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Visible Muslims in a non-Muslim World: Muslim Girls' Experiences in Canadian Public
High Schools.

by
Rana N. Diab

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

Through Education in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of
Education at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2008

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ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of the *hijab* as a marker, this study focuses on the constructions of Muslim girls' identity. Ten Muslim girls who wear a *hijab* and attend public high schools in Windsor, Ontario were provided with a venue to express their perceptions of educational experiences in the Canadian education system. The results of this study challenge the literature that emphasizes the negative experiences and external obstacles that seemingly hinder Muslims from practicing and expressing their Muslim identity in a non-Muslim society. Although participants noted incidents of discrimination and negative stereotyping as problematic issues, they viewed their overall education as positive as a *result* of wearing the *hijab*; validating that their Muslim identity helped them perceive education as an overall pleasant experience. This study concludes by offering suggestions for policy reforms in education with regards to inclusive education and accommodation for Muslim students.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my wonderful mother, Mozayan Diab and to my beautiful daughter, Shahd Ayoub. I hope that you both enjoy reading this work. I also would like to dedicate this work to all Muslim girls who strive to maintain their religious identities despite the struggles that can emerge with doing so. I hope this study will assist you as you negotiate your way through the public education system.

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First of all I would like to acknowledge Dr. Yvette Daniel for being a wonderful advisor throughout this journey. Her hard work and dedication have been constant reminders for me never to settle for the mediocre, but to strive for excellence in every task. I would like to thank Dr. Richard Douglass-Chin and Dr. Nombuso Dlamini for taking their time to serve on my thesis committee. A special thanks to my great family who has always been there to support and guide me. My sweet daughter Shahd, thank you for being the light of my life; it is your smile that encourages me to work harder and to keep going. Thank you to my beautiful mother, who always knew the right things to say to motivate me to keep going. Thank you to my father for always provoking me to critically think about difficult issues. To my husband, thank you for putting up with me and encouraging me to take on this journey. To my sisters, Razane and Racha, thank you for your ongoing support. Last but not least I would like to thank the girls who participated in this study; without them, this study would not have been possible.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

All italicized terms in the text are defined below in alphabetical order:

Allah: Arabic name for God.

Dominant social structure: Values and beliefs that dominate the cultural setting.

Zine (2001) refers to the Eurocentric schools in which Western values dominate.

Hadiths: Collections of stories and anecdotes gathered after Muhammad's (*pbuh*) death that reveal how he lived his life.

Halal: permissible in Islam. In this context it refers to Muslim dietary laws.

Haram: Arabic word meaning "forbidden"

Hijab: Also known as an Islamic veil, it is a loose-fitting headscarf worn by some Muslim women to cover their hair. In this study this term should not to be confused with the face-covering garment known as the *niqab* and sometimes also called a *hijab* or a veil. The term here solely refers to Muslim females' covering of the hair. Also note that the terms *hijab* and veil are used interchangeably in this paper.

Imam: the leader of a mosque or a Muslim prayer.

Jannah: Arabic name for Paradise.

Jilbab: A long, loose dress that covers the body.

Mecca: Islam's most sacred city as it is the birth place of Prophet Muhammad.

Mufti: A religious leader who is considered an expert on Islamic laws.

Muhajabat: An Arabic adjective meaning "one who wears the *hijab*" The word does not have English equivalence and thus the Arabic term is used.

Pbuh: The abbreviation letters for “peace be upon him” are used by Muslims every time the name of the prophet Muhammad is mentioned.

Ramadan: Ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Muslims practice fasting from sunrise to sunset for the entire month of Ramadan.

Sharia: Islamic religious laws that deal with most aspects of daily life including politics, banking, sexuality, marriage, family, moral and social issues.

Sunnah: The way the prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) lived his life; *sunnah* is followed by Muslims as the way of living an Islamic life.

Surah: Chapter in the Qur’an

Chapter I

Introduction

General Statement of the Problem

This chapter will begin by stating some of the problems that are associated with the freedom of religious expression in Canadian schools; instances where the *hijab* has been challenged as conflicting with the values of Canadian society are examined. Next an overview of Islam is provided, to inform the reader of the main rules of the religion, as well as to introduce various standpoints on the obligation of the *hijab* in Islam. My position, as a Muslim-born researcher is given as well as my rationale for choosing the scope of this study. This chapter ends by explaining the framework used in this study.

The various ethnic, cultural and religious minorities that compose Canadian society define Canada as a multicultural mosaic, a society that takes pride in embracing diversity in which minority and cultural rights are recognized within the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) and the *Canadian Multicultural Act* (1985). In Windsor, Ontario where this study took place, 2001 statistics revealed that Muslims made up almost 4% of the population, making Islam the largest religion in the city after Christianity. Interestingly, no other religions in Windsor accounted for more than 1% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2001). Moreover, Islam is the fastest growing non-Christian religion in Canada, with Muslims making up 2% of the country's overall population and with the majority of Muslims residing in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2001).

Even though minority rights are guaranteed under *The Charter* in Canada, events such as the tragic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States and in other places around the world since then have brought to the forefront some

controversial questions regarding religious tolerance. Islam and the *hijab* in particular, have become a popular topic of debate. In countries like France, the *hijab* is not permitted to be worn in some schools. In Britain, the *hijab* continues to be a heated topic in the political arena as the issue on whether it has a 'place' in the country continues to be negotiated. Objections to religious symbols and attire in public schools have also been a topic of debate in Quebec courts and school boards, as the 'right' to freedom of religious expression has been challenged, affecting not only Muslim girls who wear a *hijab*, but students from other religious denominations as well.

The 2004 Multani case, where a Sikh boy (Gurbaj Singh) was banned from carrying a kirpan (a religious ceremonial dagger) to school provides an example of the concerns about the extent of religious tolerance in Canadian society. The boy's school and the Quebec Court of Appeal relied on the "zero tolerance" policy in ruling that the kirpan was a dangerous object. Only after several attempts to convince the Court that the kirpan was a religious obligation and that there were never incidents when it was used for violent acts, did the Quebec Superior Court allow Singh to wear his kirpan, with several restrictions (to be sheathed in a wooden case, wrapped in fabric and hidden under his clothes). This decision was again overturned by the Quebec Court of Appeal (Ellis, Hird & McKay-Panos, 2005). Quebec-Muslims too have had their share of incidents where Muslim girls were expelled from schools and booted off sports teams because their *hijab* 'conflicted' with the instituted dress codes (e.g. Todd, 1998; CBC News, 2005)

Instances prohibiting religious symbolism in schools and on sports teams raise doubts about the extent to which tolerance (or intolerance) exists and whether Islam and other religions are accepted in the Western world. With the conflicting viewpoints

raised about religious symbolism in schools, a basic and unavoidable question that pertains to this study is whether Muslim girls who wear a *hijab* ought to have a 'place' in our classrooms.

The issue of the *hijab* as a marker of Muslim women's identity is the main focus of this study, since the controversy over the *hijab* does not remain solely in the realm of religious debates amongst scholars, but has become a popular topic of debate in both the political and the educational arenas of Canadian society. Negative media coverage in relation to Muslims impacts the ways in which we, as educators, interact with Muslim students and thus raises important issues for educators to examine. A recent story made most newspaper headlines in Canada: "Dad Charged after Daughter Killed in Clash over Hijab" (Wattie, 2007). It can be interpreted as part of the tradition in mainstream media that seeks to cast a negative spotlight on the *hijab*. The tragedy of a father murdering his daughter in Mississauga, Ontario was cast mainly as a 'clash' of ideas. The media's emphasis on the dispute between the father's alleged Muslim fanaticism and the daughter's rebelliousness (depicted as non-Muslim) plays into the larger and geo-political representations of Muslims. Moreover, the ways in which the battle between father (Muhammad Parvez) and daughter (Aqsa Parvez) is depicted gestures to the overall discourse of the clash of civilizations between Islam and the Western world.

While I agree that one cannot ignore the extent of the tragedy in this case, the impact of how it was represented in the media cannot be overlooked. This story is not only played into the 'bad' Muslims discourse that shapes our current context, but it further places Muslim girls who don the *hijab* in a precarious position: one that inevitably leads to them being pegged as victims of patriarchal Muslim oppression. However, the popular media did not represent the crucial reactions of the Muslim

community to this murder. Syed Soharwardy, president of the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada and Head *imam* at the Al Madinah Calgary Islamic Centre responded to the tragedy by stating “in Islam, the only institution that has the authority to punish a person for his or her crime is a court of law. Honour killing is a cultural or tribal practice” (Gilman, 2008, ¶ 12). It was in hope of raising awareness about using violence for resolving disputes and to condemn the killing of Aqsa Parvez that Soharwardy even went on a hunger strike.

Also, the day following the murder, the World Muslim Congress (WMC) issued a response condemning the father’s actions. Mike Ghouse, President of the WMC labeled the father as a “cruel man” and stated that Muhammad Parvez is a criminal according to Islam and must be charged as such. “Islam did not kill Axa [sic], nor did Islam authorize this heinous act” stated Ghouse (2007, ¶ 3). Ghouse pointed to the media’s bias in stating that news about criminals who abuse their children are numerous in Canada and are frequently reported. However, in all of these cases, the religions of the criminals were not cited. He also stated “Islam is not the reason, it is the controlling animal that is scares [sic] the insecure men, regardless of their faith, culture, ethnicity or race that killed Axa [sic]” (¶ 4).

The fact that the Muslim community’s response was that of condemnation rather than tolerance of Mr. Parvez’s act did not receive much attention in the media. The focus on the religion of Islam being the perpetrator of the murder rather than the father himself gives an unfair and one-sided view of Islam and further constructs the *hijab* as a tool that robs Muslim girls of their agency and free-will. While I will not be interrogating the Mississauga tragedy in this study, I am merely reflecting on it to understand the ways in which Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* are impacted by such media stories.

Practicing Islam in Canada.

Studies on Muslim youth who strive to lead a Muslim lifestyle show that they often struggle with maintaining and protecting their religious beliefs and practices because the *dominant social structure* does not support the practices of Islam (e.g. Zine, 1997, 2000, 2001; Al-Jabri, 1995). The pressures present in Canadian society can at times come in direct conflict with the religious rules that are vital to maintaining a Muslim identity, since many of the norms and values embedded in school policies and curriculum contradict Islamic practices and ideologies-such as dating, or physical interaction between members of the opposite sex, to name a couple of obvious contradictions to Islamic practices. The results generated through my investigation are integral to building an inclusive and healthy educational environment for all students, one that is responsive, not only to Muslim female students, but also to other students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. The fact that Muslim students are a growing part of Canadian society further stresses the importance of constructing methods for educators to respond appropriately to diversity.

Research Questions

The motives for wearing the *hijab* and the commitment to lead an observant Muslim lifestyle in a non-Islamic society are important concepts to discuss and understand. If Islam is viewed with increased hostility in the Western world, and in particular, if the *hijab* is a patriarchal tool that oppresses Muslim women, then one needs to ask why some adolescent Muslim girls choose to wear it. Why do young girls dedicate their lives to living against the social norms of the dominant society, *knowing* that politically and socially, the *hijab* attracts negative, even hostile attention? More importantly, as defined by the scope of this study, what is their experience of the

Canadian educational system? How does the *hijab* shape their experience with their teachers and peers, and their involvement in school activities? Do school activities conflict with their religious practices and obligations?

The negative media depictions of the Muslim religion as well as the cases in Canada and abroad where Muslim girls have been discriminated against because they wear the *hijab* negatively impacts the educational experiences of Muslim girls in Canada. I argue that girls who wear the *hijab* in Canadian schools are denied agency by those in power- teachers and school administrators in this case- and are seen less as individuals, the results of this study show that Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* are often viewed and treated solely on the basis of the religion they represent. The often biased implications attached to the *hijab* and Muslims in general, is problematic for the quality of education of Muslim girls; as they can be the victims of pity or hostility resulting from the connotations attached to the *hijab*.

