWIS worker how she described her job duties, she said it could be a myriad of things:

... my job is to help them with anything—students and parents with any of their needs, so often they come looking for volunteering opportunities to complete the required community service hours. Sometimes they are looking for help building the resume so they can find a job; other times I talk to them about their school work, about absences, lateness ... things like that ... sometimes they are looking for help to find which courses so they can get into the proper career path ... to get into the program they want to get into college and university.

Many students and teachers referred to the SWIS worker as a resource for both themselves and their parents. Granted, the SWIS worker is not exclusively there to serve only Muslim students; however, the majority of people who do request her services are Muslims, and mainly Arabs.

The SWIS worker also had another advantage: she was a Muslim and, hence, seemed well aware of the school's culture with respect to Muslim students' supports and challenges. She was the

only Muslim hired by the board at the school. Administrators, teachers, and especially ESL teachers mentioned the SWIS worker was a resource to them due to her Muslim background and her fluency in Arabic: “We’ve got such a really strong support system with our ... with the SWIS worker in particular in the ESL department. You know, they’re [the students] quickly made to feel welcome” (MA2). The administrator was speaking about the direct support the SWIS workers provided parents and students. Most of the parents that I interviewed shared their appreciation of the support of the SWIS worker. They said they really felt a connection with her because she spoke their language: “it is nice to talk to someone in my own language. She understands what I am saying and I understand what she is saying” (FP2). Those parents mentioned that they neither felt misunderstood nor felt that they were misunderstanding the person they were talking with when they were in the presence of the SWIS worker.

### ***School Support Counsellor.***

The school support counsellor comes one day a week and sees students based on either a referral by the teacher or by the student’s own initiative. The students have to go through the vice principal prior to visiting the school support counsellor; the VP acts as a gatekeeper to triage the cases. When I asked her to describe the Muslim students who visit her, she said she did not really have many Muslims visit her. The few Muslim girls who have seen her came for a very brief period of time. The counsellor mainly had students that came to her for mental health issues. She also specifically spoke about a Muslim male whose family was in denial of his situation:

...he had a significant health issue, and potentially psychosis, and family not accepting that they were having these struggles...I actually had to take him to the hospital and get him assessed and get him medication and mom would be meeting us there...And then they [the parents] kept on telling him that you don’t need to be doing this, you just need to be stronger, this strong male. So I think that was also a very difficult situation, which was hard for the family to accept.

The counsellor saw that the situation of this Muslim student was very difficult and she had to step in to make arrangements with the hospital and plead with the mother to get on board to support him and accept his mental health situation. Mainly, the administrators mentioned the counsellor as a support for the Muslim students. One of the administrators explicitly suggested that I speak to her about her experiences with Muslim students.

The support of the paraprofessional educators can be categorized as moral support. Both counsellors potentially can provide resource and technical support as well. However, not understanding specific struggles for Muslims or knowledge of Islam would make it difficult to provide helpful, tailored support to Muslim students in need. The SWIS worker suggested that her background in Islam and her struggle as a first-generation Canadian gave her some insight in order to work with students facing similar struggles. Having professional educators available helps empower the staff to enrich the school culture (Banks, 2001), which is a support outside the classroom that adds to a better understanding of a group of people. The school's teachers and administrators also fall under this category of Banks's dimensions because their role is not just within the classroom walls. As evident below with respect to teachers and administrators, connections with students outside the classroom, as well as inside, is just as important.

### **Supportive Teachers and Administrators.**

In interviewing students, teachers, and administrators, I found a common theme emerge regarding the students' general feelings about how supportive the teachers and administrators were. Additionally, teachers and administrators had an overall positive view of the Muslim students in their school. I asked the teachers and administrators about their roles at the school, and most of them mentioned that supporting students was a priority: "... number one priority is that they feel safe and welcome" (FT2). Students and parents both spoke about how welcomed



and safe they felt at the school. For these reasons I generally referred to the teachers as well-meaning in this study. With respect to York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) Types of Support, supportive people, surrounding the students, are considered both moral and resource supports. It is a moral support in the sense that the person-to-person interaction between the teachers and the students helps validate the students' worth. Supportive teachers and administrators are considered a resource support because a positive relationship between teachers and students helps the students to view the teachers as a supportive resource.

### *Teachers.*

Most of the students that were interviewed shared their feelings of appreciation toward staff. One student felt that the teachers saw them as individual people and not associated with the terror activities around the world: "... teachers see us as people not as terrorists" (MS2). When I asked students for one of the main reason that they felt welcomed and supported at the school, they mentioned the high percentage of Muslim students and then mentioned the teachers and administrators.

One of the teachers mentioned that providing a room for Muslims for Friday prayers might have caused an inconvenience to some students and the teacher. They had to move chairs and tables to make space on the ground for the prayer to take place; however, she said "We still make it work," indicating that supporting students so that they felt welcomed and accepted was an important priority. Furthermore, when I asked about reducing racial attitudes, a teacher who teaches humanities emphasized that one of the core aspects of her teaching is to help the students broaden their perspectives and respect of other cultures and groups—reducing racial attitudes happens daily in the school: "I feel that this is part of the moral obligation of the teacher" (FT3). She further elaborated that teachers try to be inclusive of different cultures: "We try our best to

provide them with resources that are suitable to their cultures and beliefs. Staff is very interested and accommodating, which also (hopefully) makes students feel understood” (FT3). Another teacher also expressed the same sentiment:

I use examples and symbols from different cultures in my classroom. In my [subject] classes, we examine cases from many different cultures, religions and ethnic groups. At [school] these conversations occur very frequently. Students are anxious to share and often curious about others’ points of view.

This teacher is trying to incorporate different cultures and backgrounds in her teaching so she could be more inclusive of the variety of backgrounds in their classrooms.

### *Administrators.*

Students, parents, and the Imam said that they found the administrators at the school supportive and easily accessible. The word “administrators” in this study is used to refer to the principal and the vice principal of the school. When I spoke to the administrators, the vice principal and the principal were very clear about their ultimate roles at the school: “... It is just helping the students get every support they can get so they can reach their potential” (MA1). Some of the students mentioned that the administrators took them aside and said that if they experienced any negative backlash because of what was happening in the media, then it was important for the student to bring it up: “just come and tell me and I will fix the problem.”

Another student recalled that after the Charlie Hebdo shooting, “the [administrator] came and asked me if anyone mentioned Muslims in disrespectful way to let him know ... (FS5). Students related a few incidences where they had to go to the administrators for help. One incident was when one of the Muslim female students had her locker broken into. She said how appreciative she felt because within two days all of her items were retrieved. She noticed that the vice principal took extra time to help her retrieve her things and appropriately disciplined the perpetrator.

Other participants, such as the Imam of the local mosque, also spoke about his positive interactions with the administration at the school. Parents mentioned the good relations they have with the administrators as well. One parent recalled a conversation she was having with one of the administrators at a Muslim Students' Association's (MSA) event: "He [the administrator] talked about the school and praised the Muslim kids for their good manners" (FP5); she said he mentioned that the Muslims in the school were very respectful. She further mentioned that every time she has been at the school, the vice principal greeted her personally. The good relations between the administrators and the Muslim students seem to help build strong connections and create a feeling of being supported.

When I asked the administrators about how they support Muslim students, one of them spoke about being aware of the students' backgrounds and experiences: "We [the administrators] want to treat our kids like human beings and we wanted to honour where they were coming from and to be sensitive to their lived experiences, and the transitions they are going through" (MA1). Although when I asked the administrators if they provided any special support for Muslim students considering the recent negative portrayals of Muslims in the media, or just any supports directed toward Muslim students, they both said they did not provide anything specific, other than the prayer room. In the following section, I have discussed different accommodations provided for Muslim students, including the prayer room.

### **Specific Supports Provided for Muslim Students.**

According to the interviewees, specific supports were provided for Muslim students at many levels of the school. Muslim students received support at the board level, school level, and teacher (class) level. These supports were either provided upon the request of students, or as a result of teachers' or administrators' observations and experiences with Muslim students.

Therefore, this support can be categorized as York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) evaluation support, because information was gathered, and in light of this new information, changes and supports were provided. Furthermore, moral support was also provided here because individuals receiving this support felt connected to other individuals and they felt happy.

***Specific board-level support.***

School boards in Ontario are responsible for directing the activities of their school district in terms of organization, strategic planning and operations, and accountability for finances and student learning (Seel & Gibbons, 2011). There are about 76 school boards in Ontario, some of which have as few as just one school to govern, while others have over 500 schools to oversee. The three supports provided at the board level to ensure equity and inclusion are: the dissemination of the vision of *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Policy* (2009), discussed in the literature review; the *Guidelines and Procedures: For the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices, and Observances* (2000); and meetings held by faith leaders biannually. Regarding the first support, the *Equity and Inclusive Education Policy*, two components of the vision include: promoting a sense of belonging, and meeting individual needs of students. The school board mandates equity and inclusion of all students in schools, and enforces the duty of the schools to provide religious accommodations upon request. The second support is a document that circulated to all schools with information about Islam and Muslims, and other faiths. This document, entitled *Guidelines and Procedures: For the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices, and Observances* (2000), was discussed in the literature review. The third support is the meetings held by different faith leaders twice a year.

The school Imam mentioned attending meetings with different faith leaders and that such meetings were a new initiative the board undertook on a biannual basis.

I attend regular meetings with other faith leaders with the School Board where they hold for faith accommodation.... the point of the meetings is one to inform the faith leaders in terms of what's going on and that there is an active attempt to be able to accommodate faith-based groups within the schools. And so this is a way of engagement from the school board and so then they want to be able let the leaders, let the faith leaders of the community know. And at the same time it also provides for them a forum to be able to ask ok what steps should be should we take next? What is missing? What can we do to make things better? etc. It is this open avenue—they are establishing an open avenue of communication so that whenever they do have policies in place in the future that they are more informed, that they have done what they can to be able to ask the faith leaders what perhaps some of these types of accommodations are (Imam).

The faith leaders in this meeting discuss specific faith accommodations. The superintendent<sup>6</sup>, the director of the school board, and other faith group leaders attend these meetings. When I asked the school Imam what the purpose of these meetings were, specifically relating to Muslim students, he said that there were mainly three purposes: (a) to raise awareness of, and discuss, issues-related to Muslim students as they come up, (b) to have a forum to ask any questions, and (c) for the faith leaders to inform the board about the nuances of different schools of thought in Islam. The Imam who was interviewed was newly appointed in the Muslim community in the city, so his background and relationship with the school board was newly formed. I selected this Imam for my study because he was the Imam of the most popular and most well-attended mosque in the city where the school is located. He also visited the highschool pertaining to this study. With respect to Banks's multicultural dimensions, the support outlined here leads to both prejudice reduction and knowledge construction at the board level, and also at

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<sup>6</sup> Superintendents are the supervisory officers who perform leadership roles comparable to the vice president in the private sector (Ontario Public Supervisory Official Association (2005))

the school level if the meetings and the policy trickle down. By informing the board of different issues related to Muslim students, and providing them with the background and nuances from scholarly sources, the board is able to make decisions (and accommodations) in an effective and meaningful way.

*Specific school-level support.*

At the school level, Muslim students specifically are provided with a prayer room during school hours, every day of the week. Additionally, a bigger room is provided on Fridays after school for prayers and sermons. The room, used for prayers by the Muslim students at the school, is located close to the vice principal's office. It is a small room that was not being used: "it's a prayer room, so I have kids in here every day. They go in and pray for a few minutes" (MA1). Students go in the prayer room to perform their noon or afternoon prayers when they are between classes or during their lunchtime.

On Fridays, a designated bigger room is cleared so that Muslim students have a carpeted area to perform their Friday sermon, followed by their Friday prayers. A teacher is also assigned to supervise students during this session on Fridays. Individuals from the local Muslim community are not allowed to visit the school to give sermons. A ban was passed a few years prior according to the Imam. There is a policy in place to not allow anyone, outside the school, to conduct a sermon, especially during school hours:

I think the general policy is in place, but the principals if they feel, you know, comfortable enough, then they can have a bit of leeway in that but definitely not during the school hours to have your jummah khutba or to go in to deliver a sermon, that would definitely be out of the question because it would be too against the policy, whereas if it's after school there's more leeway in that regard and then it just comes down to the discretion of the administration. (Imam)

Students from the school are assigned by the Muslims Students' Association to give the sermon.

Over the past few years, a rule emerged from the board to not allow any visitor to talk at clubs

without going through a review process at a board level. This applies to all clubs and faith groups. The providing of a tangible room for Muslim students to perform their daily prayers is considered a resource support (York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald , 2000).

Another support at the school level is the segregation of male and female students in physical education classes, starting from Grade 9. This is a school-wide policy that was implemented a few years prior. According to teachers, this support was implemented because of Muslim students' religious adherences and feelings of not being comfortable having physical education classes with the opposite sex. Students stated that this support helps them feel comfortable: "I think there are some schools, like in grade 9, doesn't separate girls and boys in gym classes but here we do" (FS3).

### ***Specific Teacher-level Support***

One of the main supports for Muslim students is the teachers at the school, as mentioned previously. This section, from the perspective of the students, discusses specific changes teachers have made for Muslim students to ensure that they feel included in the classroom. Some students mentioned that in their culinary class, the teacher, who prepares the menu each week, recognized ahead of time that some Muslims eat a specific type of meat called *halal* or *zabiha* meat. She also eliminated any ingredient that came from pigs to accommodate the Muslim students. One of the Muslim students recollected this experience with appreciation: "We have a whole week where we cook meat and the teacher made sure that she gets halal meat for us, just in case. And she didn't incorporate pork or bacon, or anything throughout the whole semester, she took that into consideration" (FS1).