In order that we might better understand some of the practices of the girls that I interviewed in this study, the next section will provide a brief overview of Islam. The intent of this section is to bring to light some of the key debates and issues surrounding the *hijab* both internationally and locally. Moreover, this section will also focus on the debates around the *hijab* that have been central in Muslim scholarship as well.

Overview of Islam

Like any other religion, Islam cannot be homogenized as a uniform set of rules and practices to which all Muslims adhere. There are many sects/denominations within Islam, each claiming that they are the 'right' followers of the religion. One of the main misconceptions about Islam is that all of its followers are Arab and all Arabs are Muslims. Rather, only 12% of Muslims are Arab, making the remaining 88% non-

Arab (Detroit Free Press, 2001). The distinction between the terms ‘Arabs’ and ‘Muslims’ are crucial to clarify in understanding Islam, in that Muslims come from different regions of the world and represent a variety of different ethnicities¹

The diversity that exists within Islam poses a difficulty to understand what it means to be a Muslim. However, there is a common denominator that joins all Muslims together; and that is the belief in the total submission to *Allah*. Mainstream Muslims agree that the total submission to *Allah* is accomplished through what are known as the five pillars, or tenets of Islam. These are:

- The belief in one God and that Muhammad (*pbuh*) is the final messenger of God,
- Structured prayer, five times a day,
- Giving alms to the poor,
- Fasting during the month of *Ramadan*;
- The pilgrimage to *Mecca* (Bates, 2002).

Along with these tenets, the *sunnah* generally represents how the prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) lived his life. The way Muhammad (*pbuh*) lived his life is accessible to Muslims by way of the *hadiths*. Devout Muslims strive to apply the five pillars of Islam as well as the *sunnah* to their everyday lives.

Islamic laws, institutionalized through what is called the *sharia*, are very explicit in stating that rules and regulations exist in virtually all aspects of life for Muslims. Rules range on very personal matters such as physical hygiene, sexual relations and proper attire, and govern even economic activities such as inheritance and business transactions (Ottawa Muslim Network, 2008). Although not all Muslims live their

¹ It is of importance to note that participants in this study conflated the terms ethnicity, race and culture as they referred to their nationalities and Muslim identity.

lives according to the *sharia*, countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and parts of Afghanistan, operate under the *sharia* as their official constitutions. Thus, in these countries, breaking the rules of *sharia* is punishable by law.

Rules governing both male and female attire find their roots in the Qur'an and apply to both sexes in Islam. Modesty is the most agreed upon factor that all Muslims take as an obligation stated in the Qur'an. However, the degree of modesty, what it should look like, and who decides the meaning of modesty have shaped the debates about Islamic dress code. Male religious leaders- such as Egypt's *mufti* Ali Goma and Mohammad Sayyid Tantawy, who is the current *imam* of Al-Azhar mosque (in Egypt)- both claim that the *hijab* is a religious obligation for women, and not a matter of tradition. It is important to note that scholars from Al-Azhar mosque are highly regarded and respected in the Muslim world, as Al-Azhar is the chief centre for Islamic learning in the world. As the Muslim world's most 'trusted' religious association, Al-Azhar deems the *hijab* as an obligation among Muslim women (Mujahid, 2003).

The following segment from the Qur'an has traditionally been the main citation that advocates (and opponents) of the *hijab* turn to in either supporting or dismissing the mandate of wearing the *hijab*. The passage states:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty...and say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and adornments except what 'must ordinarily' appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, *etc.* (Qur'an, *Surah* 24, verses 30-31).

In addition to this excerpt, proponents of the *hijab* also state that the traditions of the prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) also mandate that Muslim women must wear the *hijab*. Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) is quoted as having said ‘if the woman reaches the age of puberty, no part of her body should be seen but this’ ... and he pointed to his face and hands” (The Islamic Workplace, 2007, ¶ 2). Taking the verse from the Qur’an and traditions of the prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*), some Muslim scholars have determined that the following be regarded as ‘proper’ attire for Muslim women²:

- Clothing must cover the entire body, with the exception of the face and the hands.
- The attire should not be form-fitting, sheer or so eye-catching as to attract undue attention or reveal the shape of the body.
- The clothing cannot be similar to male clothing or to the distinctive clothing worn by people of other faiths.
- Clothing must not suggest fame or status (The Islamic Workplace, 2007).

The above interpretation of what constitutes proper attire for Muslim women is implemented in the laws of countries where the *sharia* operates as stated earlier. In countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan, women must adhere to these rules in not only covering their hair, but also in covering their bodies as well. These guidelines have contributed significantly to the general understanding of the *hijab*. Adhering to guidelines of women’s dress in Islam takes on many forms. Some women cover their bodies from head to toe, even covering their faces, some wear the *hijab* and long loose dresses, and the more ‘modern’ Muslims simply wear the *hijab* to

² It is important to note that the initiation process of wearing the *hijab* generally takes place when a girl reaches puberty, as understood by the quote stated by the prophet Muhammad. However, in some cultures Muslim girls wear the *hijab* before reaching puberty in order to get used to the practice of wearing it.

cover their hair while resorting to more Western modes of dress. It is very common in Canada, and in most Middle-Eastern countries, to see women and girls wear the *hijab* while still adhering to the local fashion trends.

I am basing my definition of the different styles of the *hijab* on a continuum from “conservative” on one end to “fashionable/trendy” at the other end of the spectrum. Conservative means: covering the entire body with very loose dress, where the body silhouette is not visible and the choice of colour worn is dark and plain. The fashionable/trendy end of the spectrum consists of clothes that fit within the fashions of young girls who do not wear the *hijab*. The style of the *hijab* that different Muslim women adopt depends mainly on their culture and family upbringing as well as their personal styles. The girls in this study varied on how they wore the *hijab*. My study was open to girls who wear the *hijab* in its multiple configurations; no other factors determined my selection such as, how they wear it, whether their dress was ‘conservative’, ‘fashionable’/‘trendy’, etc. However, most of the participants who responded to my study were somewhere within the center of the conservative-fashionable/trendy spectrum. Most wore jeans and long, loose shirts, along with the *hijab* to cover their hair and were fairly ‘Western’ in their dress codes. One of my participants was noticeably fashionable and explicitly stated that it is a misconception for “people to think that just because I wear a *hijab* I can’t look good” None of my participants covered their faces. Thus, the *hijab* in my study refers only to the headscarf worn to cover the hair.

The ‘trouble’ with the hijab.

There exists a variety of reasons as to why the *hijab* is decreed in Islam. But in mainstream Islam, two main factors seem to dominate. The first is that the *hijab* is a duty decreed by God that must be fulfilled by Muslim women as explained in the

previous section. The second rationalization of the *hijab* is that it is a unique decree created not to oppress women, as it is widely interpreted, but rather to protect women against sexual oppression; the *hijab* in this rationale is seen as preserving the dignity and safety of Muslim women. Other reasons that emerged in this study are related to identity-formation; more explicitly, the consensus amongst the girls in my study was that by wearing the *hijab* they were judged by “who they are” rather than by “what they look like”. The girls in this study spoke about the liberating aspects of the *hijab*, explaining that the *hijab* alleviated them of the Western pressures to “look good” and be judged by the opposite sex solely by their physical appearance.

Opposition to the obligation of wearing the *hijab* has been highly debated, especially by Muslim-feminists who hold that it is not a commandment from God. Rather, they view the position on wearing the *hijab* as a misjudgment and misinterpretation on the part of male Muslim scholars. Muslim feminist Fatima Mernissi (1975) is one such scholar who believes that Islam itself is not responsible for the sexism that occurs in some Muslim societies; rather the oppression of women in some Muslim societies is seen as stemming from patriarchal social institutions designed to limit women’s powers. While not a Muslim scholar per se, Nawal El-Saadawi, an Egyptian scholar, is a secular feminist who has been very critical of Islam. In an interview entitled “Egypt’s Leading Feminist Unveils her Thoughts,” El-Saadawi stated that the *hijab* is “a political symbol and has nothing to do with Islam. There is not a single verse in the Quran explicitly mandating it” (Nassef, 2004, ¶ 9). El-Saadawi’s argument on the *hijab* has been the subject of much controversy.

Most Muslim scholars who have publicly opposed the obligation of the *hijab* have been forced to flee their homelands in order to protect themselves against persecution for their acclaimed ‘heresy’ against Islam; El-Sadaawi is among these scholars who

have fled their homeland to escape such persecution. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former Muslim- now a self-declared atheist, claims that Islamic dogma “creates a cult of death, a cage for women, and a curse against knowledge...” (Ali, 2006, p. 161). In her book *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, Ali (2006) retells her experiences growing up as a Somali-Muslim whose parents knew nothing but Islam. Although the *hijab* was not the main factor that turned her against Islam, she cites that in her experience, Islam as a religion is oppressive and abusive to women. Her main concern with the religion is its “submission of free will” (p. 176).

In Irshad Manji’s (2005) national bestseller *The Trouble with Islam Today*, she views the literal interpretation of the Qur’an as the main problem with Islam. Although she declares herself a Muslim, she does not agree that the *hijab* is mandatory to any Muslim woman except to Muhammad’s (*pbuh*) wives. She argues that the *hadiths* and the Qur’an only imply modesty, and that modesty is not a fixed term.

Role of Researcher

As a Muslim-born researcher my own position on the *hijab* must be explicitly stated. I do not wear the *hijab* and I do not describe myself as a devout Muslim follower. However, I do believe in the main tenets of Islam and practice fasting, giving alms and prayer. Although I was born and raised in Kuwait, a Muslim country, I was raised in a fairly ‘Western’ lifestyle, attended American schools throughout my life, watched American television as I was growing up, and engaged in a social life that consisted of both male and female friends. I grew up observing the cultural aspects of Islam as representative of the religion- celebrating the end of *Ramadan*, praying (occasionally), and thanking God for everything that I have. I still strongly

adhere to these values. However, my quest to understand my religion remains ongoing. My first experience of living under Islamic laws was in 2005 when I was employed as an elementary teacher at an Islamic private school in Windsor, Ontario. The job entailed not only teaching the grade eight curriculum for the first time (I was a new graduate from the Faculty of Education), but also taking on both the classroom and my behaviour in a Muslim manner.

The Islamic school where I worked mandates that all teachers (and students) adhere to the Islamic dress code; therefore, female students who have reached puberty and the female staff wear a *hijab* as well as a *jilbab* over their clothes³ My conflicting identities emerged during this year and questions about the *hijab* and the differing positions on the topic led me to do my own independent research on the role of women in Islam, and most notably, the role of the *hijab* in Islam. What I found are two types of extreme viewpoints that exist in literature about Muslim women. One side of the spectrum consists mostly of male religious leaders who hold prestigious positions in the Islamic world and who believe that the *hijab* is mandatory. On the other side are people like Irshad Manji and Ayan Hirsi Ali, who have interrogated Islam and its interpretations and more importantly, those who have been shunned from the Muslim world as ‘deserters’ of Islam.

My stance on the *hijab* focuses on the notion of choice rather than on whether or not the *hijab* is a mandate from God. I firmly believe that Muslim women who make the choice to wear a *hijab* must be credited for having their own interpretations and standpoints on this matter. It is unfair in my view to deem Muslim women who choose to wear the *hijab* as oppressed or ignorant. Condemning the *hijab* on the basis

³ Because girls reach puberty at different ages, Al-Hijra’s policy is that beginning in the fifth grade all female students are required to wear a *hijab* to school.

that it is forced upon Muslim women disregards those who make the choice to wear it. From my own personal observations I know that many Muslim women wear the *hijab* based on the firm belief that it is mandated from God. My mother is one such Muslim who chose to adopt the *hijab* in her late 40's, explaining that it was her pilgrimage to *Mecca* as well as her interpretation of Islamic teachings that affirmed her decision that the *hijab* was indeed a religious obligation. I highly respect my mother's decision and the decisions made by all Muslim women who wear the *hijab* based on their own interpretations of what defines modesty in Islam.

The age group of my participants made it difficult to clearly state whether or not wearing the *hijab* was really a decision of free will; being that my participants were adolescents who were too young to make their own independent choices. However, it must be noted that all participants stated that the *hijab* was never forced upon them by their parents and that all participants found it disturbing and "wrong" for parents to force their daughters to wear a *hijab*. Thus, the term "choice" is used in this study in the sense that no force (either verbal or physical) was used by the participants' parents or other members of their families.

My interest in Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* has increased since working at the Islamic school. As an educator to grade eight girls, I often wondered (and explicitly asked my female students), how they reconciled living in Canada with wearing the *hijab*. More importantly, I wanted to know whether they succeeded in their quest to be both Muslim and Canadian. What were their educational and career aspirations? And do those adolescents who wear the *hijab* grow up like 'normal' adolescents, with the belief that they can 'be anything they want to be'? I believe that these questions about the *hijab* emerged from my own insecurities while wearing the *hijab*. At times, when I wore it and accompanied my students on various school trips, I felt as though I was an

alien to the 'other' world that existed- the world that I belonged to after 4:00 pm when my work day was over. I also felt that people treated me differently when I wore it, as if I did not speak English. I also sensed that people were somewhat cold to me. I never experienced overt discrimination such as hate speech and negative comments, but I still felt that the non-Muslim world did not feel comfortable around me because of my *hijab*.

My interest in my female students who wore the *hijab* outside of school compelled me to pursue the topic of the *hijab*. As an educator, I wanted to understand their experiences as girls who overtly represent Islam in a Western society- a religion that has garnered much controversy and interest in the last decade or so. Moreover, I wanted to know why they wear the *hijab* and what support networks they had that allowed them to practice this aspect of Islam in a predominantly non-Muslim world.

As a Muslim-born researcher, I cannot detach myself from this research as a mere observer. Rather, I acknowledge that my Muslim background as well as my experience teaching at an Islamic school influence my interpretation of the data collected. My interest stems from both my background as a Muslim, my teaching experience and from research findings that I have encountered about Muslim students. My experience teaching at Al-Hijra in 2005-2006, prompted my decision to specifically delimit my study to Muslim girls who wear the *hijab*.

Perhaps, what has further motivated me to pursue this topic is my own inner struggle with understanding Islamic teachings on the *hijab*. My decision to work at an Islamic school stemmed from my interest in finding out what it *felt* like to wear a *hijab*. As a teacher candidate without the *hijab* in the public high school system prior to working at an Islamic school, I *felt* that I was looked at as the 'nice, young girl' in front of the class. Some comments by male staff such as "I wish my teachers looked

like you” were not meant to be derogatory; however, it did little to satisfy my self-efficacy in developing my teaching skills. In the Canadian context, a woman’s appearance is important to the way she presents herself to society. I believe that one of the reasons why the *hijab* is often viewed with hostility is because it challenges the ways in which Western societies have invested in appearances. While working at Al-Hijra, I noticed the difference in that my status and value was not based on appearance; rather I felt that the *hijab* added a deeper dimension to my interaction with others.

Significance of Study

It is important for researchers/educators to continue to explore the lived reality of students from minority groups in order to facilitate an inclusive educational environment. The findings of this study could be useful for policy implementation since this research yields important insights about issues such as respect and accommodations for religious minorities, as well as the perceptions held by teachers about Muslim students. The findings from this study can also inform educators about the significance and meaning of the *hijab*. The themes generated in this study underscore the role that parents play in both the educational and personal facets of their children’s lives and the extent that parents (mothers in particular) play in shaping their perceived children’s (daughters who wear the *hijab* in this case) schooling experience.

I believe that the merit of this research is its emphasis on the role of parents, students and teachers as responsible stakeholders in education. It is only when these parties understand and value their roles as active participants in the educational system can the ‘clash’ of Muslim and Western values noted in literature be resolved. The most significant contribution of my study is related to recognizing the values of

one of Canada's religious minorities and respecting them as integral members of an equitable and just Canadian society. As an educator, I am primarily interested in how girls who wear the *hijab* experience public high schooling in Canada and how they perceive their experience in relation to their religion. Most of the girls in this study have either come to Canada at a very young age, or were born in Canada; all participants referred to Canada as their home country. This fact makes it somewhat difficult to categorize these participants as 'immigrants' or 'minorities' in Canada as most speak only English, or refer to English as their mother-tongue.

The participants in this study represent a different voice to literature encountered on Muslim youth as they comprise a generation that views Canada as their motherland. Moreover, the girls in this study all strive to maintain an Islamic way of life while being aware of the pressures that come along with not only practicing Islam in a non-Muslim society, but more importantly being a teenager. The interviews in this study reveal important measures to finding the 'key to happiness' in maintaining an Islamic identity in a non-Islamic society. My participants focused on internal issues such as self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-image as factors contributing to how they perceived their schooling experiences. While some girls reported experiences of stereotyping, racism and negativity, they also reported an overall positive experience in the high school system and they spoke about several measures that helped them feel supported in expressing their identities and practices. The next section offers an explanation of the framework used for this study. An illustration of the framework is provided (Figure 1) to supplement the explanation.

The Framework

In explaining the motives for wearing the *hijab*, and in understanding the commitments made to living an Islamic life in a non-Islamic society, we must understand the process of how youth develop their religious identities. The framework for this study is based on Marcia's identity status theory (1966) and Fowler's faith development stage theory (1981) to explain how the girls in this study developed their religious identities and to explain the factors that play into the development of adolescents' identity formation.

Marcia's theory (1966) combined with Fowler's theory (1981) helps explain the process of religious identity development for the girls in this study. The rationale for using Marcia's theory is due to its focus on parental relationships and the role that parents play in their children's identity development. Fowler's theory aids in explaining how the girls in this study have made a commitment to overtly represent their faith by wearing the *hijab*. This framework sets the stage to understand where these girls are 'coming from' and what motivates their behaviour.

According to Marcia (1967), adolescent identity development can be viewed in terms of exploration and commitment. In other words, Marcia's theory examines the extent to which adolescents independently explore certain values and beliefs as opposed to the extent to which adolescents commit to values without exploring them. In explaining adolescent development, Marcia's theory is divided into four stages:

- Identity Achievement,
- Identity Diffusion,
- Identity Moratorium;
- Identity Foreclosure.

Identity Achievement results after adolescents actively explore their options in areas of politics, religion, occupation and gender roles. Adolescents categorized as Identity Diffused have made no commitments in the identity related domains and show no movement toward commitment. The Moratorium status resembles the Identity Achievement status in that adolescents form commitments through active exploration; however adolescents in this stage have only reached their commitments by going through a certain crisis. Finally, the Foreclosure state describes adolescents who have made commitments without any exploration. This stage credits the family and important others in the adolescent's life as factors that influence the commitments made.

This study found that participants' identity formation and their decision to wear a *hijab* was heavily influenced by their upbringing and in particular, by their families' religious values; with little or no self-exploration of alternative viewpoints. The Foreclosure state described by Marcia (1966) best describes the participants' commitments to the *hijab*.

Fowler (1981) explained religious development as a set of stages. According to him, the stages of development are uniform across religions and context. Fowler identified six stages in explaining the development of faith:

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith

- Early childhood.
- Focuses on the child's preoccupation with good vs. evil.

Stage 2: Mythical-Literal Faith.

- Middle to late childhood.

- Beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations. Thinking is more logical and concrete.

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith.

- Early Adolescence.
- More abstract thoughts. A person's experience of the world now extends beyond the family.

Stage 4: Individuative -Reflective Faith.

- Late Adolescence, Early Adulthood.
- Marked by an individual's deep exploration of values and beliefs.
- Individuals in this stage take responsibility for their own religious commitments.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith.

- Middle Adulthood.
- Characterized by becoming more tolerant and open to opposing viewpoints.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith.

- Middle and Late adulthood.
- This is considered a rare stage to achieve (Wolski, 1986).

Since this study pertains to adolescents ranging from 14-18 years of age, stages 3 and 4 are crucial to examine. During stage 3, adolescents' experience of the world extends beyond the family as a number of factors such as school, work, peers, the media and religion become important domains in their lives. Even though this stage begins in adolescence, it could become a permanent place for many adults. Although adolescents consider other domains besides the family to be important at this stage,

the expectations and judgments of their families remain important influences to their commitments as adolescents in this stage base their values on the judgments and expectations of significant others around them, most notably their family members.

The development from stage 3 to 4 involves serious exploration of beliefs. Adolescents must begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility for their commitments, beliefs and values. This is primarily a stage of struggle in which one must face difficult questions regarding identity and beliefs. The person is aware of himself/herself as an individual and must take personal responsibility for his/her beliefs and feelings. Those who pass into stage 4 usually do so in their mid 30's to early 40's; however many adults do not achieve this state. During this stage, critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology) takes place. The self, which is seen in stage 3 as being sustained by the influence of others, is now shaped by personal interpretations and judgments. An illustration of the framework follows:

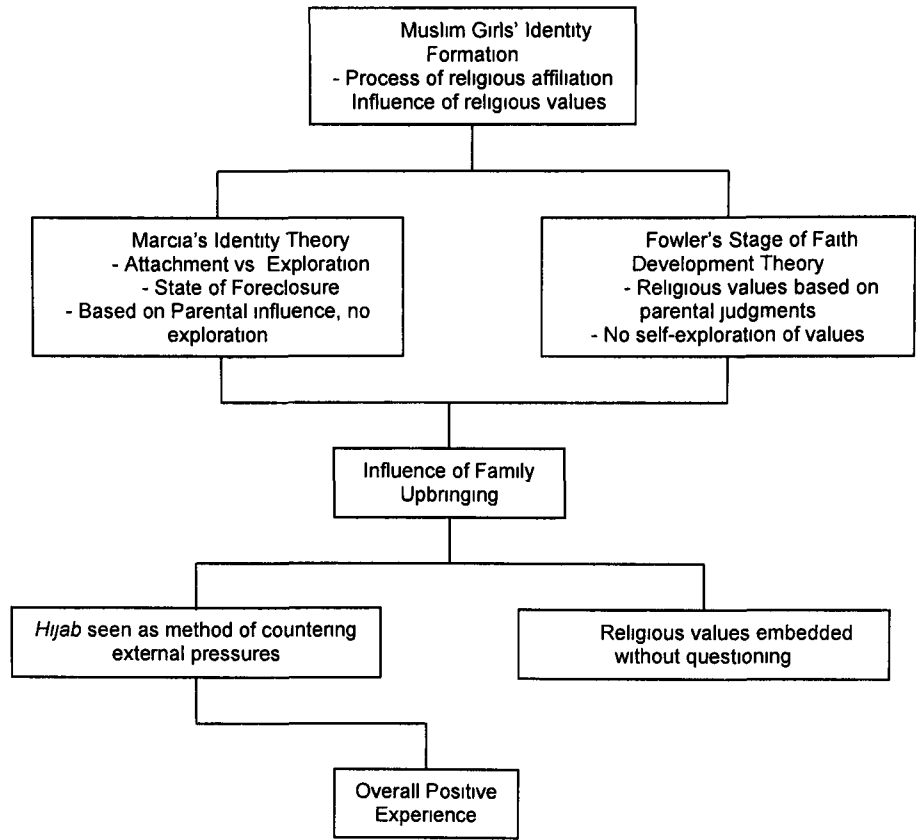


Figure 1. Illustration of Framework

In examining both Fowler and Marcia's theories, Figure 1 points to family upbringing as a main factor that influences the decisions made by the girls in this study. The results of this study indicate that the more comfortable the girls felt with wearing the *hijab* related to having significant female figures (mothers, sisters, aunts, etc.) who also wore the *hijab*. Although none of the girls stated that the *hijab* was forced upon them, none implied that they had studied or explored their decision of wearing the *hijab*. Rather, they wore it because it was a "religious obligation". Therefore the girls' religious identity formation is best explained by Marcia's Foreclosure state of identity formation and stage 3 of Fowler's faith development theory, as the effects of parental values seemed to dictate participants' commitments⁴

Family upbringing is seen as the main and initiating factor that influences the girls' perceptions of their high schooling experiences as well as their motivations for wearing the *hijab*. Figure 1 bolsters the idea that it is from family upbringing that the girls 'decide' to wear the *hijab*. It is also suggested by analyzing the participants' interviews that family influence allows the girls to feel respected and highly esteemed by their Muslim community. This can be seen as a method of building confidence, which in turn may counter pressures that exist in Western society. By viewing the *hijab* as a 'facilitator' rather than an 'obstacle' to their learning, the girls in this study revealed overall positive high school experiences. The next chapter will deal with the design of this study, as well as explain to the reader how the results of this study will be analyzed in subsequent chapters.