Students also spoke about their biology teachers' attempt to recognize other theories besides the theory of evolution. Granted evolution is not a Muslim-specific issue, Muslim

students spoke about changes made in the classroom discussions that included different perspectives besides evolution. Specifically, Muslim students mentioned about how evolution and the counter argument of creationism were presented to them. Teachers were aware of the different beliefs in the classroom, so they suggested that students understand the core theory of evolution as a scientific theory, not as a creed change. "... in biology when we studied the evolution unit, the teacher said that we don't have to believe in evolution; he said he didn't want to change our beliefs but to understand the topic" (FS3).

Those are examples mentioned by students about specific supports that individual teachers provided in their classes to be more inclusive of the other cultures. As indicated in the literature review, students who see their backgrounds or cultures considered in the curriculum feel engaged and included in their learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009), which also increases academic achievement (Taylor & Cummins, 2011; Ryan, Pollock & Anotonelli, 2009).

### **Implicit Support**

The school in this case study had some inherent advantages that acted as supports for Muslim students. By implicit support systems, I mean supports that are not consciously created by anyone, but are a natural consequential support, given the context and demographic of the school. When I asked the participants what the distinctive difference between their high school and other high schools was, 100% of the students, teachers, and administrators mentioned the following: (a) the diversity of the school, (b) the size of the school, and (c) the high population of Muslims in the school. All of these provide a moral support for Muslim students to feel a sense of belonging. With respect to Banks's multicultural dimensions, the following supports provide prejudice reduction and empower school culture and social structure. Having students from different backgrounds and cultures mingle and interact with one another, seems to help reduce



prejudice and therefore empowers school culture by improving, and challenging, assumptions of others.

### **The Diversity of the School.**

The diversity of the school, with people coming from all over the world, has created a mosaic of cultures where students and teachers inevitably interact with each other regularly. One of the teachers mentioned that he used to work as a truck driver before choosing to become an educator, and the mentality in his industry was extremely narrow:

It is funny because I came from the trucking industry and the trucking industry is very narrow-minded and we only know by watching the news and we develop our own opinions. After working around these kids I found it fantastic ... I am glad that I left the trucking industry because I don't want to be that narrow-minded all my life. (MT1)

He further shared his views after 9/11 and the negative opinion he held about the Muslim population at the time: “For me it was kind of a real eye-opener because when 9/11 occurred, all what we thought was negative, now I am around them [Muslim students], there is no negativity here” (MT1). Another student mentioned how the interaction with other cultures helped them learn from one another: “There are a lot of Arabs and white people, so we are all integrated; we are all a mix, we all learn from each other” (MS2). Some interviewees credited the diversity of the school for its lack of direct racism and discrimination: “I feel like the challenges at [school] is way less as [the school] is a very diverse” (FS2). Racially diverse schools, according to research, seem to have benefits for all students in the domain of academic achievement and building connections with others (Braddock and Gonzalez 2010; Goldsmith 2010; Stuart Wells et al. 2009; Wells, Fox and Cordova-Cobo 2016). Generally, it appears that students and teachers felt that interactions with people from different backgrounds helped them become more open-minded and less discriminatory.

### **Small Population of Students.**

The small population of students in the school creates a “family-like” environment for the students. The school can potentially hold about 1,200 students; however, due to declining enrollment, it only has around 600 students. The school is currently at almost 50% capacity. Therefore, due to the small population of students, the sense of familiarity among pupils and the ability to interact with individuals from different backgrounds and experiences increases. Most of the students I interviewed mentioned that they feel the school is like one big family to them: “Everyone knows each other; it is like a big family” (FS4). Others mentioned the “family-oriented” feeling of the school (FS3). A Muslim male student also mentioned the family feel of the school: “Just the general acceptance of the students; it is also a small school ... which makes it feel like a family environment” (MS3). The word “family” with respect to “family-feeling” at the school was used seven times by students and teachers. The feeling of being connected in a small school is aligned with numerous other research findings. “Small” high schools are considered to house from 500 to a 1,000 students (People for Education, 2005). According to research, there are many benefits to small schools. Some research suggests that small schools are a “superior and more successful model for educating children” (People for Education, 2005). Small schools can create a more intimate learning environment, which fosters meaningful relationships. (Klonskey & Ford, 1994; Schneider, 2011). Students and teachers feel that sense of family in the school and feel connected to one another.

### **High Muslim Population.**

According to students and parents, the high Muslim population of the school was one of the biggest supports for Muslim students who were interviewed. The total number of Muslim students at the school is unknown—schools do not collect data on the number of students from a

certain faith group or the number of students who identify themselves with a certain faith. When I asked the staff and students what they thought the percentage of the Muslim student population at the school was, the lowest percentage mentioned was 40% and the highest percentage was “80% or more” (FT5).

Three themes emerged when the participants were asked to speak of the advantages to having a high percentage of Muslims at a school: (a) Muslim students felt that they were comfortable in practicing their faith, (b) Most students and teachers do not pay too much attention to the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media, and (c) Muslim students did not miss out on academics during their religious holidays (*Eid*).

***Muslim students felt that they were comfortable in practicing their faith.***

Students and their parents said that one of the biggest advantages of being in a high Muslim population school was that they felt they could—freely and comfortably—practice their religion without much prejudice: “... you know you are not the only one, and people will not look at you saying where did you come from (FS3). Most of the female students wearing Hijab who were interviewed mentioned how easy it was to wear Hijab at the school: “When I first came to [school], it was my first year to have my Hijab on and it was very comfortable because [the school] has a lot of Muslims and it wasn’t a problem at all ... I felt comfortable and it was pretty normal” (FS5). One parent mentioned how the previous SWIS worker wearing Hijab helped in normalizing Hijab-wearing at the school: “There are so many girls wearing Hijab in the school and the SWIS worker is wearing it also” (MP2). Other students felt that they could be themselves because they did not feel the need to always explain themselves on special occasions: “... teachers understand what Ramadan is and that is nice ... because you don’t have to explain everything ... and they remember and that is pretty nice (FS2). Muslim students, in this study,

also enjoyed the feelings of “I could be ‘me’ kind of thing” (FS3) and “you feel like you can be yourself” (MS1) when they talk about being in a school with many Muslims.

With respect to feeling a sense of camaraderie with other Muslims, all the students suggested that the high population of Muslims helped them feel supported if someone said something negative about their faith:

... you feel like that there is someone like you, someone to defend you, someone to help you, or if a teacher said something that goes against you, you will find a lot of people backing you up. (FS4)

Muslim students and their parents felt that the high Muslim population at the school was a positive thing. Students felt that being among their Muslim peers gave them a sense of moral support and strength against any backlash or negativity.

***Most students and teachers, generally, do not pay too much attention to the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media.***

In general, when the Muslim students were asked about their experiences at the school regarding the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media, most of them mentioned that they did not feel any difference: “There is very minimal talk on what is going on in the media” (FS3).

Another Muslim student explicitly mentioned that she felt the school did not consider the media as their primary source of knowledge on other people: “I don’t see any challenges with the media ... something I see in [the school] is that people ... not that they don’t pay attention, but they don’t care about it” (FS4). Students felt that their day-to-day interactions with other students make a difference; it is this very interaction that changes people’s perceptions of what is in the media: “... people in other schools may not know Muslims and they just make assumptions from the media ... that is a secondary source, but people-to-people is a primary source” (MS1). One of the administrators also spoke on this point; he attributed this lack of attention paid to the media to the strong value system that exists in the school:

I haven't in my [inaudible] years here had to address things in a public forum such as what has been portrayed in the media because the value system that exists within this school is so strong that those things I'm sure are not on people minds, but I guess I could argue that they are somewhat sheltered from it here and protected from it here.... (MA2)

When I asked what he meant by a strong value system, he said the interaction between students is a strong buffer against any media backlash. Research in the field of in-group and out-group attitudes discussed in the literature review is inconclusive. Some research indicates that the mere exposure of non-Muslims to Muslims is not sufficient enough to create positive feelings towards Muslims. This is especially true when non-Muslims have preconceived notions about Muslims (Stephan & Stephan 1985; Stephan & Renfro 2002; Plant & Devine, 2003). However, recent emerging surveys indicate that the mere exposure of Muslims and non-Muslims is actually more successful among younger people than older people (Chalabi, 2015). The findings of my study here, seems to confirm that Muslim students do not feel the negative impact of media portrayals of them, and they feel more accepted by their non-Muslim peers, if young non-Muslims interacted regularly with Muslims. However, students did mention some of the negative impact of the media portrayal of Muslims, specifically in the discussions that took place in their classrooms about terrorist activities carried out by Muslims. I will elaborate on this further in the next chapter with respect to teacher biases and Islamophobia.

***Muslim students did not miss out on academics on their Eid days.***

Muslim students did not need special permission to take days off for *Eid* nor did they have to make up for missed classes on Eid. One of the holidays that Muslim students observe is Eid. It comes twice a year. Muslims follow the lunar calendar, and Eid encompasses a total of five to six days. The first Eid (Muslim holy day), observed for three days, comes after the fasting month of Ramadan, and the second Eid comes a few months later, and is observed for two days. Due to the high Muslim population, the school was reported to be almost empty on Eid days.

Some teachers said they had four or five students in their classes. One student said, “No one shows up at Eid” (FS1). Another student was not worried about missing any class during Eid, “... we don’t have to worry about missing information or tests...” (FS3). Teachers stated that they usually used those days as “catch-up days” or they engaged students in different ways such as playing chess (MT5). Muslim students and their parents were happy that taking the days off for Eid did not come at an academic cost to the students. Students felt that they could enjoy their Eid days.

### **Summary**

This chapter answered the sub-question: What supports are there for Muslim students? The findings show there are two kinds of support: explicit and implicit. I first outlined the explicit supports: (a) the formation of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) and the Diversity Club, (b) the hiring of paraprofessionals, (c) supportive administrators and teachers, and (d) the provision of specific accommodation for Muslims from the school board level all the way to the classroom level. Then, I presented the implicit supports, which are divided into three sections: (a) the diversity of the school, (b) the small population of the school, (c) the high Muslim population of the school.

## CHAPTER 7 FINDINGS: CHALLENGES OF MUSLIM STUDENTS

### Introduction

This, third, findings chapter reports on the challenges of Muslim students, considering the supports that already exist in the school. The answer to my third sub-question is reported below: Considering the supports, what challenges do Muslim students face in the school? This chapter is divided into two sections. The first one presents the themes that emerged from students (drawing on quotes, from student interviews) about their challenges in the school. The second section reports on the challenges of Muslim students that were not explicitly mentioned by any one participant group, but that are apparent in the interview transcripts. The findings show that Muslim students experience five challenges: (1) Students experience Islamophobia; (2) Students feel pressure to defend and explain themselves (3) Teachers' biases; (4) Teachers view students the same; (5) Students did not see themselves in the curriculum.

Table 7 EMERGING THEMES ON THE CHALLENGES OF MUSLIM STUDENTS

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<b>Table 7</b>
Emerging Themes on the Challenges of Muslim Students
<b>Student Voice</b>
Islamophobia Exists
Students Feel Pressure to Defend and Explain Themselves
Teachers' Biases
<b>Interview Transcripts</b>
Teachers' Biases
Teachers View Students the Same
Students do not See Themselves in the Curriculum

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### Challenges of Muslim Students: Student Voice

In the paragraphs below I report on the challenges that Muslim students face, drawing from the students' voices. The three sub-themes that emerged in this section were: Islamophobia exists;

students feel pressure to defend and explain themselves; and students speaking about teacher biases.

### **Islamophobia Exists**

Muslim students in this study speak about the negativity they feel surrounding Islam and Muslims. One of the challenges discussed in the conceptual framework was Islamophobia. There have been numerous definitions of Islamophobia, but the definition that is used most commonly is “the dread, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims perpetrated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims” (Runnymede Trust Commission, 1997). A commissioned poll conducted by The Environics Institute Research Group, in 2010 showed that one in three Canadians reported that aboriginal people and Muslims are considered “frequent targets of discrimination” (Hildebrandt, 2010).

Some Muslim students in this study spoke about explicit Islamophobic comments they received from teachers:

They [the teachers in this school] feel that we are all really terrorists ...they think that we are the cause of the troubles in the world...like he [the teacher] told us that to our face (MS1).

This student was particularly frustrated at being viewed as a “terrorist”, and goes on to say that his discussion with certain teachers about Islam had not changed their perspective. He said that no matter how much he tried to bring evidence from Islam condemning the terrorist and suicidal attacks, certain teaches stuck to their original opinion. Other Muslim students I interviewed also felt that people in general do not understand Islam. They suggested that people’s source of information about Islam mainly was the media, where Muslims are primarily portrayed as



“terrorists”. Muslim students find it difficult to lead an “everyday” or a “normal” life in such an environment:

it is difficult for the students or for Muslim students to have the everyday life because most people wouldn't understand what is Islam or they would have a specific idea because of the media, people giving a harsh time to the Muslim students because they think that we are all terrorist or they are trying to stereotype ...

Furthermore, when I asked students how they would feel best supported in the school, most of them mentioned that they wanted to be accepted in the same way that other students were:

the most important thing is like being treated equally, there should be the teachers who see us like people, not just like terrorists or something, teachers who can treat us in a nice way and treat us like equal to other students and treat us like other people and give us equal grades and equal treatment and everything so that is the most important thing for me (MS1).

Wanting to be treated like a person, regardless of their faith, was one of the most important desired supports for Muslim student participants.