⁴ Although it cannot be clearly foreseen whether or not the girls in this study will remain in a state of Foreclosure and in Fowler's stage 3 of faith development, I have used these stages to describe where my participants seem best fit as characterized by the current stage of their lives

Chapter II

Design and Methodology

Design and Procedures

This qualitative research explored the schooling experiences of Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* and attend public educational institutions. By wearing the *hijab*, Muslim girls overtly express their dedication to the Islamic faith. My main research question is: How do Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* perceive their educational experiences in the public education system? The issues investigated in this research were:

- Being Canadian and being Muslim;
- Internal and external perceptions of the *hijab*;
- Forms of pressure;
- Representation of Islam in the classroom and the curriculum.

My sub-questions were:

- What strategies do Muslim girls use to maintain their religious identity while being part of the dominant culture?
- Besides the religious significance of the *hijab*, what other significance does it have for the girls wearing it?
- Do Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* feel incorporated and accommodated in their schools? (i.e., through curriculum inclusion, religious accommodations)

Since the focus of qualitative research is on participants' perceptions and experiences, I wished to investigate how my participants perceived their experience of schooling in Canada as well as how they perceived they were viewed by others because they wore the *hijab*.

Participants

The participants in this study were Muslim girls who wore the *hijab* and attended public high schools in Windsor, Ontario. Ten Muslim girls were purposefully selected using advertisements as well as personal contacts from Al-Hijra School and Mosque where I was employed during 2005-2006. With the help of friends at the Mosque and by 'word of mouth' referrals, the ten girls who were chosen met the criteria of this research. They wore the *hijab*, attended a public high school, were in the age range of 14-18 and most importantly, they were willing to talk about their experiences of wearing a *hijab* and attending public high schools. Three of the participants were in the 12th grade, three were in the 11th grade, three in the 10th grade and one in the ninth grade.

The girls represented different regions of Windsor, with some attending metropolitan area high schools and some attending schools in the more affluent parts of the city; thus they presented a sample of different socio-economic backgrounds. The girls also represented different modes of how they wore the *hijab*, including those who were on the more conservative end of the spectrum, those who were on the fashionable/trendy end of the spectrum, and those who were in the middle of the spectrum. To restate my "conservative to fashionable/trendy" spectrum, conservative means covering the entire body with very loose dress, where the body silhouette is not visible and the choice of colour worn is dark and plain. The fashionable/trendy end of

the spectrum consists of clothing that fits within the fashions of young girls who do not wear the *hijab*-clothes that most teenagers wear.

Excerpts from the participants will be used throughout the chapters to explain and support the themes that have emerged during the analysis phase of this study.

Pseudonyms are used when citing the participants in order to protect their identities. I will give a brief background of each participant as she is cited; in effort to help the reader better visualize where my participants are 'coming from' It is interesting to note that some of the participants sought me out in order to participate in this study. In other words, it was relatively simple to recruit participants, as those who joined seemed enthusiastic and proud to discuss their experiences with the *hijab*.

Methodology

Because of the fact that this study looked at the perceived school experiences held by Muslim girls who wear the *hijab*, the methodology was to conduct in-depth, personal interviews with my participants in order to give them a chance to talk about their experiences. Face-to-face, personal interviews were conducted with each participant, with each interview lasting from one to two hours. A semi-structured approach was used during the interviews as most questions were open-ended (Questionnaire in Appendix). The advantages of using this type of method include the fact that direct observation could not be performed as this research dealt with the perceived schooling experiences of the girls- something that only the girls could reveal and that cannot be observed. Also, personal interviews facilitated an open and comfortable atmosphere between me as the researcher and my participants. The questionnaire was divided into different themes/topics of interest, and all participants were asked the same questions in the same order presented in the questionnaire. The

questions were divided into the following headings: Background, Issues of Identification, School Experience and Peers and Social Activities.

The interviews took place at Al-Hijra Mosque and School after permission was granted from both the Research Ethics Board at the University of Windsor as well as Al-Hijra Mosque and School Board of Directors. Appointments with participants were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. I attempted to create two sub-groups of girls; one that attended an Islamic elementary school and one that attended a public/Catholic elementary school. The intention was to analyze if any significant differences arise as a result of the type of elementary education the girls experienced. However, no significance was found as all participants spoke of similar experiences and rationalized their commitment to Islam as the result of being brought up in a Muslim household that practiced an Islamic lifestyle.

Limitations/Delimitations

The most obvious limitation of this study is a characteristic of the qualitative method- the fact that the results cannot be generalized. This study is based on participants' view points and not on actual numeric records of any sort. I interviewed students and not their teachers or parents; thus I am representing only one side of the issue- that of the perceived experiences of my participants. Another limitation of this study is the inevitable fact that there are many similarities of perceived experiences shared by all adolescents alike. Issues of belonging, self-identification and categorization are the dilemmas usually experienced by most teenagers, Muslim or not. However, one of the strengths of this type of research is the validity of findings as the interviews used allowed the participants in this study to have a 'voice'

To ensure validity, each participant was sent a transcribed copy of her interview transcript and was asked to look over the transcript for a chance to edit, delete or add

any information which was revealed during the initial interview. Follow-up phone calls were made to each participant to ask if she would like to change anything in the transcript.

Mapping the Thesis

In order to follow the themes generated in this study, I have provided a literature map (Figure 2) to help the reader visualize the overall themes that have emerged during the literature review. I chose to refrain from writing a specific chapter for a literature review; rather the chapters are divided into separate themes that have emerged from this study. Each theme/chapter is then given its own literature review and supported by using excerpts from the participants in this study. Chapters Three, Four and Five will consist of literature pertinent to each topic which both aligned with or refuted the findings from this research. This method was used in order to effectively focus in-depth on each theme as well as to avoid confusion by overwhelming the reader with too much information. This method, I believe is much more concrete in explaining the themes and the results of this study. Chapter Six wraps up this study by offering a model to help understand the needs and motivations of Muslim girls. A conclusion and discussion are also given based on the themes that have been analyzed in this study.

In my assessment of literature about Muslim youth, the following themes emerged: The pressures of minority groups to “fit in” mainstream society, discrimination and stereotypes experienced by Muslims due to several factors; the most important being distorted media images about Islam. Literature about adolescent development also revealed the role of parental influence on identity formation, and how such influence impacts the religious choices that young people elect to embody.

Figure 2 is to serve as an umbrella of the issues that emerged in this study. The categories: Discrimination and stereotypes, pressures for Muslim girls and the influence of family upbringing have all been listed as separate themes; each will be discussed in a separate chapter and compared to the narratives gathered from participants' interviews. Under each theme, the main cause/issue is presented as well as the scholars who have contributed to the literature reviewed in this study. The main points associated with each theme are listed, explaining the overall issues that will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

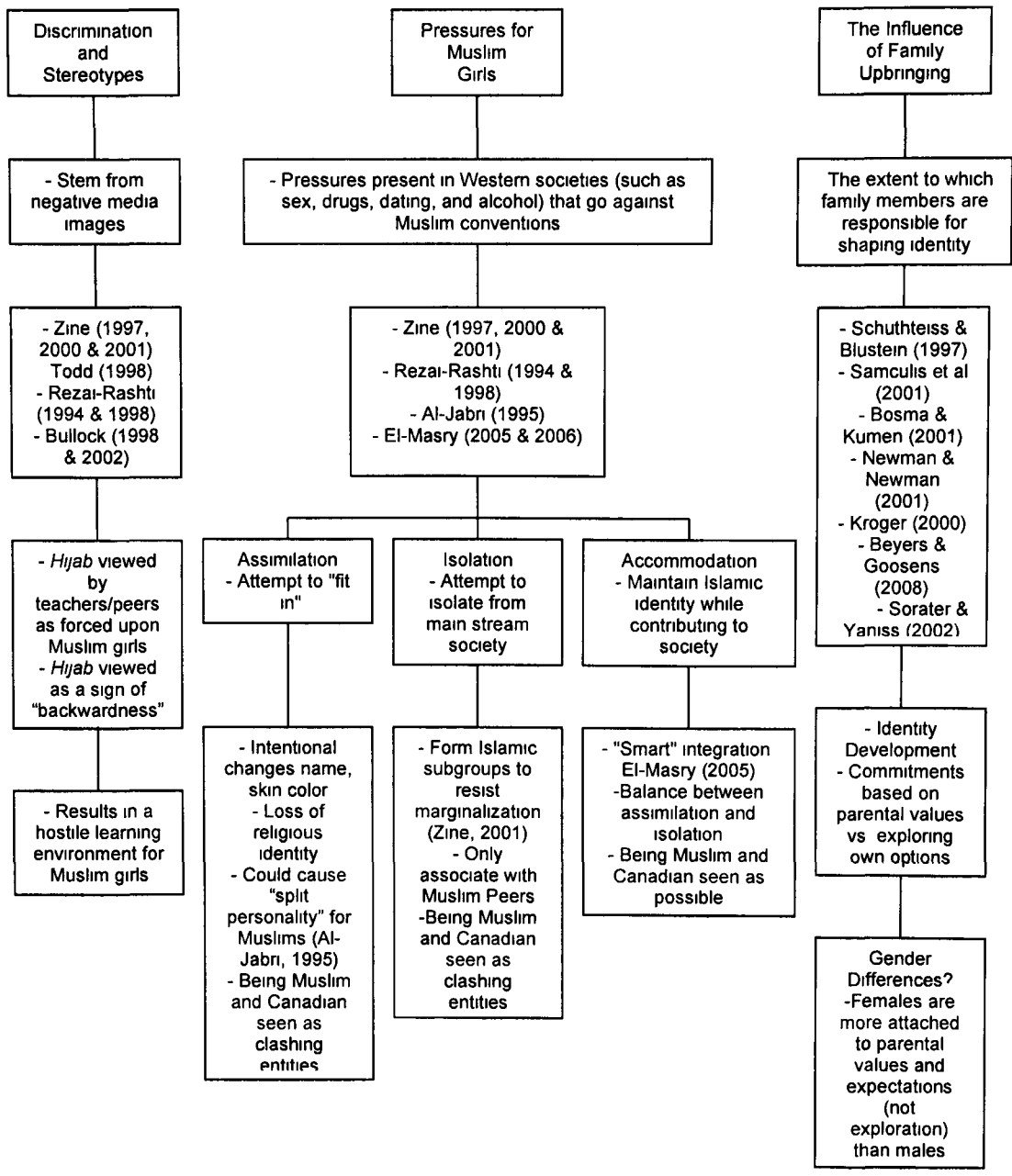


Figure 2. Literature Map

Chapter III

Discrimination and Stereotypes

Review of Literature

This chapter will review the literature on discrimination and stereotypes as it relates to Muslim youth in order to provide the appropriate background information and current research regarding the experience of Muslim youth in this domain. The literature on Muslim youth is sparse. In particular there are no Canadian studies that deal specifically with Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* and their experiences in the Canadian education system. Following a review of the literature, excerpts from participants' interviews are provided and analyzed in relation to the review. This chapter concludes by offering challenges and new perspective on the issues of discrimination and stereotypes.