### **Students Feel Pressure to Defend and Explain Themselves**

One challenge that students who wear Hijab, or are visibly Muslim, or are known to be Muslim, mention is that they feel a lot of pressure to conduct themselves in a specific way since they visibly represent the global Muslim community “... whether I choose or not, I still represent the whole Muslim community and that is a lot of pressure” (MS3). When Muslim students watch the news and see violence committed by Muslim individuals, and then feel that they are painted with the same brush, they feel that they must counteract those images. One student explicitly mentioned incidents in the news where Muslims were being blamed for violence: “... sometimes it is one person who messes it up and people start to stereotype [all] the Muslim population” (FS3). Another student made the point that she has to consistently be her best self. She further elaborated that she felt it was absurd to generalize an entire group based on the actions of a few: “... this person is not good, then it doesn't mean that everyone is not good” (FS2). Similarly,

another student suggested that individuals who are not Muslim do not have to exert this kind of an effort to prove themselves: “Other students are not worried about giving certain impressions like we are worried about how we act and what we can’t do” (FS4). Students were reluctant to make mistakes or let their guard down because they felt the responsibility of counteracting negative images in the media about Muslims.

Besides negative images in the media, another example brought up by the students, in which they felt pressure to explain themselves, was in situations regarding gender interaction. One of the main Islamic values, which is either misunderstood or not known by teachers and administrators, is the guideline Muslims follow with respect to gender interaction. This was mentioned in the literature review when discussing Hayaa and in the conceptual framework, as one of the six challenges. The expectation surrounding cross-gender interaction in Islam is one of the most contentious expectations for Muslims living both in the West and in Muslim-majority countries. Normative expectations for appropriate cross-gender interactions in Islam are based on mutual respect, non-interference, and no-body contact, which also applies to teacher-student interactions. Non-interference refers to no touching between the male and female.

Naturally, males and females have to work together, whether in real life or in a classroom setting. Therefore, Muslims find themselves uncomfortable working with the opposite gender, especially in a high school setting, where cross-gender interaction norms are loosely defined.

This female student demonstrates the discomfort she feels when working with males:

I personally had other interactions where the teacher chose our group, so we are set up, like we don’t have a choice who we are paired up with.... As a student, there is no restriction right. So it is not, really, if I am in the group I kind of orient the way things are going to go and as I show that this is what my restrictions are, then other people are going to have to deal with it. And sometimes that is a difficult thing for Muslims to do, just because it is something they have to go out of their way to do and again not everyone is

like that. If I was like that and my friend wasn't and I want to share that with her, she would probably say oh that is ok, it is not a problem, just go with it. (FS1)

This female student is explaining a situation in which she is forced to let her teammates know her expectations for cross-gender interaction. She further elaborates on her continuous struggle to assert her expectations each and every time she works with a group where there are males. At the beginning of the quote, she speaks of having no choice in selecting one's group, insinuating that she would have selected an all-female group so that she was not in a position to assert herself repeatedly.

With respect to cross-gender interactions, another struggle for Muslim students is when they follow an opinion in Islamic jurisprudence to not shake hands with the opposite gender, which is an extension of no-body contact with the opposite gender. Some female Muslim students in this study raised concern regarding their reservations to shake a male's hands. In this example, a female Muslim student speaks about a friend of hers who struggled with a common ritual during graduation, where everyone who collects their diploma shakes the hand of those on the stage:

I had a friend who was pretty religious; she followed Islam to a great extent, and she was trying to become a practicing Muslim, and she wears Hijab and everything. And we were doing this activity; it was in grade 8, and we were having our graduation. And we were trying to make sure that everyone knew how to properly shake hands, and grab the diploma on the actual ceremony, so the girl was scared that she would have to shake hands with a male teacher. And she was worried about that and she kept on, and she didn't know how to say it, because she was the shy type, she told me and she told a couple of other girls, like she didn't want to tell the teacher herself. (FS1)

Some Muslim students adhere to a school of thought in Islam where shaking hands (or body-contact in general) with the opposite gender is not permitted. This kind of observance poses issues for those Muslims living in a society where shaking one's hand is a sign of respect, greetings, and security (Burgoon, 1991; Levav & Argo, 2010).

Similarly, teachers have also noted that they do not either understand the gender interaction guidelines of Muslim students or they do not know the guidelines:

I think it was within my first couple of months on the job; I had a bit of an awakening experience. I had a Muslim daughter in with her father and she had had an “interesting” relationship with a male student. The terminology that I used [with the father] was “boyfriend” just got me in a whole bunch of hot water with the father. Holy smokes. And I had to backtrack quickly so it was a real cultural awakening for me, the language usage.

One of the teachers, during his first few months at the school, realized the importance of culturally appropriate language when speaking to Muslims. In this example, when the term “boyfriend” was used, the connotation of the term in the Muslim culture was that there was intimate physical contact between the daughter and the “boyfriend,” which provoked the father. In other words, Muslim girls who have boyfriends are deemed to be “unfaithful”, or “immodest,” which are all terms that a parent, especially a Muslim parent, would not tolerate hearing about his/her daughter. This also goes against the emblematic character of Islam—Hayaa—mentioned in the literature review, which mainly revolves around modesty and bashfulness in Muslim conduct and appearance (Hadith Database, 2002).

It seems that teachers do not know the nuances of dealing with Muslim students and students seem to be tired of “always have to explain[ing] [themselves]” (FS2). Some students also mentioned that it is not just the explaining that is the challenge but the “I don’t know how to explain it” (FS4) which also raises difficulties.

### **Teachers’ Biases**

An emerging theme identified by both students and teachers in this study is teachers’ biases against Muslim students. These biases might be conscious or they might be unconscious. Students mentioned the importance of having a good relationship with teachers in the school: “I think that teachers [are one of the biggest support systems] because they are like role models ...

if they treat Muslims rightly, the students would [treat them nicely] too and the opposite is true too ...” (FS2). Students feel that a relationship between a teacher and a student is a two-way street, where both contribute to either the enhancement or the destruction of the relationship. As shown in the previous chapter, students identified teachers as one of the most crucial support at the school. However, there have been emerging themes suggesting that teachers hold some biases against Muslims, and that these biases cause confusion, misunderstanding, and friction between students and teachers.

Students mentioned incidents they personally experienced with specific teachers that led them to feel discriminated against. One student spoke about a teacher who was fair in all his other dealings except when there were topics related to Islam that entered into the conversation:

... he is a great guy, he doesn't have anything against Muslims, he is fair in everything, but when it comes to these kinds of topics [Islam and religion], he holds on to his opinions.... Muslims in the class kept saying this is not Islam, but I don't think our message was received. (FS5)

Students felt that some teachers would hold onto their way of thinking no matter what evidence was presented. One student identified a specific bias she noticed in a few of her teachers: “... teachers think we are making war in other countries” (MS2). The language used in this quote shows that the student felt that the teacher was implicating Muslim students in the violence seen in the media.

In addition to identifying certain biases against Muslims, students recalled incidents where they felt discriminated against or treated differently from other groups of students. One student felt they were the recipient of unfair treatment and deliberate discrimination:

“...he always pushes us aside and every time we tell him something, he ignores us and tells us that that is wrong, like he never agrees with us ... I think it is like their second nature ... they don't really understand us, that we are as good as other people.” (MS2)

Feelings of not being treated as well as other groups of individuals due to one's religion was something many students sensed from specific teachers.

### **Challenges of Muslim Students—Interview Transcripts**

In the previous paragraphs I reported on the challenges that Muslim students feel, using their own quotes from the interviews. In this section I report on the challenges that Muslim students face, that emerged when reading through the interview transcripts.

#### **Teacher's Own Biases Surface.**

In the section above, I reported on teachers' biases, from the perspective of students. In this theme, I report on teachers' biases from the interview transcripts. When conducting interviews with specific teachers and administrators, some biases and stereotypes about Muslim students surfaced. One of the teachers asserted that he knew that "Muslim parents are not afraid to use corporal discipline or whatever it takes to get their kids behaving" (MT5). When I asked if this was what he thought of his Muslim students, he modified his answer by saying that those Muslims who live in Canada are very much different from the Muslims outside of Canada: "... there seems to be a difference in Islam in Canada and Islam in other places in the world"(MT5). The teacher mentions that, in general, he has experienced positive interactions with the Muslims in his school; however, that does not negate, his perception, that those "Muslims" outside of Canada must be very different. He believed that what he saw in the media was indicative of the Muslim population in general, except those in Canada. One staff member went as far as to ask me if the holy book of Muslims, the Quran, endorses cheating: "... does the Quran say that cheating is okay because in most religions that is not right" (FT5). The teacher could not fathom that a student who was wearing Hijab and also practicing other Islamic fundamentals like

praying and fasting to cheat in the class. To this teacher, it seems that, those who are practicing a faith cannot also choose to cheat.

### **Teachers' view students the same.**

One of the major themes that came up in interviews, with 90% of the teachers and administrators I interviewed, was that they mentioned statements like: “students are students,” or “I am not always aware of them as Muslims,” or “I treat all my students the same.” When I asked what the challenges of students in general were, followed by what the challenges of Muslim students were in particular, the answer was that they had the same struggles as all the other students. Most teachers said that they would describe them as any other student group in general: “I deal with people as people; I am not separating them as Muslims and non-Muslim” (FT2). Teachers, also, said that if any struggles come up, they deal with them as they emerge. I further asked the teachers if they change anything in their classrooms to support Muslim students, the response was that they teach all students in the same way (FT2; FT3; MT1; MT2; FT5; MT4). Other teachers said that some individuals, not specifically Muslims or non-Muslims, had more challenges than others; that “specific challenges” were not exclusive to Muslims.

### **Students did not see themselves in the curriculum**

One of the challenges implicit in the findings is a lack of representation in the curriculum of the school. By representation I mean “a multiplicity of perspectives in academic discourse, knowledge, and texts.” (Dei, 1996b, p.176). When I asked the Muslim students if they saw themselves in the curriculum, they did not understand what I meant by the question. The specific words of the question were—I asked it with different words and in different ways—Do you see yourself in the curriculum of certain classes? Do you relate to the curriculum? I explained myself

and gave them simple examples, such as—Do you see yourself or your culture represented in your classroom through images or words or any kind of discussions? Unless the discussion revolved around new terrorist attacks performed by Muslims, all except for one student said that they did not see themselves reflected in the curriculum or their classes. Most of the answers were “I do not know what you mean” (MS1; FS2) or “No, not really” (FS6; MS3). The exception to this was a student who spoke of an incident in her English class where the teacher referred to Arabic numbers as the “numbers that we use today” in a discussion of a literature excerpt. Though, Arabic numerals are not directly related to all Muslims—only 20% of Muslims are Arabs (Pew Research Centre, 2009). Other than this incident, none of the students recalled any reference to Islam or Muslims in their classes. It seemed that Muslim contribution was absent in the curriculum of the school, which may create a barrier for Muslim students when trying to connect and engage in their learning (Anwar, 1986; Murad, 1986; Parker Jenkins, 1995; Rezai-Rashti, 2004; Yousif, 1993; Zine, 1997; Sweet, 1997; Berns McGown, 1999; Shamma, 1999b). Most students were surprised that “representation” would even be an option; to them it seemed like a very odd question to be asked.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I reported on the challenges that Muslim students faced in the school, even despite the supports mentioned in the previous chapter. I first reported on challenges of Muslim youth, drawing on their own quotes: (a) Students experience Islamophobia; (b) Students feel pressure to defend and explain themselves (c) Teachers’ biases. Then I used interview transcripts to present other themes that emerged with respect to the challenges of Muslim students: (d) Teachers view students the same; (e) Students did not see themselves in the curriculum.





## **CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

The challenges of Muslim students and the supports provided to them in the school, according to the findings, are analyzed and discussed in this chapter. I divided this chapter into three sections: First, I connect the themes from the different categories (conceptions of Islam, issues related to Muslim students, supports for Muslim students, and challenges of Muslim students) that were presented in the findings chapters. In this section, I explore the ultimate question: Do Muslim feel supported? If yes, how do Muslim students feel supported? And how they do not feel supported? I do so by connecting the findings and presenting two tables, using two different perspectives, to show the supports and the challenges that Muslim students feel. Second, I deconstruct the teachers' views of Muslims and how those views impede the student-teacher relationship and learning. Third, I use existing and emerging research to further discuss Muslim students' challenges in the school.

### **Connecting the Themes**

Table 8 shows a comparison of all the themes that emerged in the three findings chapters. Careful study of the table shows links between certain columns and certain items.

TABLE 8: COMAPRISON OF THEMES EMERGED FROM THE FINDINGS

Table 8: Comparison of Themes Emerged from the Findings			
(A) The conception of Islam	(B) Issues facing Muslim Students (Identified by Educational Partners)	(C) Supports for Muslim Students (Identified by all the participant groups)	(D) Challenges facing Muslim Students (Identified by students and the interview transcripts)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Islam is a way of life</li> <li>2. Islam is peace</li> <li>3. Islam is all about having good manners.</li> </ol>	<p>From all educational partners:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Specific Curriculum-related Challenges</li> <li>2. Contrast between the Home and “Mainstream” Culture</li> </ol> <p>From teachers and administrators only:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Distinct Gender Roles and Expectations</li> <li>4. Teacher Biases</li> </ol> <p>From parents and Imam only:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Muslim students lack deeper knowledge of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices.</li> </ol>	<p>Explicit Support</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clubs</li> <li>2. Paraprofessionals</li> <li>3. Supportive Teachers and Administration</li> <li>4. Specific accommodations</li> </ol> <p>Implicit Support</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Diversity of the school</li> <li>6. Small population of the school</li> <li>7. High percentage of Muslims at the school</li> </ol>	<p>From Student voice</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Islamophobia exists</li> <li>2. Students feel pressure to defend and explain themselves</li> <li>3. Teachers’ biases</li> </ol> <p>From interview transcripts:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Teachers’ biases</li> <li>5. Teachers view students the same.</li> <li>6. Students do not see themselves in the curriculum</li> </ol>

**Conception of Islam and Challenges (Columns A and D)**

The Muslim participants in this study viewed Islam as a way of life, peaceful and all

about manners the latter two relate to Muslims' interactions with other people. The conception of Islam (column A) seems to be reflected in column D (challenges of Muslim students). Muslims tend to highlight their religious identity (Brah, 1996; Jacobson, 1998; Modood, 2005; Shah, 2006). Emerging surveys show that Muslims, more than any other religious group in Canada, see their faith as an integral part of their identity (Environics Institute, 2016). The findings in column A support the research in this field. Muslim students see their faith as a way from which they lead all aspects of their life (A1). Therefore, the challenges that have emerged, as shown in column D, are due to this very core concept: Islam to Muslims is an integral part of who they are. That is why Muslim students feel that they need to defend their faith: they see it as their way of life. Thus, students want their faith to be acknowledged and accepted (D2) as a peaceful religion (A2) and not associated with terrorism and violence, as students sensed in their conversations with their teachers.

### **Issues and Challenges (Columns B and D)**

The issues and challenges have been divided according to the participant group that spoke to that theme. Parents, teachers, administrators, and the Imam, as educational partners, said that there is a contrast between the home and the mainstream culture (B1) and that students' need accommodations for specific curriculum-related issues (B2). However, parents did not mention any specific gender roles and expectations associated with their religious beliefs that would pose an issue for Muslim students. Below I provide evidence to demonstrate that Muslim gender roles, suggested by parents and administrators, are myths and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. Also, teachers and administrators did not speak about students' lack of deep understanding of their faith. Perhaps, because of an assumption that if one is practicing or adhering to a faith then one must understand it. Contrarily, practicing the rituals of a faith is not

the same as understanding the reasons for performing those rituals. Also, just because one is practicing a faith does not mean that one knows the faith well. Ramadan (1999) observes that most Muslims have reduced Islam to sets of rules, regulations, and practices, which makes it “impossible to give birth to an affirmative, confident and constructive perception of Muslim identity which develops real abilities to inscribe itself” in the Western landscape (p. 10). This perception, that if one practices a religion then one must know their faith, may lead teachers, unconsciously or consciously, exerting pressure on the students to speak for their faith.

Issues facing Muslim students, from the perspective of the teachers, administrators, parents, and the Imam (column B), and the challenges of Muslim students (column D) show three angles of the same issue. On one angle (column B), the teachers, administrators, and the parents (the educational partners) say that Muslims have such a distinct lifestyle from the “mainstream” (B2) culture that they almost seem to be practicing a contrasting or parallel way of life. This is demonstrated when the teachers and administrators refer to defined gender expectations (B3) that they noticed in their Muslim students’ interactions, and curriculum challenges (B1) that have surfaced, as mentioned by teachers, parents, and administrators. From another angle, Muslim students report (column D), when it comes to their faith, that they feel they are the victims of Islamophobia (D1), and therefore need to constantly explain and defend themselves (D2). From a third angle, also articulated in the challenges column (column D), one of the themes from the interviews show that the teachers have biases (D3 and D4) and misunderstandings about Muslims and Islam. What does this all mean? In comparing the issues (column B) from the educational partners’ perceptions, and the challenges (column D) from students’ perceptions, what main points are emerging? After weaving and intersecting all these angles together, a few plausible and intertwining points emerge:

1. Teachers' and parents' views of Muslim "culture" versus "Canadian/Mainstream" culture-contrast (B2) is not a lived experience for Muslim students. In other words, Muslim students, in this study, did not mention a dissonance in their Muslim-Canadian identity, in the challenges.
2. Furthermore, students' feelings of the existence of Islamophobia, and the need to explain/defend themselves (D1 and D2), coupled with the surfacing of teachers' biases (D3 and D4 and B4), show that the teachers in this case study have a lack of deeper understanding of Muslim values, practices, and beliefs, which may lead to the students' feelings of not being accepted for their faith.
3. Parents and the local Imam see Muslim students as lacking in their understanding and appreciation of Islamic values, practices, and beliefs (B5). This is further shown, in part, when students feel pressure (and therefore struggle) to articulate their faith or represent their faith (D2). Since the teachers and the students both seem to lack a deep understanding of Islamic values, practices, and beliefs, then teachers' views of Islam and Muslims continue to be unchallenged, and students will continue to feel the pressure to represent Islam.
4. Teachers are not offered any training, as mentioned in the findings, specific to teaching Muslim students. In addition, teachers' work intensification infringes on their time and energy to sift through an amass of knowledge about, Islam and Muslims, to learn about Islam and Muslims in a more meaningful way.
5. Teachers may be unaware of their lack of understanding of Islamic values, beliefs, and practices, as well as the need to include Muslim learners' background and histories in their teaching.

6. Consequently, teachers appear to resort (and continue) to view (and teach) all students the same (D4).

These connecting themes are further discussed in the sections below.

### **Supports and Challenges (Column C and D)**

Using the conceptual framework established at the beginning of this thesis supports in Column C can be viewed in different ways. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the challenges that continue to face Muslim students even with the existing supports in the school. Do the Muslim students feel supported? If yes, how so? If not, then why not? Below are two tables: Table 9 shows the challenges of Muslims and the corresponding supports provided. This table also shows how well each of the challenges is supported using the findings and the two support systems (York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's and Banks's). Table 10 shows the two support systems I selected in the conceptual framework and the supports from the findings for each of York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) Types of Support and Banks's multicultural dimensions.

<b>Table 9: Challenges of Muslim Youth and the Corresponding Supports</b>			
<b>Challenges of Muslim Youth</b>	<b>Corresponding supports provided at the school</b>	<b>Corresponding type of York, Giangreco, Vandercook, &amp; Macdonald 's support</b>	<b>Corresponding dimension of Banks's Multicultural Education</b>
<b>Religious practice</b>	Clubs prayer room/Friday prayers High % of Muslim population	Resource Support Moral Support Evaluation Support Technical Support	Empower School Culture and Social Structure Prejudice Reduction
<b>Dress code</b>	High % of Muslim population and small community	Moral Support	Prejudice Reduction Empower School Culture and Social Structure
<b>Sexual ethics</b>	Physical education High % of Muslim population and small community	Resource Support Moral Support Evaluation Support	Empower School Culture and Social Structure Prejudice reduction
<b>Myths, stereotypes, biases and Islamophobia</b>	High % of Muslim population and small community	Moral Support	Prejudice Reduction Empower School Culture and Social Structure
<b>Curriculum-related</b>	Physical education accommodation	Resource Support Evaluation Support	



<b>Table 10: York, Giangreco, Vandercook, &amp; Macdonald 's Types of Support and Banks's Multicultural Dimensions and the Specific Supports</b>	
<b>York, Giangreco, Vandercook, &amp; Macdonald 's Types of Support</b>	<b>Specific Supports (in the findings)</b>
Evaluation Support	Specific accommodations for Muslim students at the board-level, school-level, and the teacher-level
Moral Support	Clubs Small population of the school High percentage of Muslim population Diversity of the school
Resource Support	Specific accommodations for Muslim students at the board level, school level, and the teacher level
Technical Support	Specific accommodations for Muslim students at the board level, school level, and the teacher level
<b>Banks's Multicultural Dimensions</b>	<b>Specific Support (in the findings)</b>
Content Integration	Including Arabic numerals in a discussion in English class.
Knowledge Construction	
Equity Pedagogy	
Prejudice Reduction	Clubs Small population of the school High percentage of Muslim population Diversity of the school
Empower School Culture and Social Structure	Clubs Small population of the school High percentage of Muslim population Diversity of the school

Table 9 shows that each of the challenges of Muslims is met with the corresponding supports emerged in the findings. For example, Islamic sexual ethics mainly revolves around guidelines for cross-gender interactions. With respect to physical education, school-wide policy of separating males and females in their respective physical education classes from the beginning of high school has eliminated the challenge of females feeling uncomfortable and unable to perform well due to male presence. The corresponding support of this school-wide policy to segregate males and females in physical education lends itself to York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald's (1992) resource support, where males and females are physically separated into

different classes, and evaluation support, because it is an accommodation based on feedback administration received from students and parents. The implicit supports of having a high Muslim population in the school provide the students with moral support (York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald, 2000), so that Muslim students do not feel “different” when they adhere to their faith. For example when they choose to follow the distinct code of conduct for gender interaction in Islam, such as no body contact with the opposite gender and keeping all cross-gender interaction professional. Furthermore, the implicit support of having a small, diverse, and a reputation of having a large Muslim student presence helps reduce prejudice and empower school culture and social structure. Having a diverse group of people in a small school may lead to increased interactions with the other backgrounds and people of different races and ethnicities. Muslim students, being surrounded by likeminded peers who adhere to the same sexual ethics or those who look like (or dress like them), may feel more of a sense of belonging and acceptance among their own group. It is clear that the table shows supports in place for each of the challenges that Muslim students may face. But does this mean that Muslim students feel “supported”?

Another way of looking at supports and challenges is with Table 10, which shows the provision of supports through a different lens. The table displays the Types of Supports from the conceptual framework and the corresponding supports from the findings. Generally, looking at the table, it is clear that the supports categorized by York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald’s Types of Support and Banks’s multicultural dimension are not a deliberate effort made by teachers and administrators to help Muslim students in their educational journeys. The supports, as can be seen in the second column, labelled as “specific supports from the findings,” mainly fall into three categories: religious accommodations that are mandated by policy and

legislation; supports created due to the unique context and demographic of the school (implicit supports); and clubs created by students to have a voice within the school. Nonetheless, even if the teachers and administrators have not created the existing supports for Muslim students, and perhaps the concern should not be who created or mandated the existing supports, as long as those supports exist. Overall, these supports seem to be helping Muslims feel welcomed and happy in the school. Both tables show that most of the supports from the conceptual framework have been met in this case study. The concern and question remains: are these supports sufficient for Muslim students?

Before, I can answer the above question further, I want to explore some salient points that were brought up in the findings, using the existing and emerging research. This thesis looked at challenges of Muslim students and the existing supports in the school. In the sections below, I discuss teachers' views of Muslim students, and the students' views of themselves. I chose to dedicate a section in the discussion chapter to the teachers. When reviewing column D (challenges of Muslim students), two main overarching challenges emerge: students do not feel accepted and acknowledged when it comes to their faith; teachers do not have a deep understanding and appreciation of Muslim values, practices, and beliefs. Therefore, it is important to discuss the teachers and their perceptions of Muslim students.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of Muslims**

A teacher-student relationship is considered to be one of the most important foundations of student learning and sense of belonging (Baker et al., 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Green, 1998; Niebur & Niebur, 1999; Medina & Lunn, 1999; Kohn, 1999; Fouts, 2001; Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008). Students appear to learn best from teachers who show a positive view of them (Jacobson, 1995; Walsh & Maffei, 1995; Hamre &

Pianta, 2001). In reviewing the findings, one can conclude two discussion points about the teachers of the school. First, from a student view, overall students were happy with their teachers, and they considered the relationship with their teachers to be a key support in their school life. Second, looking at the teacher interviews, teachers are not well informed about Islamic beliefs, values, and practices. Not being well aware of Islam is not exclusively a teacher issue; it is a broader Canadian issue. Recent research shows that Islam as a religion is frequently misunderstood by non-Muslims (MacDonald, 2015; Environics Institute, 2016; Mohamed, 1996). Teachers' lack of knowledge of Islamic beliefs, values, and practices became apparent in the interviews.

Furthermore, in this study, some teachers' strong negative biases and stereotypes toward Muslims surfaced. For example, one teacher demonstrated a negative attitude by assuming that the holy book of Muslims—the Quran—spoke favourably of cheating (MT3). Other negative attitudes of the teachers I interviewed were based “largely on stereotypes of Muslims that are reminiscent of a long-gone colonial era” (Rezai-Rashti, 1994, p.37), such as when teachers spoke of the subservience of women to men or the use of corporal punishment to discipline children. Teachers also mentioned their low expectations of newcomer Muslim students, which may lead to negative evaluations and underachievement (Parker-Jenkins, 1991). These teachers have been working at the school for a long time, and the school has a reputation of having a large Muslim student presence—for at least the past five years—have been Muslims. In the following paragraphs, I discuss two issues related to teachers: teachers' stereotypes, myths, and biases against Muslims; and viewing all students the same.

## **Teachers' Stereotypes, Myths and Biases against Muslims**

Teacher biases and stereotypes against Muslims and Islam were evident during the interviews. Students recalled incidents of teachers speaking ill of Muslims and of Islam. Students also spoke about reporting those incidents to the administration, and not seeing any change of behaviour. The administrators spoke about these same incidents, and said that when it came to teachers, there was very little they could do (MA1).

Some teachers in this study spoke about Muslims in a general, homogenous manner. Speaking about any group of people, especially a group as diverse as the Muslim population, in general blanket statements, leads to stereotypes and misconceptions (Phelps, 1972; Arrows, 1973). Granted, as human beings, we naturally are inclined to categorize things, and it is useful to think like that; “the human mind must think with the aid of categories” (Allport, 1954, p.20). However, when it comes to human beings, categorical thinking distorts perception by minimizing differences within categories and exaggerating differences between categories (Plous, 2001). This is also called the “out-group homogeneity effect”, where individuals see members of a group that are different from them as being more similar to each other versus members of their own group being seen as diverse from each other (Judd, Ryan, & Park, 1991; Park & Judd, 1990). Therefore, out-group members are more likely to be stereotyped by the in-group members.