For Muslim girls who wear the *hijab*, Islamic identity is a primary factor in their self-identification as the *hijab* does not ever allow them to 'hide' their religious identities. Misconceptions about Islam have generated many stereotypes about Muslim women, most notably about those who don the *hijab*. Since the focus of this study is on the experiences of Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* and attend public schools in Canada, it is vital to examine the status of the *hijab* in Canadian society in order to understand some of the concerns that pertain to Muslim girls. The issues of stereotyping and discrimination affecting Muslim youth have been noted in Canadian literature prior to the events of September 11, 2001 (e.g. Rezai-Rashti, 1994, 1998; Todd, 1998; Zine, 1997), thus acknowledging that the tragic events of 2001 were not necessarily the 'birth' of interest or controversies over Islam in the Western world. However, the years following the tragic events have resulted in many questions and concerns in regards to Islam and Muslim practices.

The interest in Islam has sparked some of the most controversial debates in the political domain globally, as the practices of Islam have been questioned, criticized and even partially banned (e.g. *hijab* banned in some institutions in France and Canada). Although minority rights and religious freedoms are protected under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) Canadian-Muslims face challenges to their identities and faith. What Muslims once viewed as inherent and protected ‘rights’ have now shifted to mere accommodations that are conditional and highly unstable. According to literature about Muslims, mostly negative stereotypes exist about Islam in Western societies. The stereotypes about Muslims often translate into the maltreatment of visible Muslim students.

The intersection of religion and culture is a common theme brought up in the few studies available on Muslim youths’ experiences in Canadian high schools⁵ The lack of acceptance of visible Muslims as ‘real’ Canadians has been a noted issue in literature prior to September 11, 2001. To explain this fusion of culture and religion as synonymous, Rezai-Rashti (1994) explained that when one identifies herself as a Muslim, her legitimacy as a Canadian is not readily accepted unless it is backed up by an ethnic reference (e.g. Pakistani-Canadian). Therefore, one stereotype is that Muslims are not ‘from here’ (i.e. Canada) and must therefore identify themselves by their ethnic backgrounds in order to be ‘accepted’ into mainstream society.

The images of Muslim women as oppressed or backwards have also been popular depictions (and continue to be) associated with the *hijab*. Zine (2001) stated that Muslim women in particular have become a metaphor for oppression as common misconceptions are that the *hijab* is forced upon them despite the fact that many

⁵ Most Canadian studies have been implemented by researcher and Associate Professor at Wilfred Laurier University, Jasmine Zine (1997, 2000 & 2001) and have taken place in Toronto, Ontario.

Muslim women wear it as a symbol of religious identification and modesty, as opposed to coercion. Rezai-Rashti (1994, 1998) noted that in her experience the interaction of non-Muslim students, teachers and administrators with Muslim students were largely based on stereotypes about culture, practices and beliefs⁶

Rezai-Rashti's (1998) claim that the interactions of non-Muslim teachers, administrators and students with Muslim students being mainly based on stereotypes can further be explained by her experiences teaching a university course entitled "Women in Muslim Societies" Having taught this course at a Canadian university, she concluded that the course was met with significant resistance from students who found it difficult to connect Islam, racism and feminism. From this assertion, one can assume that the Western connotations associated with Islam contradict notions of racism and feminism and view Islam as somewhat clashing with such terms.

In an educational setting, the misconceptions about Islam inevitably lead to discrimination against Muslim students. Discrimination against Muslim students, from teachers, administrators or non-Muslim peers can in part be explained by the negative ways that the media portrays the Islamic religion. Stereotypes about the *hijab* in particular make it problematic for Muslim girls to experience equal and inclusive education in Canadian schools. The 1994 case of a Montreal Muslim student who was expelled for wearing the *hijab* to school can be seen as an example of how stereotypes about Islam can directly interfere with Muslim girls' quality of education. Todd (1998) in referring to the 1994 Montreal expulsion case points out that negative media images about Islam at that particular time fixated on the *hijab* as being something threatening.

⁶ Rezai-Rashti's more recent works- 2000 and beyond- focus on multicultural education and anti-racism. Her earlier works (1994 & 1998) are used as references in this study as they focused on the problematic issues that are associated with being a Muslim woman in a Western society.

Following the expulsion of the Muslim girl, the Quebec Human Rights Commission decided in 1995 that Quebec schools were not permitted to prohibit students from wearing *hijab*. As stipulated by the *Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms* (1976):

Every person has a right to full and equal recognition and exercise of his human rights and freedoms, without distinction, exclusion or preference based on race, colour, sex, pregnancy, sexual orientation, civil status, age except as provided by law, religion, etc.

The *Charter* also specifies that “every person has a right, to the extent and according to the standards provided for by law, to free public education”. Despite Quebec laws banning religious discrimination, a similar incident occurred in 2003. A Muslim high school student was barred from entering her classes at a private school in Quebec, and was told that she was not allowed back until she removed her *hijab*. Salam Elmenyawi, President of the Muslim Council of Montreal (MCM) responded to the incident by stating:

It is shocking that we still have school directors who behave this way, who have no respect for our constitution and the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Their action violates the right of all students to freely practice their religion without harassment (MCM, 2003, ¶3).

This statement by Elmenyawi sheds light on the conflicting problems that arise when some institutions defy what a legally instituted document states as a right. It invites the question of whether other institutions, mainly public institutions, and schools in particular, will one day decide to eliminate the *Muhajabat* from attending their institutions. Many questions arise from the Quebec expulsion cases. First and foremost, the question of ‘why’ they were expelled and on what grounds needs to

generate serious discussion. Perhaps Bullock's (1998) assertion that the expulsion of Muslim girls in Quebec demonstrates that "the West has not yet transcended the negative stereotypes of the oppressed, veiled Muslim Women" (p. 1) can help explain why the *hijab* was banned in Quebec schools.

Bullock is the editor of the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* and a Western convert to Islam. Interestingly, Bullock's conversion to Islam happened during her doctoral research. The negative reactions by her peers to her conversion to Islam affirmed her belief that the West views the *hijab* as a symbol of women's oppression. Although she had informed her non-Muslim peers about her decision to embrace Islam and wear a *hijab*, Bullock (2002) stated that she found herself "subject to some hostile treatment" (p. xiv). Bullock stated that prior to converting to Islam she too had the Western belief that the *hijab* was a tool of oppression, imposed on Muslim women by men in power. However, she explained her changed stance on the *hijab* by stating:

Like many Westerners, I believed that Islam oppressed women. I had embarked on a spiritual journey during my Master's degree that culminated four years later in my conversion to Islam. The journey included moving from hatred to Islam, to respect, to interest, to acceptance (p. xiii).

Bullock (2002) concluded that laws banning the *hijab* in Canada and elsewhere were usually enacted in the name of modernity, "a modernity that sees Islam as backward, anti-civilization, barbaric, and oppressive to women" (p. 220). In referring to the ban of the *hijab* in France, Bullock stated that the French government saw the *hijab* as threatening to modernity. In Canada too, Bullock believes that the *hijab* is seen as oppressive and forced upon women. She stated "Muslim women in *hijab* are

regularly told by Canadians ‘This is Canada. You’re free here. You don’t have to wear that thing on your head’” (p. 221).

Such negative labels attached to the *hijab* in Western societies subject Muslim women to discrimination and pressure Muslims to “look Canadian” (Bullock, 1998, p. 1). Bullock concludes that the pressures to “look Canadian” accompanied by the Western view of the *hijab* as oppressive and un-modern pushed many Muslims to hide their Islamic identities and pressured them to assimilate to the ways of the dominant society. Western stereotypes about those who wear a *hijab* inevitably impact Muslim students’ school experiences as they can be perceived by their teachers, counselors and peers with hostility and anger that is built up and generated as a result of the negative images that are presented by the media’s portrayal of the *hijab*. On the flipside, the negative connotations of the *hijab* can also result in teachers’ pity for Muslim girls, resulting from the belief that the *hijab* is forced upon them by their families.

An example of how the media often portrays Islam in bad light can be seen in chapter One of this study (Wattie, 2007), where it seemed as though the media focused on the role of Islam in the case of a Canadian-Muslim father who murdered his daughter for allegedly refusing to wear the *hijab*. The failure of the media to acknowledge the response of the Muslim community is troubling for the future of Muslim girls in Canada. The Muslim stance was one that condemned the father’s murder and begged those blaming Islam to view this case as an individual man’s murder, rather than the result of Islamic teachings. The next section will reveal the participants’ interview analysis in relation to Western stereotypes and discrimination that exist within their school systems.

Participant Interview Analysis

With regards to issues of discrimination and self-identification, participants in this study were asked the following questions:

- What are some of the challenges of being a Muslim in a non-Muslim society?
- How do you cope with some of these challenges?
- Have you ever felt discriminated against as a Muslim in school? Explain.
- Do you feel that there are negative stereotypes about Muslims in your own school? Explain.

Hyphenated Canadians.

Mixing culture with religion was cited by most participants as typical of their non-Muslim peers and teachers. However, participants did not view this issue as problematic nor did they view it as affecting their educational experiences. Dana, an 11th grade student comes from an affluent Arab family and considers herself to be a “native” Canadian as this is her country of birth. On the scale of conservativeness vis a vis wearing the *hijab* Dana lies on the “fashionable/trendy” end of the spectrum. She noted that it was “easy” to adopt Western styles to her attire by pairing longer shirts with jeans and wearing long-sleeved shirts underneath tank-tops. More interestingly, Dana’s light complexion made it difficult to tell whether or not she was a white Western convert to Islam. In response to the question about how she felt she was treated by others because of her *hijab*, she explained:

My relationship with teachers and people in my classes is good, they don’t really say anything negative to me. The teachers treat me the same as other students. I

got asked if English is my first language last week. I don't have an accent so I think that the *hijab* is why she asked me that question. They confuse culture with religion.

Dana further explained that prior to wearing the *hijab* in elementary school, her peers and teachers often thought she was "white" because of her light complexion and features. However, she believed that since she started wearing the *hijab*, her ethnicity has come into question. Rezai-Rashti's (1994) claim that Muslims' legitimacy as Canadians must be backed by an ethnic reference did not seem to shock the girls and was viewed as somewhat inevitable since all of the participants in this study indeed came from different ethnic backgrounds (Lebanese, Syrian, Somali and Algerian).

Although participants did not see an issue in being asked about their ethnic backgrounds, the problems associated with having to defend their identities as hyphenated or secondary Canadians must be noted as a validation to the account that Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* are judged primarily by their appearance. Being hyphenated Canadians can at times make Muslims feel isolated from mainstream society and subject them to the status of always being the 'others', even when they are born in Canada. Dana, explained how she sometimes felt "left out" because of her *hijab*:

If I didn't wear the *hijab* I think that people would think I was white. It's funny because I am the same person whether I wear it or not. My school is mostly white people, there are... I think four other girls that wear the *hijab*. So they don't know much about it here, the teachers want to ask questions, but I don't think they know how to ask without offending you... just treat me and talk to me like everyone else, I am Dana, not the Muslim girl who wears the *hijab*!

Media depictions of the hijab.

Participants revealed that some of their teachers viewed them as being “oppressed” and having no rights at home because of their religion. The negative images of Muslim women can translate into the maltreatment of Muslims who wear the *hijab* as most of the participants believed that the choice of words used by their peers such as “move” rather than “excuse me” were the direct result of the connotations associated with the *hijab*. A few participants even reported that some teachers explicitly humiliated them in front of their peers often attacking the practices and rules of Islam such as rules on sexual education, gender relations and the concept of the *hijab* itself.