Muslims are not a homogenous group of people; they are merely unified in their belief in one God and Mohammed—peace be upon him—as the final messenger. That is the only necessary commonality among Muslims. There are over 1.7 billion Muslims in the world; that is about 23.4% of the world population. About 91.2% of Muslims live in Middle East and North Africa, 29.6% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 24.8% in Asia, 6% in Europe, and 0.6% in the Americas

(Pew Forum, 2014). Muslim cultures, beliefs, opinions, thoughts, experiences, educational backgrounds, cuisines, dress code, and so on, vary tremendously, even when Muslims live in close proximity to one another (Pew Forum, 2012). Making general statements about Muslims leads to prejudices and negative stereotypes, which may cause conflict and tension in teacher-student relationships. Teachers appeared to have stereotypes and biases toward Muslims, not related to Islam, but rather of an intersectionality of either faith and gender or both.

The Muslim students in this study came from diverse backgrounds. According to the anecdotal data presented by the administrators, the Muslim population at the school comprises students from the Middle East, Pakistan, India, and Somalia. When people say “Middle East”, they usually mean the 22 Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa (Pew Research, 2012). Each one of these countries is home to many different cultural and ethnic groups (Pew Research, 2012). The Muslim students of the school comprise a diverse racial group even within their own countries. The four main stereotypes, reported by the teachers, that related more to gender and race than to religion were: (a) Muslim females being less outgoing or speaking less in the presence of males, (b) Muslim males dominating a sports game in a co-ed setting, (c) Muslim males being less respectful of female authority, and (d) Muslim mothers disciplining their girls more than their boys.

The previously mentioned blanket statements reported by teachers show the intersectionality and confusion of race, gender, and religious stereotypes. Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) first came up with the term intersectionality when referring to the overlap of race and gender of African American women’s subordination. Feminist Patricia Hill Collins (1999) describes intersectionality as the “interlocking systems of race, class, and gender,” which create a “matrix of oppression.” When speaking to teachers, stereotypical statements were made about

Muslims that were not relevant to the Muslim students' faith. Below are some examples of teachers' stereotypical statements:

**Muslim females being less outgoing or speaking less in the presence of males.**

Traditionally, women are seen as those who wear dresses, take care of children, are beautiful and delicate, and also are passive and pure (Griffin, 1998; Dherrow, 1996; Woolum, 1998; Zimmerman & Reavill, 1998). Furthermore, Muslim women (and women with brown skin colour) are seen as more docile and passive than their white female counterparts (Sultana, 2012). Especially if the female is veiled, the stereotype is that she is oppressed and subservient (Sultana, 2012). Considering these stereotypes of Muslim women, it is no surprise to find teachers being taken off-guard when they encounter "outspoken and outgoing" Muslim women. Teachers and administrators in the study also relayed that they noticed, during parents' meetings, that the man (or the father) dominates the conversation, while his wife (the mother) quietly sits down. Teachers attributed this to a general challenge Muslims face, where men in the Muslim tradition are more outspoken than women. Those particular females are the subjects of stereotypes because they are female, Muslim, and veiled: the intersectionality of gender, religion, and dress.

**Muslim males dominating a sports game in a co-ed setting.**

Generally, males are known to be more interested in sports than females (Russel, Allen, & Wilson, 1996; Sallis & Patrick, 1996; Wankel & Mummery, 1996). One of the coaches involved in a coeducation ball game mentioned that he noticed that Muslim males dominated the ball game and marginalized the females. When I asked him if this was a Muslim issue or just a gender issue, he thought his statement through and said: "I never thought of that." He modified his statement, stating that males in general were more dominating in sports games than females. Research shows that more males are interested in sports than females, especially during the

adolescent years (Russel, Allen, & Wilson, 1996; Sallis & Patrick, 1996; Wankel & Mummery, 1996). Furthermore, Colley, Roberts, & Chipps (1985) found that team sports are generally seen to be a male sport because they have more masculine attributes and are more aggressive. For example, team handball is considered to be more masculine than gymnastics (Fontayne, Sarrazin, & Famose, 2000; Koivula, 1995, 1999). Granted, more women are breaking those stereotypes and more women are joining male-dominated and male-appropriated sports. However, male domination of sports is not a faith-related issue; it is more of a gender stereotype.

Another issue here was that the males who were playing sports were Middle Eastern, and being from that race tends to fuel the stereotype that males overpower females. This is an example of intersectionality of race, gender, and religion, where a group of men are seen as dominating because they are from a specific race that is stereotyped as one that overpowers females. In the book *Reel Bad Arabs* (2003), the writer examined 900 films that portray Arabs as “brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women” (Shaheen, 2003, p.172). Those young boys were the subjects of prejudice from their teacher.

### **Muslim males being less respectful of female authority.**

None of the teachers mentioned a direct experience or witnessed any Muslim male student disrespecting a female authority. Some teachers related stories they heard from other teachers. The disrespect of female authority by males is not a faith-related issue. Sandler (1991) investigated the experiences of women in the classroom and how students (male and female) treated male and female teachers differently. Her “very presence makes some of her students uncomfortable even before she speaks” (Sandler, 1991, p.11). Sandler mentions a female professor’s mere presence to create discomfort among her students. Disrespecting female authority or deeming female authority as less competent is not just a problem faced by teachers



but also a problem in broader society. Researchers posit that one's perception of authority changes, depending if the authority figure is a male or female. Females are devalued when they are in a position of authority; to some, "femaleness" does not go together with power, competence, and authority (Kram & McCollom-Hampton, 1998; Lipman-Bluman, Fryling, Henderson, Moore, & Vecciotti, 1996; Rudman & Kilianski, 2000). Framing the devaluing of female authority as faith-based, or perhaps racially nurtured, rather than a broader gender issue, is falling into prejudicial and stereotypical thinking.

### **Muslim mothers disciplining their girls more than their boys.**

Teachers have seen Muslim boys get in more trouble than Muslim girls. The "trouble-making" boy is not related to mothers being less or more permissive, but it is a general issue schools have with boys. Generally, boys are known to have more behavioral problems than girls (Beaman, Wheldall, & Kemp, 2006; Gilliam 2005; Ready et al. 2005). Contrary to such stereotypes that girls are disciplined more than boys, research shows that boys receive severer and harsher punishment than girls in certain countries such as Hong Kong (Tang, 1998) and the United States (Day, Paterson, & McCracken, 1998). Muslim boys' misbehaviour seems to reflect on their religion and the permissiveness of their mothers rather than on a wider gender issue in schools.

It is important to think through our biases and stereotypes toward a specific race, gender, and religion. Granted, some categorical thinking is natural to function normally in society; however, when misplaced and generalized without critical investigation, such thinking becomes prejudicial. Confusing one general negative statement about a specific race or gender as a true pattern of behaviour attributed to Islam adds to the myths and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims perpetuated by the media. It is unrealistic to make any general statements about

Muslims and Islam after understanding the diversity of Muslims in the world (Pew Research, 2012). When teachers make such statements, it is a breach of the ethical standards (of care and respect) and standards of practice (of commitment to students and student learning) of the teaching profession, as outlined by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT, 2012). How can teachers maintain respect and care for their students if they have negative stereotypes of them? How can teachers commit to students and student learning (OCT, 2012) when they have biases and prejudices? Stereotypes, like the ones above, are considered harmful to the individuals they are directed at because the individuals are not treated as persons (Fong et al., 2004). Especially if those stereotypes are culturally based, those who are stereotyping “dominate, criticize, or dehumanize members of out-groups” (Gudykunst et al., 2003 p. 146). Stereotypes and negative biases about a certain group of people are limiting to both parties, in this case to both the Muslims and the teachers. Having those kinds of stereotypes and biases about Muslims show the teachers’ lack a deeper understanding of Islam and of Muslims, which therefore leads the teachers to be overly cautious and reserved, as mentioned in the example below:

... maybe it is me, not them, because I know how much the Hijab means to them in that kind of belief. I try not to engage with them [the Muslim girls] ... with boys you can kid around and you can joke around but I don’t do that with the girls. I know how much protective their families are and stuff and I don’t want any problems. I mean perception is a lot of things so I could be doing something they may find offensive ... I want to be cautious and respectable I don’t want to bend over and let them kick me every time.  
(MT1)

Some teachers resort to reserved caution when they are around Muslim students, and others seem to dismiss the differences that students bring to the classroom and, therefore, treat the students in a blanket manner.

With respect to the biases and stereotypes that some teachers held about Muslim students, I would like to discuss their claims, and in doing so raise three points. First, the biases brought

forward by the teachers were not triangulated by other participant groups; parents and students did not speak of any of the issues brought up by the teachers regarding gender expectations. In other words, other participant groups did not provide further evidence for those points at all. Granted, just because other sources did not mention them, does not deem the points unfounded. However, the second issues that arises is that teachers in this case study seemingly only noticing these attributes in certain students (or their parents), who happen to be Muslim, and attributing those issues to Islam or Muslims in general—which may be a faulty connection. For instance, gender-based treatment could exist within any family unit or ethnic or social culture (we see it in many different families and cultures, including those in North America) (Raley and Bianchi, 2006; Baker & Milligan, 2014) and thus can not be a practice solely attributed to Muslims or the faith. Third, I want to explore the teachers' biases and stereotypes origins. Some teachers might have adopted those biases, consciously or unconsciously, from the media, prior to working with Muslim students or parents. Others might have witnessed such stereotypes to be true in one or more cases within the Muslim or Arab or South Asian or Somali population of the school. However, holding negative biases about a certain population because of a few cases, or because of opinions informed by the media, without further meaningful investigation, is stereotyping. Stereotypes lead to “cognitive distortions”, such as “moral distancing, failing to see members of the stereotyped group as individuals, and failing to to see diversity within that group” (Blum, 2004, p.251). Therefore, this may be a source of tension or mistrust in student-teacher relationships.

### **Viewing All Students the Same**

In this study, the majority of the teachers that I interviewed, many of whom seemed to have good intentions, made statements such as “I treat all my students the same.” Teachers may

believe that treating all students the same ensures that they are not discriminating against any specific group; however, this very thinking is discriminatory (Banks, 2006; Gollnick and Chinn, 2009). What does it mean to view or treat all students the same? Cooper, Barbara & Levin (2011) indicate that such statements of being faith-blind or colour-blind may have three underlying meanings: teachers do not want to think about their own race and ethnicity, which may be accompanied with privilege; teachers do not want to admit that they have biases toward certain groups; teachers do not feel comfortable talking about the differences among the students for numerous other reasons.

Clearly this was an issue of Banks & Banks's (1995) equity pedagogy, where teachers were not providing students what they needed as individuals. When looking at Table 10, the equity pedagogy of Banks' Multicultural dimension has no specific supports from the findings. Another statement similar to "I treat all students the same", was "I do not see Muslim" when I see my students. Banks wrote about colour blindness, although in this case the it would be being faith-blindness. "A statement such as 'I don't see color' reveals a privileged position that refuses to legitimize racial identifications that are very important to people of colour and that are often used to justify inaction and perpetuation of the status quo" (Banks, 2001, p. 12). Adopting a faith-blind attitude when talking about Muslim issues and struggles indirectly neglects Muslim realities and challenges.

When speaking to teachers, I sensed that many were uncomfortable when talking about Muslims. When I asked them if they knew of any challenges that their Muslim students faced, I mainly got responses that indicated that teachers were not aware of the Islamic faith, practices, or values. Research shows that teachers seem to feel more comfortable teaching children living below the poverty line than those children who are of black or brown skin colour (Milner

2010a.). It seems that teaching students of colour is challenging for teachers. In a school with a reputation of having a large Muslim student presence for a number of years, perhaps acknowledging that one is unaware of Muslims' practices, beliefs, and life experiences may seem ignorant and unbecoming of a teacher. Ontario College of Teachers indicates that professional knowledge (to be current in their professional knowledge) and professional practice (to respond to the needs of students) are two important tenets of standards of practice for teachers (2012). The school administrators, as indicated in the findings, also mentioned that there is no special training for teachers to learn about Muslim students' values, beliefs, practices, and needs. Nonetheless, it seems that most teachers need support to teach the Muslim population equitably and that having good intentions is not sufficient enough to achieve inclusive teaching.

### **Muslim Students' Perspective**

This study is about Muslim students and it is important to discuss their perspectives. Students in high schools face a lot of pressure academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. Pressure may be from society, from peers, from parents, from one's ideologies, or from within (Wolfe et al, 2008). Muslim students face these same pressures that their counterparts face. In addition to those pressures, they encounter other stresses related to affiliating with and adhering to Islam. The findings in this research identify three of the pressures that Muslim students experience because of their faith: the pressure to represent Islam in the school; the pressure to assert their Canadian-Muslim identity; the pressure "to be yourself."

#### **The Pressure to Represent Islam in the School**

Western Muslim, now more than ever, feel the backlash of negative portrayals and stereotypes of Muslims and Islam in the media (Helly, 2004; CAIR-CAN, 2002; Adams, 2007; Hildebrandt, 2010; Geddes, 2013; Environics Institute, 2016). These stereotypes and negative

biases have seeped into school environments and cultures (Rezai-Rashti, 1994; Zine, 2001; Sisak, 2015; Nuttall, 2016) . Muslim students in this study felt that they needed to represent Islam to the broader school community. During the interviews, students indicated that on the one hand they felt welcomed and respected in the school, but on the other hand, they felt Islam was misunderstood and misrepresented in the media. Furthermore, students also mentioned, as indicated in the findings, that they feel those negative notions of Islam and Muslims in the school. Recent surveys show that Muslims hold their Islamic identity particularly close (Environics Institute, 2006, 2016). Muslims do not want their peers and teachers to be misled by the media, so they feel a sense of responsibility to defend Islam when it is attacked or undermined in their classrooms. Similarly, at a macro level, one can see that “Muslim organizations are constantly working to counter the negative image of Islam and Muslims in the media as well as on the international and domestic political scenes ... striving to represent ‘pure Islam’ (Kanjwal, 2008, p.4). Muslim organizations are the first to condemn any terrorist attack in a media release. “They are often placed in the awkward position of having to defend Islam or Muslims when a problematic incident occurs” (Kanjwal, 2008, p.4). Muslim individuals, just like these organizations, find themselves as ambassadors called upon to defend their faith. One of the challenges of representing Islam to one’s peers and teachers is understanding Islam in depth. Muslims who adhere to the practices of Islam, without any meaningful reflection, may practice the religious obligations and follow the religious guides effectively; however, they may be unable to articulate the reasonings behind Islamic practices to their non-Muslim peers and teachers (Ghanea-Bassirri, 1997).

Most teenagers explore, understand, and construct their identities in high school, and therefore they are not in a position to defend the religion they adhere to because they have yet to

fully understand it themselves. Practicing a religion does not mean one understands it. Many Muslim adults, let alone adolescents, have limited knowledge of Islam and Islamic history (Ghanea-Bassirri, 1997). Being uninformed about the reasons one performs certain rituals and the depth of rulings concerning practices of Islam puts Muslims at a disadvantage. One of the reasons, perhaps, that teachers are not well aware of Islamic practices and values is because the students themselves do not have an in-depth understanding of their religion. But then, should we really expect high school students to speak for a religion? And should Muslim students be relied upon as the sole source of their teachers' knowledge about Islam and Muslims? Students cannot speak about and discuss Islam in an intelligent manner because they, themselves, do not yet know their faith well enough to do so.

Representing Islam is a big responsibility. Students are already under pressure to express themselves and their individuality; adding the additional pressure of representing an entire religion, in its best form, is a daunting task. Most of the students interviewed, as mentioned in the findings, stated that they tried their best to be caring, helpful, and to show kindness to counteract the negativity in the media. Furthermore, most of the teachers interviewed also spoke about the kindness and respect of their Muslim students. Also, teachers have also indicated that most of the Muslim students at the school were among the most respectful and kindest students.

### **The Pressure to Assert Their Canadian-Muslim Identity**

Muslim students find themselves asserting their Canadian-Muslim identity to their peers, teachers, and also to their parents. During the interviews, parents of Muslim students unconsciously would refer to themselves as “us” and to those who were not Muslim or Arab as “them” when they would talk about religion, Hijab, or maintaining their culture. One example of

such phrasing was when a parent mentioned that “we are not like them” or “we don’t do that,” referring to having a boyfriend or a girlfriend.

Furthermore, teachers and parents have referred to non-Muslims and the non-Muslim culture as “Canadians” or “Canadian.” Teachers have also spoken about Muslim students living double lives (B2 in Table 8) as mentioned in the Issues Related to Muslim Students section of the findings. The “double lives” referred to (1) broader Canadian values and (2) the values that Muslims uphold. Public discourse tends to turn to a question of “different values” when discussing the topics of Islam and immigrants specifically (Zine, 2012). The Environics Institute’s survey in 2006 and 2016 showed that the population at-large is concerned that Muslims are not adopting “Canadian Values.” Although there has been some improvement in 2016, 43% of Canadians believe that Muslims want to remain distinct, versus the 57% ten years ago, in 2006.

Even though parents, teachers, and administrators reported this issue as a problem for Muslim students, none of the Muslim students spoke in a way that revealed an “us versus them” mentality, nor did they mention feeling as though they were leading “double lives”, or of thinking or feeling that being “Canadian” was something in contrast to their culture. Language, and the words we use, are indicative of our psyche, our belief systems, and our way of thinking (Pennebaker, Mehl & Niederhoffer, 2003). The language the Muslim students used during the interview did not indicate an outsider mentality; on the contrary, they felt that they had to assert their Canadian and Muslim identities to others.

The Muslim students see themselves as Canadians with Canadian values and as part of the wider social fabric. In a recent survey by The Environics Institute (2016), 83% of Muslims stated they were “very proud” Canadians, versus 73% of non-Muslims. With respect to their



sense of belonging to Canada, 94% of Muslims suggested that their sense of belonging in Canada was very strong, and 58% of them said that their sense of belonging has become stronger in the past five years. More and more Muslims feel as if they belong in Canada; however, many of the youth—around 83%—continue to fear discrimination (Environics Institute, 2016). Muslim youth, more so than their parents, feel a strong attachment to Canada and see it as their home country.

Although the youth do not consider themselves to be living “double lives”, the people around them, perhaps well-meaning, suggest this concept to them in various ways. It appears that adults who surround Muslim youth, and the media implicitly and/or explicitly, show Muslim youth that they cannot be both Muslim and Canadian. Many researchers have challenged Huntington’s (1996) “clash of civilization” phenomena (Nagra & Peng, 2013; Kibra, 2010; Sirin & Fine, 2008), demonstrating that Muslim identities and Western identities are, indeed, compatible. Discussing the reasons why there is a difference between how the Muslim youth in this study view their identity, as both Muslim and Canadian, versus how the adults view their identity, as conflicting, is beyond the scope of this study. The findings of this investigation are not sufficient enough to attribute the youth’s positive view of their Canadian-Muslim identity to their public schooling.

### **The Contending Pressure “To Be Yourself”**

Muslim students are torn between the need to represent Islam in its “true” form, and the force within, urging them “to be themselves.” Students want to be free to make mistakes and not be judged by their teachers or peers, or their fellow Muslim students. Trying to “to be yourself” requires one to first find out who they are— an exercise that requires making mistakes, experimenting, and exploring. Muslim students speak about feeling free and more open when

referring to being around other Muslims in the school: “I could be “me” kind of a thing” (FS3). This was mentioned in the findings chapter, in the context of the implicit support of having a high Muslim population in the school. Therefore, using Table 8: we see that (C7) High percentage of Muslims at the school alleviates (D2) students feeling pressure to defend and explain themselves. It seems that, in this study, when the Muslim students find themselves among other Muslim students who understand them, the students feel accepted, and therefore can let their guard down and be themselves.

Individualism is not just a value sought by adolescents; it is deemed as an important Western value in general. “The idea that people should be free to explore their individuality and to express their true selves is fundamental (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Spindler & Spindler, 1990). Students, as adolescents trying to figure out the world and themselves, have a multitude of pressures to deal with (Wolfe et al, 2008); the pressure of representing Islam takes a toll on them. Even though Muslims are known to highlight their religious identity (Brah, 1996; Jacobson, 1998; Modood, 2005; Shah, 2006b), Muslim students are not in a position to be ambassadors of the religion at such a young age.

### **Did Muslim students feel sufficiently supported in the school?**

After exploring the nuances in the findings, and presenting the challenges and supports in different tables, at the beginning of this chapter, I would like to come back to the question that I started with: ultimately, did the Muslim students, in this case study, feel sufficiently supported? I introduced two terms in the conceptual framework regarding support: real support and intended support. *Real support* is when the recipient feels that they are supported, and *intended support* is when the provider implements something he/she sees as a “support” (York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald, 1992). I also defined the type of support that I refer to in this study as “supporting the *well-being*” of the Muslim students, which is defined in Ministry of Education

documents as “enhanced mental and physical health, a positive sense of self and belonging, and the skills to make positive choices” (Ministry of Education, 2014, p.3). Given the definition of support, and considering the supports shown in multiple ways in the tables above, do Muslim students feel a positive sense of self and belonging in their schools? and therefore feel sufficiently supported?

Looking at the overall themes that have emerged in the tables, and connecting the findings seem to lead to the conclusion that, in many ways, Muslim students feel supported and welcomed in the school. Multiple support systems are in place, both explicit and implicit, for Muslim students to feel happy in the school. They have good rapport with their teachers and the administrators, the Muslim Students’ Association (MSA) provides a voice for Muslim students, accommodations that are directly associated with their faith are made, and the local context of the school provides them with additional implicit support. Those very supports are also recognized, in the literature, by: York, Giangreco, Vandercook, & Macdonald’s (1992) *type of supports* and Banks’s multicultural *dimensions*.

However, in other ways, the students do not feel the *well-being* support discussed in chapter 3, where “a positive sense of self and belonging” (Ministry of Education, 2014, p.3) is achieved. This is mainly because Muslim students feel judged for an integral part of their identity—their faith. The themes that emerged in column D (challenges of Muslim students) show that something is missing. The students feel that they are not heard and the interview findings show that the teachers have preconceived biases about Islam and Muslims, which, therefore, puts the students in a position to defend their faith. Even though there are forces undermining Muslim students’ Canadian and/or Muslim identity, the youth, in this study, continue to be living proof that they see themselves as both Canadian and Muslim.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I began with a table showing all the themes of the findings and followed it with a discussion on the connections between the conceptions of Islam, issues-related to Muslim students, supports for Muslim students, and the challenges of Muslim students. I then explored how Muslim students feel supported in some ways and how they feel unsupported in other ways. I deconstructed stereotypes and biases of teachers using emerging and existing research. I concluded with a discussion on the views of Muslim students concerning their overall experiences in the school.

## **CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

The aim of my study was to explore the role of a public school in supporting Muslim students. To investigate my main question, I conducted a qualitative study; I selected social constructivism as my epistemological perspective since my interviews were driven by the experiences the interviewees shared. I used a case study and semi-structured interviews as it provided an in-depth understanding into how public schools supported Muslim students. My inquiry specifically focused on questions concerning the support and challenges perceived by the different participant groups. I interviewed a total of 32 participants, including administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the local Imam. This chapter is divided into four sections: (a) Summary of the major findings; (b) Implications: for practice, for policy, for future research; (c) Contribution to the field; and (d) Concluding remarks.

### **Summary of the Major Findings**

This section summarizes the answers to the research questions of this study. The main research question I pursued was: How does a public school support Muslim students? The answers to the interrelated sub-questions, which helped answer my main research questions, are presented below.

1. How do educational partners of the school understand issues related to Muslim students? On one hand, educational partners (teachers, administrators, parents, and the Imam) all saw two issues-related to Muslim students: (1) a contrast between the home and “mainstream culture”; (2) specific curriculum-related accommodations. On the other hand, teachers and administrators stated two issues that may pose a problem for Muslim students. They saw a (3) gender role and expectation of their Muslim students; and (4) certain teachers spoke about the biases of other

teachers. Parents and the Imam saw that Muslim students lacked a deep understanding of their faith. Having a superficial knowledge of Islam may cause the students problems articulating their faith to others. It may also cause them to feel insecure in their faith due to the negative portrayal of their faith in the media.

2. What kinds of supports are in place, in the school, to help Muslim students?

The school provided many supports for Muslim students. There were two kinds of supports provided at the school. The first type were explicit supports, which were created either by the board, the teachers, the administrators, or the students of the school. The second type were implicit supports, which were provided due to the context and demographics of the school. The explicit supports were: (a) the formation of the Muslims Students' Association (MSA) and the Diversity Club, (b) the hiring of paraprofessionals, (c) supportive administrators and teachers, and (d) the provision of specific accommodation for Muslims from the school board level all the way to the classroom level. The implicit supports are divided into three sections: (a) the diversity of the school, (b) the small population of the school, (c) the high Muslim population of the school. Students, in the interviews, considered the high Muslim population of the school to be one of their biggest support. They also mentioned their teachers and the good relationship they had with the administrators to be one of the other highly regarded supports for them.

3. Considering the supports, what challenges do Muslim students face in the school?

The findings show that Muslim students experience five challenges: (1) Students experience Islamophobia; (2) Students feel pressure to defend and explain themselves (3) Students speak about their teachers' biases; (4) Teachers' view students the same; (5) Students did not see themselves in the curriculum. Muslim students in this study seemed to want to be accepted for who they were, without the pressure of "defending" or "explaining" their faith.

The six challenges of Muslim youth (religious practices, dress code, sexual ethics, stereotypes and biases, Islamophobia, and curriculum-related challenges) articulated in the conceptual framework seem to be the day-to-day challenges that Muslims face when they want to practice their faith. These challenges are also the basis by which Muslim students can legally ask for accommodations. However, Muslim students, in the study, seem to want to go beyond accommodations. They seem to ask for as much equal space as their non-Muslim counterparts—space where they are free from any pressure to fight for their faith or their multiple identities.

When investigating other communities' experiences in public schools, there are many similarities. I mainly draw on the African-Canadian and the indigenous communities' experiences in public schools with respect to challenges and supports. Beyond mere accommodation, there are four common themes in supporting Black/African-Canadians and indigenous communities, which revolve around: (a) the importance of not overlooking the difference within each community as well as difference in class, ethnicity, and gender (Dei et al., 1995; Hunter, 1983; (b) culturally relevant learning environments that reflect the students' epistemic knowledge (Cherubini, 2010; Asante, 1991; ); (c) Afrocentric and indigenous knowledge is not just important for the students of those background, but it also contributes to the growth of all students (Dei, 1996); (d) the recognition of the struggle of schools and educators to support students from different backgrounds, given the work intensification and budget constrains. Nonetheless, studies have shown that with all the educational partners' participation, supporting students from different backgrounds is doable (Henry, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1992; D'Oyley, 1994; Calliste, 1994; Lewington, 1995; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Banks, 1993; Casey, 1993; Foster, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Stanford, 1995; Asante, 1992; Harris, 1992). However, generally, studies of African-Canadians and the indigenous

communities focus on student achievement and learning needs of those students (Dei, 1996; Brown, 1993; Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Hill & George, 1996; Battiste & Mclean, 2005; Cherubini & Hodson, 2008), whereas my study does not directly explore supports around academics, but rather has a stronger focus on well-being supports.