Yara, a high school senior, comes from an Arab background and a conservative Muslim family; both of her parents are teachers at an Islamic school in Windsor. I would classify Yara in the middle of the spectrum in regards to her dress. Dressed in jeans and long-sleeved shirt at the time of the interview, she stated that most of her clothing is bought from “normal stores at the mall” Yara struck me as a serious student, more interested in her studies than caring about what ‘others’ thought about the way she dressed. She also seemed shy, and quieter than my other participants. However, she was very outspoken when discussing how she felt that others viewed her because of her *hijab*, she stated:

It’s tough wearing the *hijab* in a non-Muslim society, people are usually cold and stiff when you ask questions, as opposed to a girl who has like pretty hair, people are ruder to you, they treat you differently. They sometimes treat you like you don’t have a brain. My teachers respect me because they got to know me, but like when we have a substitute, they treat me like I’m stupid, like I don’t speak English. Some challenges are the need to prove yourself that I’m not stupid, I’m

not the stereotype you see on TV In group work, they don't listen to me usually, it's annoying, I don't know why.

Yara's comment brings to light some of the concerns that arise when teachers as well as students form judgments about Muslim girls based on media portrayals about Islam. Yara stated "I'm not the stereotype you see on TV" The participants in this study all seemed to agree that there "definitely" exist common misconceptions about Muslims who wear the *hijab*, one that is rather negative and as Yara put it "degrading to Muslims"

Media depictions about Muslim women have been cited by participants as the primary reason for the negative stereotypes and ultimately, the discrimination against Muslims who wear the *hijab*. Yara further stated:

They see what's on the news... Muslim women being abused by their husbands and getting beat up and stuff. I get angry when I see these images on the news, I mean they don't represent who I am, or any other Muslim girl I know. My parents force me to get an education and want me to do my best and go to university.

They don't want me to sit home and wait to get married (laughing).

The use of force on Muslim girls to wear the *hijab* was also cited by most of the participants as a "misconception" about Islam. Randa, a 10th grade student who also comes from an Arab background explained that some of her teachers viewed the *hijab* very negatively and believed that it was forced upon young girls by their parents. However, Randa also explained that there are indeed some girls who were forced to wear it; but that it should not be understood to mean that all Muslim parents force their daughters to wear the *hijab*. In explaining this, Randa stated:

It's true that some girls are forced to wear the *hijab* because I know one girl who is. There is this girl who keeps talking to the teachers in school about her parents

and how she doesn't want to wear a *hijab*. So teachers view it so negatively. I hate it when parents do that to their kids, it's so wrong. I told that same teacher that that girl shouldn't wear it and that this girl shouldn't be used as an example for the rest of us. I mean I told her that I chose to wear it and this girls' parents are to be blamed, not Islam.

Randa, a more conservative Muslim based on the manner of her dress, discussed how often Islam is wrongly accused of mistreating women, when in fact it should be the people who abuse women who should be blamed for their actions. Randa's comment that Islam should not be automatically blamed is important for educators to understand. It can be assumed that by 'automatically' blaming Islam, those who Muslim students encounter (teachers, peers, counselors etc.) privilege a set of assumptions that have been formulated prior to the encounter, and based only on how the media depicts Islam.

Negative connotations associated with the hijab.

Besides the belief of some teachers that the *hijab* was forced upon Muslim girls, some teachers and peers believed that Muslim girls were allowed to remove the *hijab* since they "live in Canada" Confirming Bullock's (2002) assertion that the *hijab* was perceived as something that Muslim women could be liberated from in Canada, one participant (Dana) explained that some of her classmates did not understand why she was wearing the *hijab* "here" What upset Dana the most was that wearing the *hijab* was not received as a religious obligation by her peers; as they assumed she can take it off and put it back on based on where she lives. More frustrating to Dana was that she identified Canada as her "home" – she was born in Canada and yet, she felt as though she was often made to feel as a foreigner, mainly because of her *hijab*. In her own words, Dana stated:

People think that you're allowed to take it off here (*hijab*) and that you only have to wear it back in Arabic countries. They think it's more of a tradition and not obligatory in religion. They don't understand that we can't just take it off. I guess it's because they can't relate to it.

As discussed in the introductory segment of this study, the obligation of the *hijab* remains debated amongst Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike. However, for the girls in this study, the *hijab* was considered an obligation decreed by God, one which was unquestionable by all participants alike. A critical point that arises in thinking about those who hold authority positions like teachers and educational administrators are the ways in which they engage with the dynamics around the *hijab* and question its obligatory status. Some participants revealed that they could "tell" which teachers did not "agree" with their wearing of the *hijab*. Amal, a tenth grade student who comes from a Somali background spoke of how "unfair" it was when teachers explicitly stated their negative opinions about the *hijab*. Amal stated:

In Civics class, we were talking about the role of women in society... I don't know how but Islam came up and the teacher was looking at me and talking about how the *hijab* limits women in society because they're treated like objects or something. I don't really know how she got to that thinking, but it's so unfair that she thinks that. I didn't say anything though. I felt like I was like put on the spot. I don't know what I could have said to her though, it was kind of scary!

Amal's statement can be refuted by the fact that all people have the right to their own interpretation of the *hijab* and its meaning. At the same time, educators also have, and must practice their obligations of treating their students equally, regardless of the religious beliefs of their students. A more pertinent question relates to the extent to which those whom the *Muhajabat* depend on for the success of their

education separate their personal beliefs about the *hijab* from their treatment of the girls who wear it. In the words of one of Islam's biggest critics, Irshad Manji (2004):

I don't think it should be a crime to present yourself as a person of faith. As long as you are not infringing upon the basic rights of other people, and as long as it is in fact a choice, people may wear what they want, etc (p. 1).

Although Manji further stated that she believed that the *hijab* was forced upon Muslim women by men in their lives, her comment should be used as an example of how teachers and administrators ought to view their Muslim students. Whether or not the girls in this study were 'forced' to wear the *hijab* cannot be proven for certain. However, it is largely biased to assume that they indeed were forced to wear it and hence build our assumptions on that premises. I believe that the success of students should be the primary goal of teachers. Thus, we as educators must do everything we can to ensure that our students experience a healthy and non-threatening environment, despite our beliefs and opinions about the religions they represent.

School struggles

The expectation to "represent" Islam and know it "inside out" was cited by most participants as another stereotype that they experienced daily. Although most participants felt that their teachers 'put them on the spot' with questions or comments about Islam, most participants believed that it was "never intentional," and was not meant to put them down. Although teachers might not intend to put pressure on their Muslim students, the girls felt that at times, the expectation to know "everything" about Islam created pressures. In explaining the pressures to "represent" Islam at all times, Randa stated:

We have to be models to show what Islam is all about, we have to show the right information. That's hard sometimes because I don't know everything about Islam,

I have questions myself. It's different if I was in Syria, everyone knows what Islam is, here (Canada) everything that you do you have to explain. You're the representative of Islam for everyone. Sometimes people ask me why I don't have a boyfriend. I have to be careful when answering. Also, you can't walk in the hallways with a frown. You have to be an example for Islam. It's much more than just a *hijab*.

The formation of opinions about Muslim girls can result in negative and unfair treatment towards them. Amira, a high school freshman, who comes from an Arab background, spoke about her Gym teacher who constantly "picked on" her and a friend who also wore the *hijab* in class. Amira, being one of the more outspoken participants in this study was the youngest of six sisters. Interestingly, one of her main reasons for wearing the *hijab* was the fact that all her sisters wore it and that she did not want to feel "left out" Although she did not feel left out at home, Amira stated that she "hated" Gym class because of the way her teacher made her feel:

She (Gym teacher) is so rude. She makes fun of our religion but you know not directly. I think people like her need to learn more about other religions. The information should come from leaders from the community. Not from students. It should be a uniform set of rules. So teachers don't have to embarrass kids or answer from their own opinion. I mean we're still learning, how do you expect us to know everything about our religion? I handed in my health test empty because she kept centering us out. So I didn't do the test. The teacher just said 'that's sad, you don't even know your female organs' That teacher has authority in the school. She can say whatever she wants; she's the principal when the principal is not there, she's been there a long time. Other teachers are not like that.

Amira's statement that she did not complete her test because of her teacher's attitude towards Islam is disturbing to me as an educator. Although there were numerous methods that Amira could have applied to 'correct' her teacher and thus settle the misunderstanding, she decided to rebel instead, and refused to write her test. Amira cannot possibly take full blame for her actions as she felt threatened and at times even humiliated by this teacher. Amira's rationale for this particular teacher's 'hostility' towards girls who wear the *hijab* was because of this teacher's lack of information about Islamic rules that at times (especially in Health or Gym class) contradicted the school curriculum. In explaining why she felt her teacher treated her in a negative way, Amira replied:

I think because it gets in her way. For swimming class, she was annoyed that she had to put up a sign on the doors for no boys to enter the pool. She always did it in sarcasm. She didn't understand that we couldn't wear tampons and made us get doctor notes not to swim when we have our periods. She doesn't understand that we can't wear tampons because it's against our religion. In health class too she always picks on us for answers, like we should know everything about Islam. I really liked gym because I'm athletic. But the teacher really hates Islam and treats us like shit

Health and Gym class in particular were noted by most participants as subjects where more care and accommodations were needed in order for them to fully participate. The dress code required in high school Gym classes (shorts and t-shirt) for example, poses a problem for Muslim girls who must cover their legs and their arms. Some girls stated that it took several attempts to explain to their teachers that they could not wear such attire. Others stated that their teachers perfectly understood and accommodated their needs.

Yara spoke highly of her gym teacher as one who accommodated her needs and “understood” her. She stated:

Gym for example, our teacher is awesome, we can wear whatever we want as long as we can run with it. All the other classes are ok, I mean sometimes I get annoyed because our values are so much different than theirs, like debates about homosexuality and stuff, they talk about stuff like it’s so normal, like sex and stuff.

Some topics covered in the Health curriculum were also cited by some of the participants as “going against” their religious beliefs. Layla, a grade 12, conservative Muslim student who comes from an Arab background explained that topics of homosexuality and contraception in particular were discomforting to her as a Muslim. The trouble for Layla was being obliged to write an essay on the “pros and cons of contraception” and present it to the class. She said:

In Health class, the topics, some we can’t learn about. They have to teach it, like contraception and stuff. That’s against our religion. You know I respect the fact that they have to teach it, but do we really need to present the pros and cons of sex and stuff? I wish she (teacher) would have respected the fact that some people are not allowed to talk about this stuff so freely, let alone promote it!

Defending stereotypes

Despite the cited experiences of stereotyping and discrimination that the girls encountered in their schools, surprisingly most of the girls seemed to ‘defend’ their peers and teachers as lacking enough knowledge and information about Islam rather than intentionally being hostile towards them. The girls blamed the popular media and the images usually associated with wearing a *hijab*. Although most girls felt discriminated against at one point, they also viewed negative or incorrect comments

from peers/teachers as an interest in Islam as one of my participants, Manal a grade 11 student, even said “behind every comment I think that there is a question” Also, the girls did not take negative perceptions about Muslims very personally, they agreed that stereotypes existed about every group, not just them. Further, some participants also cited that they seldom experienced any stereotyping or discrimination. Although the girls all agreed that negative stereotypes can be damaging to Muslim girls’ self-esteem, they agreed that their experiences as high school students were rather positive. Manal stated:

I haven’t felt racism in school; there aren’t many negative stereotypes about Muslims in school. Students usually comment on how strict the rules of Islam are. Once that political cartoon about the prophet Muhammad and some flag burning I don’t know where, students saw that as representing all Muslims, we’re all violent. There are stereotypes about everything though, it’s like saying all Americans are stupid, I don’t think it’s weird that there are negative stereotypes about Muslims, it’s normal, people don’t know much about it except what they see on TV

Coping with stereotypes.

In agreeing that stereotypes existed about all groups and all people alike, the girls in this study revealed one method to ‘cope’ with some of the stereotypes experienced in school. The openness to criticism and the expectation of stereotypes could be better understood by Zeinab, a grade 11 student who is the daughter of a Muslim Mosque leader in Windsor:

It’s ignorant to believe that you’re not going to be stared at or picked on sometimes because of the way you look. I mean if I wasn’t Muslim I would probably look at us the same way. I think of it this way, when we went to Marine

land on a school trip, there was a group of Amish people, I think they were Amish, but you know they dress very different too. Everybody in my class was staring at them and like gossiping and stuff, what's weird was that I was honestly staring at them too, but not in a mean way, I just don't know why they dress like that, they all wear the same thing.

Zeinab's excerpt reveals that stereotypes are generated when people lack understanding about certain beliefs and cultures; thus explaining some of the girls' view that some of the stereotypes present about Muslims stem from interest about Islam and not from hostility. Further, Zeinab's statement that she too was staring at the group of Amish people because they looked different also revealed that Muslim girls too have stereotypes about others who look different than they.

Although participants seemed at times frustrated with some of their teachers, surprisingly, they did not expect their teachers or peers to fully understand or even accept their religious beliefs. More interestingly, the findings of this study indicate that participants also held *themselves* responsible for the ways that they interpreted certain situations and even stereotypes. The comfort level that the girls had with wearing the *hijab* seemed to have offset some of the negative experiences encountered in schools. Dina, a grade 10 student from Arab background who was one of the more fashionable participants stated:

I have never experienced racism or anything. I think it's your personality; you have to be strong when you wear it, and you have to know why you're wearing it and be sure that you want to wear it.

Dana's statement about "never" experiencing racism contradicts most literature encountered about Muslim youth living in Western societies. It points to the encouraging fact that some Muslims do not feel that they are subject to racism or

discrimination because of their religion. Further positive experiences in the Canadian educational system were voiced by Nora, a grade 12 student of Algerian background:

I think that people misjudging you is hard. They think all Muslims are alike.

Especially like after September 11 stuff, they think so badly of us. It's not fair. It would be awesome if we learned about Islam in class. Like just one class to teach them about us. I would love to go to that class, but I guess it's not fair, because if they do that then they would have to do that for all other religions and groups. But you know, sometimes people are nice too. They even sometimes tell me that they like my shirt or scarf, like when I wear shiny ones.

An inclusive education.

The participants in this study revealed that negative stereotypes existed in their schools and that their teachers' interpretations and views on the *hijab* at times came in direct conflict with their positive schooling experiences. The pressures to "know everything" about Islam and the difficulties of fully participating in the schools' curriculum activities (i.e. Gym and Health) pose problematic issues for Muslim girls and deny them access to equal and inclusive education. At the same time, the participants' 'defence' of their teachers'/peers' negative or incorrect comments about Islam as seemingly being an 'interest' in Islam sheds a new light upon understanding the experiences of what seems to be a unique generation of Muslim girls in the education system- girls who consider Canada their homeland.

It is apparent by the girls' narratives that the more comfortable they felt with wearing the *hijab*, the more tolerant they viewed their school atmosphere to be. Most of the girls 'defended' their teachers and non-Muslim peers claiming that it was the result of media depictions of Islam, and not the teachers' or peers' own prejudices that are to blame for the generations of stereotypes and discrimination against Muslim

students. The girls' rather unique stance on how they interpreted their experiences in Canadian high schools stresses the importance of the girls' high self-esteem and their overall comfort level with wearing the *hijab* as predictors of how they experience their education. An important note with which to end this section is the fact that most of the participants agreed that there were things that could be done in order to better accommodate them as Muslim students; Dina stated:

Maybe a better understanding of our religion and other major religions. I'm not saying they should like study it deeply or anything, but just know the basic rules. I'm not complaining though I think my school does a great job at that because they're so used to having Muslim students. Other schools are probably much different.

Challenges and New Perspectives

The right to wear the *hijab* in schools cannot be taken for granted by Canadian-Muslims, as is evident from the Quebec cases. The connotations associated with the *hijab* in the Western world can be problematic for Muslim girls in Canadian high schools. An important philosophy for Western educators to acknowledge is that by assuming that all Muslim girls are forced to veil, and that Muslim girls must take off the veil in order to be liberated is biased and oppressive itself. As stated by Bullock (2002) "'forced uncovering' by governments and school boards who wish to 'liberate' Muslim women is as problematic as 'forced covering'" (p.223).

The literature reviewed highlighted the consequences of discrimination and stereotyping in providing a hostile learning environment for Muslim students. Teachers' negative perceptions and limited knowledge of Islam can distort their images of Muslim students and result in unfair treatment towards these students. On the other hand, it is also encouraging to note that participants in this study revealed

positive school experiences, citing that although stereotypes about and discrimination toward Muslims existed, respect and understanding were present as well.

Moreover, it is important to note that some participants revealed that teachers' exposure to Muslim students was "normal", due to the fact that there were a fair amount of Muslims at their schools. The interview analysis revealed that Muslim students also take ownership over their experiences in Canadian society and acknowledge that their own perceptions of the *hijab* and their own self-acceptance as Muslims contributed to their positive experiences. This rather 'new' perspective does not focus solely on external sources such as negative media interpretations and the 'hostility' of Western thinking as the only 'obstacles' to Muslim girls' educational quality- such views externalize problematic issues that Muslims face in schools and place blame merely on the school systems and the media for depicting Islam in negative ways. Rather, the perspectives offered in this study also internalize issues relating to the experiences of Muslim students by focusing on the participants' own perceptions and comfort level with wearing the *hijab* as crucial indicators to how they perceive their educational experiences.

The need to assess the extent to which Muslims are comfortable with their own religious identities is an integral factor that contributes to and affects how Muslim girls interpret the reactions of others around them. By acknowledging that they indeed dressed differently than their peers, Muslim girls in this study were able to accept the existence of the stereotypes associated with their religion as inevitable, as stereotypes existed about different groups and people, not just Muslims. Although the level of comfort the girls had with wearing the *hijab* greatly affected the ways they interpreted their experiences, the onus also extends to educators and administrators to accommodate Muslim girls' needs and respect their religious practices and beliefs. It

is farfetched and unrealistic to expect teachers and other school personnel to fully understand Islam and particularly Muslim girls' needs. However, the call for more respect for religious practices is integral to the educational quality for these youth. Judging students based on what 'we think we know' about them is both dangerous and detrimental for their success and well-being.

The next chapter deals with the pressures faced by Muslim girls who wear the *hijab*. The struggle to "fit in" and maintain their religious identity is one that can be seen as partially stemming from the negative connotations often associated with the *hijab*.

Chapter IV

Pressures for Muslim Girls

Review of Literature

This chapter will review the literature dealing with the pressures encountered by Muslims living in a Western, non-Islamic society. The literature pertains to both Muslim males and females, as I was not able to locate studies that were limited to Muslim girls who wear the *hijab*. After reviewing pertinent literature, the participants' interviews are analyzed and compared to the themes presented in the literature review. The chapter concludes by offering a section of challenges and new perspectives for educators and researchers to consider in relation to the pressures that Muslims experience in schools.

The high school years could be characterized as the 'awkward' years in the lives of most adolescents. The struggle to 'fit in' and be accepted into their high school social milieu is faced by most youth. However, according to Zine (2000) it is the "Eurocentric" focus of Canadian education that creates an alienating experience for many visible Muslim students. The values and beliefs that dominate the school settings in Canada often clash with the values of Muslims students. Zine (2001) asserts that Muslim youth struggle as their day to day schooling experience is often complicated by social pressures that are often contradictory to their faith, such as dating, premarital sex, alcohol use etc. Further, social events supported by most Canadian high schools, such as proms, dances, and other social activities can present Muslim students with the dilemma of choosing which path they want to follow- the Islamic or the 'Canadian'

The quest to be accepted into mainstream society and thus "fit in" is a very frustrating experience for Muslims. The struggle to "fit in" can lead some Muslims to

develop what Al-Jabri (1995) called a “split personality syndrome”. The “split personality syndrome” is described as the development of a double identity in order to integrate within the dominant society and at the same time attempt to maintain the integrity of one’s lifestyle as Muslims. Although Al-Jabri did not provide a concrete example of the “split personality syndrome” based on the definition of the term, an example of a Muslim experiencing such a syndrome can be illustrated by a Muslim girl who wears the *hijab* at home- i.e. in front of her family- and then takes it off when she arrives at school- i.e. in the presence of non-Muslims. By developing this double persona, she is able to integrate into the dominant society while concurrently maintaining her lifestyle as a Muslim.

Developing a double personality is viewed as one method that some Muslims resort to in dealing with the pressures faced in schools. The pressures to fit into Canadian society can also lead Muslims to develop other coping strategies such as isolation and assimilation. In contending with the existing pressures, Muslims are seen as being forced to choose whether to assimilate to, or “fit in” mainstream culture, or, on the other hand, isolate themselves from it. In choosing the latter, Muslims distance themselves and form their own Islamic subgroups as a means of coping with existing pressures.

An example of how some Muslims tend to isolate themselves is evident in Zine’s (1997) study in the metropolitan Toronto, Ontario area. Although she found that the conflicting pressures often led to assimilation for many Muslim youth, she also found that some Muslims developed ‘formal’ strategies to maintain their identities and hence resist assimilation. It was through the development of Islamic subcultures within their schools that the resistance to assimilation was achieved. The formation of

Muslim Student Associations (MSA's) was a way that participants were able to assert a collective Muslim identity.

According to Zine (1997), the process of creating Islamic sub-cultures is one that involved several components: 1) a shared ideology, which is based on Islamic beliefs (all members are practicing Muslims) and 2) a level of interaction and support from the school. For example in Zine's study, Islamic organizations lobbied for places to pray, and accommodations for *halal* foods in the cafeteria. The third requirement for an Islamic subculture is institutional compliance or the need to reform the policies and practices of the school so that it becomes responsive to the social and religious needs of Muslim students; an example would be exempting Muslim girls from wearing shorts during physical education.

The rather formal isolation on the part of Muslim youth in Zine's study sharply contradicts the findings of this study; which found that none of the participants were involved in MSA's. In fact, some of the participants did not know whether or not MSA's existed in their schools. This finding suggests that participants did not view formal isolation as a method of maintaining their religious identity, nor did they expect their schools to formally collaborate with them in order to establish facilities (e.g. prayer rooms or *halal* foods) to help them maintain their religious practices.

Researchers (e.g. Al-Jabri, 1995 ; Zine, 1997, 2000, 2001) conclude that Muslims "either" assimilate or isolate in order to deal with the pressures of living in a non-Islamic society. However, Elmasry (2005), professor at the University of Waterloo and national President of the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC) argued that both methods of assimilation and isolation are troubling and dangerous to the future of Muslims in Canada. He called for Muslims to consider "smart integration"; an alternative model for living in a Western society. Defined by Elmasry (2005):

[Smart integration] promotes the preservation of one's identity in matters of religion, culture, language and heritage, while simultaneously encouraging full participation in the country's political square, and promoting both individual and collective contributions in all fields to its well-being (p.4).

This model goes beyond merely choosing the best from both worlds; it allows individuals to be proud of their heritage while contributing to and appreciating the mainstream culture in where they live. Elmasry stated that the isolation model is devastating for minorities and the country (Canada) as a whole as it results in a minority's rejection by mainstream society. The notion of assimilation also poses dangers to minority groups, in that extreme assimilation inevitably results in the loss of a minority's culture, beliefs and values.