## **Implications**

### **For Practice**

Muslim students in public schools face challenges due to their adherence to their faith (Rezai-Rashti, 1994; Zine, 2001; Sisak, 2015; Nuttall, 2016). There are certain measures that could be undertaken to help support Muslim students in their experiences in public schools. Workshops to support teachers are one important stepping stone. Diversity and cultural training for teachers does not undermine teacher competence; it supports the notion of teachers being lifelong learners. Teachers from all backgrounds would benefit from training programs to ensure they could provide equal access for all students.

Although the Ministry of Education in Ontario does not require any mandatory workshops for teacher training in multicultural classrooms, when looking at the Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009), it clearly states that some school boards, such as the Toronto District School Board's, "staff attend workshops and seminars that focus on social justice and human rights issues" (p. 16–17); the Greater Essex County District School Board also put together a diversity training program for its New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP), which is a mandatory workshop. Therefore, providing workshops related to diversity is a possibility that other boards have successfully implemented.

Furthermore, pre-service teacher education programs lack sufficient support for teacher candidates to teach a diverse population of students. Researchers from both the United States and Canada (Abdi, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ghosh, 2002; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Kincheloe &



Steinberg, 1997; Larkin & Sleeter, 1995) have observed that there is very little training to support teachers in teaching equitably and to challenge their preconceived internal beliefs and biases.

### **For Policy**

Policies are already in place in Ontario to ensure that all students have equal access to learning. *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education* policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) envisions an inclusive education where “all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected; every student is supported and inspired to succeed” (p.10). However, the aforementioned policy, in 2009, outlined a four-year action plan, and now in 2016, seven years after the policy's launch, there are still schools that have not taken steps to empower their school culture and climate. One of the questions asked in my interviews was whether the teachers and administrators knew about *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Although most said that they had heard about it, none of them mentioned what their school was doing to implement the vision and objectives of the policy.

This study's findings show that the current *Equity and Inclusive Education* policy is not making the anticipated impact. There is a need for policy reviews, which will help Muslim students feel acknowledged, accepted, and respected in their respective schools.

### **For Future Research**

The findings of this research should not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as an outcome of a process to explore the supports for Muslim students. The findings of this thesis provide a strong understanding of what the current challenges are for Muslim students, in the view of the participants. Furthermore, I recommend acquiring the viewpoints of the parents,

students, and administrators of other public schools, perhaps in similar studies, some of which feature Muslims as the majority and some studies where Muslims are a minority. This will provide a unique perspective with respect to effective support systems. Also, another participant group that was missing in this research were the non-Muslim students. This would have helped triangulate the Muslim students' general feelings of acceptance from their non-Muslim peers. Interviewing non-Muslim students would have also helped add to the numerous emerging surveys regarding the positive impact of "mere exposure effect" (Bornstein, 1989) of one group (in-group) with another group (out-group) (Allport, 1954) among the youth (Chalabi, 2015). Furthermore, it will be helpful to explore how other Muslim youth, in other schools and other communities, view their Canadian-Muslim identity in comparison to the adults' view of the youth's dual identities. Adams (2007) points out that Muslim youth who are raised (or born) and educated in Canada view themselves differently than the adults who immigrate to this country, leaving behind their "home" countries. Other studies show that language fluency breaks barriers for youth to feel a part of their communities (Nasir, 2016) and not have the "us" versus "them" mentality. However, there seems to be no study conducted in Canada to compare how Muslim youth see their identity versus how their parents or their teachers view it.

Another area of study that could be implemented is to have a discussion between the Muslim students and their teachers together in one setting. Studies have been conducted regarding the perspectives of teachers of Muslim students (Niyozov and Pluim, 2009; Niyozov, 2010) but I have not found any studies that included both parties together in a conversation.

### **Contribution to the Field**

With the increase of public discussions in Ontario over Muslim prayers in schools and the growth of Muslim communities all over North America, this research can inform local and

academic communities, and influence future policy in the area of student well-being, educational design, and leadership. My study is unique for a few reasons. First, the Muslim population in the high school of this case study were well liked by the teachers and administrators; they had a good reputation and rapport — that is not always the case. In this study, the teachers and administrators spoke highly of their Muslim students. Also, the Muslim students were known to be academically driven. The reason why it is important to know these two attributes of the Muslim students in the school is because, generally, it seems that Muslim students do not need academic support, and therefore they were looking for other types of support. Also, due to the Muslim students' and teachers' overall positive rapport, the school atmosphere seemed to be a welcoming and positive one. Second, my study identifies a list of specific supports and challenges for Muslim students that are not exclusively for accommodation purposes. Most of the other studies on Muslim students directly discuss accommodations and the needs of Muslim students, through the lens of accommodating for the students' faith-related practice (CFS, 2007; Niyozov and Plum; 2009; Butt, 2015; Ali, 2012; Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2009). Recently, in August of 2016, the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) published an educator's guide. This guide, entitled *Helping Students Deal with Trauma Related to Geopolitical Violence and Islamophobia (2016)*, is the third publication by NCCM regarding supports for Muslim students in public schools. The guide is focused on Muslim refugee students and the students experiencing war trauma. The first two editions focussed on accommodation with respect to prayer rooms and fasting. This recent publication, however, looked beyond accommodation and specifically stated that students needed validation, acceptance, respect, and to be treated equally; which was one of the main findings of this study regarding what the Muslim students long for.

In Summary, this study contributes to the literature:

- by identifying some of the important supports, both implicit and explicit, provided to Muslim students in their schools, in order to make them feel welcome;
- in being perhaps the only study looking at supports and challenges in an urban school in Ontario with a reputation of having a large Muslim student presence;
- by adding to the growing research on the complex and diverse needs of Muslim students;
- in questioning the stereotypes, myths, and biases of well-meaning educators who work with Muslim students.

I will disseminate the findings from this research as lessons learned, challenges faced, and best practices, with respect to supports employed, at three different levels: (a) at the local school board, from which participants are selected to help set policies and guidelines on religious accommodations, and to encourage further considerations and collaboration, (b) at conferences and through peer-reviewed publications, and (c) to prompt further discussion and research in order to create a substantive body of data to support Muslim students who can inform policy. The results of my research provide valuable insight into building the capacity of the publicly funded education system to foster equity and inclusion (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p.2) for Muslim students. Moreover, it provides considerations required by educators looking to support Muslim students and specifically their well-being, as well as for all newcomers and minority students, in general, in secular public schools.

### **Concluding Remarks**

My overall perception of the study is that it will assist in helping educators, educational leaders, and Muslim leaders to better understand the needs of Muslim students and change future projects concerned with establishing effective supports to assist Muslim youth. Supporting

Muslim students in their school journey requires more than just providing prayer areas, celebrating different Muslim cultures, and accommodations for taking time off for Eid holidays. Muslim students and their parents are working toward being acknowledged and respected as Muslims (Shah, 2009) and Canadians (Environics Institute, 2006, 2016). It is not sufficient anymore to just provide resource supports without critically challenging the Eurocentric curricula, nor is it acceptable to tolerate teachers' lack of knowledge of the Muslim faith and practices or to have to challenge the teachers' own biases and preconceived notions. More importantly, the youth would like to be acknowledged, understood, and respected for whom they are—both Muslim and Canadian.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX A**

Interview Questions for

students

parents

teachers

principal

Imam

Student Interviews

Initial Background Questions

	How long have you been a student at this school?
	How many siblings do you have? _____ Did they all attend this public school (if not, why not?) _____

Formal Interview Questions:

	Can you tell me about your experiences as a student in this school.
	What is Islam? What does Islam mean to you?
	What do you think are the challenges of youth/student today?
	What do you think are the challenges of Muslim youth/students today? What challenges the students may face due to their affiliation with Islam. Probes: For example are there any specific religious practices that may be a challenge for Muslim youth? Are there any specific curriculum-related issues that may be a challenge for Muslim youth? Are there any overt differences that demarcate the Muslims from their counterpart that may pose a challenge for Muslim youth?
	Is this school a choice or the default community school? If it is their community school, would they have preferred a different school and if so, why?
	How do you feel about attending this school? (this question relates to the school culture) Why they feel the way they feel? Do you see yourself in the curriculum of certain classes? Do you relate to the curriculum?

	<p>Probes:</p> <p>Do you feel supported and understood in the school?</p> <p>Are there special programs or practices in this school that you feel are supporting (or not supporting) you? And why? Or why not?</p> <p>Are you aware of any supports, affordances or constraints offered by the programs?</p>
	<p>What general programs (curricular/non-curricular) are you involved in?</p> <p>Why are you involved in these programs?</p> <p>What benefits do they offer?</p>
	<p>How do you think this school is different from other schools?</p> <p>How do you think this school is similar to other schools?</p>
	<p>All things considered, what do you think is the role of schools in supporting Muslim students? why do you think it is the role of the school to do so?</p>
	<p>Is there anything you wish to add? Have I forgotten to ask anything that you feel is important? Do you have any questions for me?</p>

Parent Interviews

Parents with children who attend the school

Initial Background Questions:

	How long have you been a parent at this school?
	How many children do you have? _____ Did they all attend this public school (if not, why not?) _____

Formal Interview Questions:

	Can you tell me about your experiences as a Muslim in Canadian society.
	What is Islam? What does Islam mean to you?
	What do you think are the challenges of youth today?
	What do you think are the challenges of Muslim youth today?
	How do you feel about your child attending the public school? Why they feel the way they feel? Is the school that your children are attending a choice or the default community school? If it is their community school, would they have preferred a different school and if so, why?
	How do you think this School is different from other schools? And Why? How do you think this School is similar to other schools? And why?
	Do you think your children are supported and understood in the school? Are there special programs or practices in this school that you feel are supporting (or not supporting) your child? Are you aware of any supports, affordances or constraints offered by the programs?



	All things considered, what do you think is the role of schools in supporting Muslim students? Why do you think it is the role of the school to do so?
	Are you aware of the equity and inclusive strategy? Do you think the school has met the requirements of this policy?
	Is there anything you wish to add? Have I forgotten to ask anything that you feel is important? Do you have any questions for me?

Teacher Interviews

Initial Background Questions:

	How long have you been a teacher at this school?
	How long have you been a teacher in general?

Formal Interview Questions:

	Can you tell me about your professional journey?
	Generally how would you describe your students? Did (does) you have any Muslim students in the past (present)?
	What do you think are the challenges of youth today?
	Are you aware of any specific challenges that the Muslim youth face during their time at the school?  Do you think Muslim students are understood in the school?
	Has the staff/school come up with any “supports” to help Muslim students feel that their religious creed/practices are not impeding on their academics? Or acting as a barrier to their connection with the school?  Probes:  Do you use examples/symbols from an array of cultures to reflect the diversity of cultures (specifically Muslim) in your classroom?  Have you had any conversation around student attitudes toward certain cultures (specifically Muslim)?
	How do you think this School is different from other schools? And why?  How do you think this School is similar to other schools? And why?
	All things considered, what do you think is the role of schools in supporting Muslim

	students? Why do you think it is the role of the school to do so?
	Are you aware of the Ontario's Equity and Inclusive strategy? If yes how is it connected to the education of Muslim students?
	Is there anything you wish to add? Have I forgotten to ask anything that you feel is important? Do you have any questions for me?

## Principal Interviews

### Initial Background Questions

	How long have you been a principal of this school?
	How long have you been an educator?

### Formal Interview Questions:

	Can you tell me about your professional journey
	Generally how would you describe the students in your school?
	Are you aware of any Muslim students attending this school in the past (or present)? If yes, can you describe the Muslim community in your school?
	What do you think are the challenges of youth today?
	How would you describe the culture of the school? Probes: Are there specific policies, practices or procedures that you use to inculcate a specific culture in the school? How would you describe the attitudes of your staff and student toward Muslim students?
	Are you aware of any specific challenges that the Muslim youth face during their time at the school? Do you think Muslim students are understood in the school?
	Have you encountered requests for accommodation or support? If yes, how did the principal deal with it? What is the due process for such requests? Are there any proactive measures the principal takes to ensure the support of Muslim students?
	How do you think this School is different from other schools?

	How do you think this School is similar to other schools?
	All things considered, what do you think is the role of schools in supporting Muslim students? why do you think it is the role of the school to do so?
	Can you tell me about the Equity and Inclusive strategy? How has the board implemented and supported the equity and inclusive strategy? how has the Ontario Equity strategy influenced your work? And how has the equity policy influenced how Muslim students are educated in your school?
	Is there anything you wish to add? Have I forgotten to ask anything that you feel is important? Do you have any questions for me?

## Imam Interviews

### Initial Background Questions

	How long have you been the Imam of the Muslim community in Maingate?
	How long have you been an Imam in General?
	Do you have (or had) children attending a public school?

### Formal Interview Questions:

	Can you tell me about your experiences with the Muslim community in Maingate.
	What is Islam? What does Islam mean to you?
	What do you think are the challenges of youth today?
	What do you think are the challenges of Muslim youth today?
	To what extend do you interact with schools and school administrators?  Has the imam been involved in any consultation or mediation to help with accommodation of Muslim students or further supporting their educational experience? Does he visit any schools regularly or has he done presentations in the past in schools?
	What he thinks are ways that schools or educational institutions can support the Muslims?
	All things considered, what do you think is the role of schools in supporting Muslim students? why do you think it is the role of the school to do so?
	Is there anything you wish to add? Have I forgotten to ask anything that you feel is important? Do you have any questions for me?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT**

students

parents

teachers

principal

Imam



**The University of Western Ontario**

**1137 WESTERN ROAD**

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

**London, Ontario N6G 1G7**

**Fax No. XXX XXX-XXXX**

**Katina Pollock**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. XXX XXX-XXXX ext XXXX**

**Asma Ahmed**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. (XXX) XXX-XXXX**

Email sent out to Students for interviews

Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School

Dear Student,

My name is Asma Ahmed and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. I am currently conducting research into the education of Muslim students in a public school and would like to invite you to participate in this study.



The aims of this study are to explore the strategies to support Muslim students in a public school and the challenges that Muslim students face in a public school. This study includes a one-to-one interview.

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked for a one-to-one interview approximately 30-40 minutes. Attached is the letter of information and consent form that I will ask you to sign prior to the interview.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential and all the data will be stored in a password-protected computer, which will only be accessed by me. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the research.

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your school or your marks.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me; Asma Ahmed at XXX XXX-XXXX or XXXX@uwo.ca or my thesis supervisor Dr. Katina Pollock at XXX xxx-XXXX ext xXXXX or XXXX@uwo.ca

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Thank you!

Asma Ahmed



**The University of Western Ontario**

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**FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

**London, Ontario N6G 1G7**

**Fax No. XXX XXX-XXXX**

**Katina Pollock**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. XXX XXX-XXXX ext XXXX**

**Asma Ahmed**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. (XXX) XXX-XXXX**

*Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School  
Asma Ahmed, PhD student researcher at UWO*

**CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS ABOVE 18 YEARS OF AGE**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Name (please print):

Signature:

Date:

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Date:



**The University of Western Ontario**

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**FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

**London, Ontario N6G 1G7**

**Fax No. XXX XXX-XXXX**

**Katina Pollock**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. XXX XXX-XXXX ext XXXX**

**Asma Ahmed**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. (XXX) XXX-XXXX**

*Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School  
Asma Ahmed, PhD student researcher at UWO*

**CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS UNDER 18 YEARS OF AGE**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Name of Parent (please print):

Signature:

Date:

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Date:



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**FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

**London, Ontario N6G 1G7**

**Fax No. XXX XXX-XXXX**

**Katina Pollock**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. XXX XXX-XXXX ext XXXX**

**Asma Ahmed**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. (XXX) XXX-XXXX**

Email sent out to potential Participants for interviews

Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School

Dear Parent,

My name is Asma Ahmed and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. I am currently conducting research into the education of Muslim students in a public school and would like to invite you to participate in this study.

The aims of this study are to explore the strategies to support Muslim students in a public school and the challenges that Muslim students face in a public school. This study includes a one-to-one interview.

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked for a one-to-one interview approximately 30-40 minutes. Attached is the letter of information and consent form that I will ask you to sign prior to the interview.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential and all the data will be stored in a password-protected computer, which will only be accessed by me. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the research.

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your relationship with the school or your relationship with the staff at the school or your child's marks.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me; Asma Ahmed at XXX XXX-XXXX or XXXX@uwo.ca or my thesis supervisor Dr. Katina Pollock at XXX xxx-XXXX ext xXXXX or XXXX@uwo.ca

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Thank you!

Asma Ahmed



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**Asma Ahmed**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. (XXX) XXX-XXXX**

*Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School  
Asma Ahmed, PhD student researcher at UWO*

**CONSENT FORM**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Name (please print):



Signature:

Date:

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Date:



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**Tel. No. XXX XXX-XXXX ext XXXX**

**Asma Ahmed**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. (XXX) XXX-XXXX**

**Email sent out to potential Participants for interviews**

## **Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School**

Dear Teacher,

My name is Asma Ahmed and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. I am currently conducting research into the education of Muslim students in a public school and would like to invite you to participate in this study.

The aims of this study are to explore the strategies to support Muslim students in a public school and the challenges that Muslim students face in a public school. This study includes a one-to-one interview.

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked for a one-to-one interview approximately 30-40 minutes. Attached is the letter of information and consent form that I will ask you to sign prior to the interview.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential and all the data will be stored in a password-protected computer, which will only be accessed by me. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the research.

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your work and your employment.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me; Asma Ahmed at XXX XXX-XXXX or XXXX@uwo.ca or my thesis supervisor Dr. Katina Pollock at XXX xxx-XXXX ext xXXXX or XXXX@uwo.ca

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Thank you!

Asma Ahmed



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**Asma Ahmed**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. (XXX) XXX-XXXX**

*Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School*  
*Asma Ahmed, PhD student researcher at UWO*

CONSENT FORM

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Name (please print):

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**Asma Ahmed**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. (XXX) XXX-XXXX**

**Email sent out to potential Participants for interviews**

**Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School**

Dear Principal,

My name is Asma Ahmed and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. I am currently looking to conduct research into the education of Muslim students in a public school and your school has been selected as one that has above –average enrolment of Muslim students. I would like to invite your school to participate in this study.

The aims of this study are to explore the strategies to support Muslim students in a public school and the challenges that Muslim students face in a public school. This study includes a one-to-one interview.

If you agree for your school to participate in this study, I will be recruiting participants from your school and they will be asked for a one-to-one interview approximately 30-40 minutes. I have five participant groups: Parents, Students, teachers, principal and the local Imam. An invitation letter/email will be sent to all students, parents, and teachers. Anyone who self-identifies as a Muslim and volunteers to be interviewed is welcome for an interview. A letter of information will be sent via email to potential participating students, teachers and parents, I will have my phone number and my email address in the email that will be sent. All those participants willing to participate in the study will contact me directly via email or phone number.

Attached is the letter of information and consent form that I will ask participants to sign prior to the interview and I will be asking you to sign this when I interview you as well.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential and all the data will be stored in a password-protected computer, which will only be accessed by me. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the research.

There are no known risks to participating in this study.



Participation in this study is voluntary. Any one may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on their work or their employment or have any academic penalty for students.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me; Asma Ahmed at XXX XXX-XXXX or XXXX@uwo.ca or my thesis supervisor Dr. Katina Pollock at XXX xxx-XXXX ext xXXXX or XXXX@uwo.ca

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Thank you!

Asma Ahmed



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**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

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*Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School  
Asma Ahmed, PhD student researcher at UWO*

**CONSENT FORM**

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Name (please print):

Signature:

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**Fax No. XXX XXX-XXXX**  
**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Email sent out to potential Participants for interviews**

**Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School**

Dear Imam,

My name is Asma Ahmed and I am a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. I am currently conducting research into the education of Muslim students in a public school and would like to invite you to participate in this study.

The aims of this study are to explore the strategies to support Muslim students in a public school and the challenges that Muslim students face in a public school. This study includes a one-to-one interview.

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked for a one-to-one interview approximately 30-40 minutes. Attached is the letter of information and consent form that I will ask you to sign prior to the interview.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential and all the data will be stored in a password-protected computer, which will only be accessed by me. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the research.

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If you have any questions about this study, please contact me; Asma Ahmed at XXX XXX-XXXX or XXXX@uwo.ca or my thesis supervisor Dr. Katina Pollock at XXX xxx-XXXX ext xXXXX or XXXX@uwo.ca

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Thank you!

Asma Ahmed



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**Asma Ahmed**

**Email: XXXX@uwo.ca**

**Tel. No. (XXX) XXX-XXXX**

*Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School*  
*Asma Ahmed, PhD student researcher at UWO*

**CONSENT FORM**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Name (please print):

Signature:

Date:

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Date:

**APPENDIX C**  
**ETHICS APPROVAL**





Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board  
NMREB Full Board Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Katina Pollock  
Department & Institution: Education/Faculty of Education, Western University

NMREB File Number: [Redacted]  
Study Title: Supporting [Redacted] students in a Public School  
Sponsor:

NMREB Initial Approval Date: October 3, 2014  
NMREB Expiry Date: July 31, 2015

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Instruments	Interview Questions	2014/07/10
Letter of Information & Consent	Letter of Information and consent	2014/07/10
Letter of Information & Consent	Letter of information and consent	2014/07/10
Recruitment Items	Clean copy of email sent to the students 09032014	2014/09/03
Recruitment Items	Clean copy of the email sent to the teachers 09032014	2014/09/03
Recruitment Items	clean copy of email sent to the principal 09032014	2014/09/03
Revised Western University Protocol	Clean copy of the track changes with the reviewer's recommendations 09032014	2014/09/03
Recruitment Items	Clean PDF copy of the email sent to the Imam	2014/09/03
Recruitment Items	Clean PDF copy of the email sent to parents	2014/09/03

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the HSREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

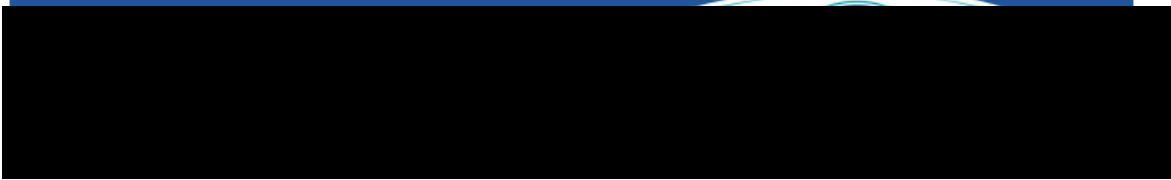
NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of HSREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.



*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.*



February 19, 2015

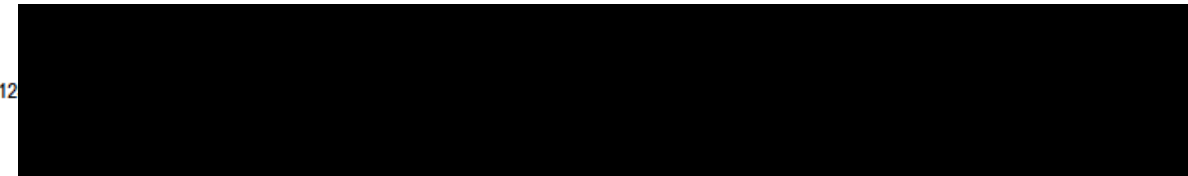
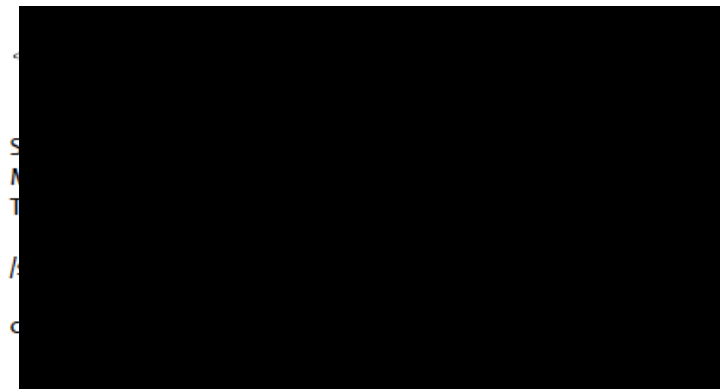
Dear Mr. Ahmed:

Your project, entitled "Supporting Muslim Students in a Public School" has been approved by Learning Support Services at the Thompson Valley District School Board. Please ensure that all members of your research team who will be assisting with [redacted] up-to-date criminal record check. Information about the study will be sent to the principal of the school that has been identified. If the principal is interested in having his/her school participate in the study, he/she will be asked to contact you directly.

The continued willingness of our faculty to participate in research studies is greatly enhanced by pertinent feedback of findings. Please find attached the [redacted] Completion Form. Once you have completed your research in our board, please complete this form and submit it to Dr. Steve Killip. This form should be submitted within two years of receiving approval. It is also suggested that direct feedback be provided to the school(s), staff, students, and/or families involved in the study.

All the best with your research. Please feel free to contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,



## CURRICULUM VITAE

<b>Name</b>	Asma Ahmed
<b>Post-Secondary Education and Degrees</b>	<p>The University of Western Ontario London, Ontario, Canada 2001 – 2005 Honors Health Science and Social Justice and Peace</p> <p>The University of Western Ontario London, Ontario, Canada 2007 – 2008 Bachelor of Education</p> <p>The University of Western Ontario London, Ontario, Canada 2008 – 2010 Master of Education: Educational Policy with a Leadership Focus</p> <p>The University of Western Ontario London, Ontario, Canada 2011-2016 PhD: Educational Studies</p>
<b>Honors and Awards</b>	<p>Ontario Association of Physics Teachers: Physics Contest School First 2000</p> <p>The University of Western Ontario's Scholarship of Excellence 2001-2002</p> <p>The University of Western Ontario's Scholar's Elective Scholarship 2001- 2004</p> <p>The University of Western Ontario's Scholar's Elective Scholarship 2001-2004</p> <p>Ontario Student Opportunity Grant (OSOG) 2011-2016</p> <p>Faculty of Education Conference Travel Program 2014</p>
<b>Related Work Experience</b>	<p>Grade 6 Classroom Teacher London Islamic School London, Ontario, 2005 – 2006</p> <p>Grade 7/8 Classroom Teacher London Islamic School London, Ontario, 2006 – 2007</p> <p>Grade 4 Classroom Teacher London Islamic School London, Ontario, 2008 – 2010</p>

Research Assistant, Faculty of Education  
Western University  
2011-2015

Instructor, Faculty of Education  
Western University  
2012-2013

Educational Consultant  
Private School  
2013-Present