An example of the "smart integration" model in action can be seen by the CIC's *2004 Election Report Project*; a project targeted to encourage Canadian-Muslims to vote. The focus of the report was to both educate Muslims about the pros of voting, as well as remind them that it was both their religious and civic duty to do so. As a result, Elmasry (2006) stated that the percentage of Muslims who voted in 2004 was higher than the Canadian national average of voters: "This was a practical and successful exercise in smart integration. By becoming informed, committed, multi-issue voters, Canadian Muslims proved on Election Day 2004 that they could be simultaneously good Muslims and good Canadians" (§ 11).

In order help Muslims "smartly integrate" into Canadian society, the CIC also held educational courses that focused on educating Muslims about Canadian laws, history and politics. The courses were deemed very successful by the CIC, as an enrolment turnout of over 50, 000 Muslim-Canadians proved that Muslims *want* to contribute to Canadian society and find it important to do so. A critical point brought

up by Elmasry in order to defend the “smart integration” model, is the fact that a large number of Muslims are born in Canada, and that their Canadian identity must also be respected and practiced along with their Islamic identity. He stated “although the smart integration model could well prove beneficial for all of Canada's ethnic and religious communities, it is a must for Canadian Muslims, who now stand at some 750,000 making them the nation's largest non-Christian religious community (Elmasry, 2006, ¶ 7).

Successful integration.

Adopting Elmasry’s model of integration, Muslim students can perhaps alleviate their struggle to “fit in” By attending to both their Muslim needs as well as their civic duties, Muslim-Canadians can offset some aforementioned pressures that exist in a non-Islamic society. The “smart integration” approach seems to have positive results for both the maintenance of an Islamic identity and the contribution to mainstream society. Rather than viewing Islam and the West as opposing and clashing entities, this model integrates both worlds in a manner that allows them to successfully co-exist, allowing Muslims to preserve their religious identities, and at the same time enforcing that their Canadian citizenship must also be respected and practiced.

It is important to note that although Elmasry advocated the “smart integration” model, he also stated that the extreme notions of assimilation and isolation are often sought by minority groups who experience forms of racism and stereotyping. The outcome of such negative experiences can either repel minorities from contributing to or even affiliating with the mainstream society, or on the other hand, can lead to the minority’s desperate attempts to try to fit into that culture. Those who experience negative treatment because of their religion are either “turned off” by the dominant society, or on the other hand by their own religion.

The quest to educate Muslims about the benefits of “smart integration” is of utmost importance to the future quality of experience for Muslims in Canada, as well as important for the functioning of Canadian society as a whole. Because Muslims are a growing part of Canadian society, their contribution to society is considered crucial to the growth of the overall economy. No longer can Muslims live in an isolated world, and no longer can we view assimilation and isolation as the ‘expected’ modes of integration to which Muslims aspire. Rather, the stress on the importance of finding a balance between the two notions is integral to promote.

It is encouraging to note that the girls in this study revealed very positive information in relation to how they viewed themselves in Canadian society. The next section will focus on the interview analysis section of this study. I would like to note that although my participants are characterized as following the “smart integration” model, their responses to the pressures that existed in their educational settings revealed that at times the pressures could lead some Muslims to go astray from their religion- most participants revealed that they knew of such cases.

Participant Interview Analysis

Based on the literature review, the existent pressures stemming from the clash of Western values and Muslim values often results in Muslim students’ isolation from mainstream society, or their assimilation into the dominant culture. Both of these methods pose certain dangers when taken to extreme lengths. The desperate need to assimilate and “fit in” can result in a complete loss of religious and personal identity for Muslims. On the other hand, isolating themselves from mainstream society ultimately yields to negative results for Muslim students, as isolation results in the failure to acknowledge the importance of contributing to one’s own society and in this context, one’s Canadian citizenship.

Taking into account the benefits of “smart integration”, the quest to live a pious Islamic life does not have to contradict with contributing to mainstream society. The participants in this study considered Canada as their homeland and Canada their main society. Interestingly, none of the girls reported that they isolated themselves from non-Muslims in order to counter the pressures sometimes experienced at schools. Rather, the girls seemed to find a healthy balance which allowed them to be both Muslims and Canadians. The participants in this study were asked the following set of questions regarding their socialization habits in school as well as their perceptions of the importance of “fitting in” in the dominant culture.

- Is integrating into Canadian society important to you as a Muslim? Explain.
- Do you find pressure to assimilate to the school culture? If so, how do you deal with it?
- Does your school make any accommodations for your Islamic way of life? (Food, prayer location, etc?),
- Is there a Muslim student organization at your school? If so, what activities do you participate in?
- Are your school friends primarily Muslim? If yes, then how are your relations with non-Muslim peers/classmates?
- What social events do you attend?

The interviews revealed that Muslim girls tended to follow a pattern more compatible with Elmasry’s (2005) definition of “smart integration”; rather than the extreme notions of assimilation or isolation:

- The girls reported having Muslim female friends only; however they were not fully isolated from their peers in school.
- The girls seemed to maintain their religious identity while contributing and interacting (in classes) with ‘other’ people.
- The girls did not expect teachers and peers to fully understand/ accommodate Muslim practices.
- The girls viewed their grouping as “normal” saying that at school people group themselves with people “like them”

Participants agreed that Muslims cannot escape the fact that they live in a non-Islamic society and must in turn respect the fact that Canadian society cannot possibly accommodate all of their religious needs. Although the girls stated that there were many pressures present in schools that conflicted with their religion, they also stated that pressures existed for “all youth”, not just Muslims. The pressures of dating, looking good, smoking, participating in sexual activities, partying and doing drugs were issues revealed by participants as existing social pressures for all students in high schools.

Fitting in.

The girls’ responses about the importance of “fitting in” revealed that it was important to be accepted by and contribute to mainstream society. However, the notion of moderation is an integral concept to highlight in this segment. Although the girls wanted to fit in with their non-Muslim peers they also acknowledged that they maintained certain boundaries with them. In explaining the importance of fitting in, Amira, the high school freshman stated:

Fitting in is important a little bit...no one wants to be a loser. If you don't fit in then you're lonely, you want to have friends, but not like parties and everything, so fitting in is kind of important. But it's hard to keep up with what people are talking about. I'd rather hang out with people like me, we can do the same things. When I'm with a Muslim I can be myself. When you're with non-Muslims you have to be careful what you say. It's normal to hang out with your own kind, the punks, the Goths, the smarty-pants.

Amira's statement that it is "normal to hang out with your own kind" is of importance to examine. She rationalized her choice of having mostly Muslim friends by stating that with people "like" her, she can engage in similar interests and activities. More importantly, hanging out with other Muslim girls who wore the *hijab* provided a common bond between the girls as they reported feeling more comfortable and able to be 'themselves' Also commenting on the importance of fitting in, Manal, the 11th grade student stated:

In a way it is important to fit in, not completely, I want to socialize with people. Being away from everyone all the time is not right. It's cool to be different, I know what I'm doing is not wrong. Wearing the *hijab* gives me a different outlook on life, in Canada, it's so multi-cultural, it's not a melting pot like the US. I don't think the *hijab* will ever be an obstacle for me in the future, that may even draw more people to you say if I was to become a Muslim doctor, you might even have an advantage.

The above excerpts indicated that some form of assimilation to mainstream culture was viewed as necessary by participants. The "who wants to be a loser?" statement made it clear that Muslim girls did not want to be feel isolated from their non-Muslim peers, but at the same time wanted to maintain their own Muslim

identity. Randa, the 10th grade student explained that the obsession of trying to fit in can become “tiring” for Muslim youth in stating “you shouldn’t try to fit in to the point where you’re dying to fit, you’re just going to get tired”

Although participants agreed that fitting in was somewhat important, Randa further explained that the struggle to be accepted into mainstream society could indeed become an obstacle for maintaining an Islamic identity; she explained that some Muslim girls she knew “obsessed” about fitting in and “fell into the trap” of jeopardizing their Muslim identity for the sake of fitting in. Randa stated:

I don’t [find pressures] myself but I see it all the time, it happens a lot, drama! They wear the *hijab* but because of this society, and trying to fit in, they can’t do both! I know a friend who got into the drama society but now she can’t be with her old friends because they’ll say it’s *haram* and she can’t fully be with her new friends...her new friends touch her, high five and hugs and stuff. It’s not their fault; even parents get weak (in faith) when they live here, so their kids can’t really be blamed. This society can weaken your faith if you don’t practice your religion. It’s not just the school; it’s the influence of the family. I know that I’m blessed because my family is a good example

Randa’s claim that Canadian society can “weaken your faith” points to the extent of family influence and upbringing. She attributed having a “good example” at home as a major influence on countering pressures present at school. Another factor that participants revealed helped them maintain their religious identity was their own self-concept and comfort level with wearing the *hijab*. Manal explained “it depends on your personality and what level you are at wearing it, how comfortable you are and what the *hijab* means to you. That affects your life at school” It is evident that the comfort level that the girls had with wearing the *hijab* seemed quite high. All of the

girls revealed that they decided to wear the *hijab*, claiming that no parental forces existed and that it was a decision made by them. That all of the girls stated that the *hijab* was a mandate from God seems to be a major factor in explaining why they felt so comfortable and convinced of wearing it.

As evident in the girls' narratives, "fitting in" was important, but not to the extremes noted in literature. The notion of "formalized resistance" and the formation of Islamic subgroups was not a theme that emerged from the interviews. The fact that the girls preferred to choose Muslim friends was perceived by the girls as a 'normal' method of how adolescents form their social groupings during the high school years. The girls seemed to find a healthy balance between maintaining their Muslim identity, while at the same time participating with their non-Muslim peers in school-related activities. Manal explained that although her friends were primarily Muslims, her relationship with her non-Muslim peers was important in the school setting as well:

My friends are mainly Muslims, my non-Muslim friends are my school friends. I can't really relate to them, we can't be close; you have to explain everything to them. So if you want to communicate with non-Muslims, you have to talk about something you have in common. So pretty much you can talk about school subjects. You can't talk about personal issues, because if I were asked a question about something, I would respond in an Islamic manner, telling them what Islam says we should do, like pray or something. I don't interact with the opposite sex except for in class, but nothing more personal.

Manal's statement revealed that she did not find common grounds between her and her non-Muslim peers at school, except in school-related subjects. According to her, it would be difficult to befriend non-Muslims, as her values inevitably clashed

with theirs. Yara, the high school senior gave similar reasons to Manal's as to why her friends were primarily Muslim:

My friends are mainly Muslims. It's hard to relate to anybody who's not Muslim, because they don't understand you. For example, they'll ask why you can't go to a party. We have totally different values. Everything is so different, With Muslims we can talk about the same things, they (non-Muslims) mainly talk about boys, parties and concerts, none of which I am familiar with nor want to be familiar with. My relationship with non-Muslims is cool, it's okay. It ends in class; it doesn't go any further than that. I interact with boys, there are limits of course, and it ends in class too.

Although this could be perceived as an 'isolating' stance, I believe that it is a very common interaction process for all groups alike, in that people mostly choose their friends based on common beliefs and values. Moreover, Zine's (1997, 2001) findings that the creation of Muslim Student Associations (MSA's) was a method that Muslim students used to resist marginalization was not once cited by any of the participants in my study.

The hijab as a facilitator rather than obstacle.

The girls viewed their *hijab* as a means to counter temptations to "cave in" the pressures encountered at schools. Because of the fact that the Muslim girls in this study could not 'hide' their religious identity, they believed that the *hijab* played the role of a barrier in protecting them against pressures encountered at school. Randa explained how the *hijab* worked out to her advantage in helping her resist temptations:

I think my *hijab* plays a role as a barrier. No one ever came up to me and told me to come smoke for example. If I was a guy, it probably would be harder because

there is nothing they can wear to show people that they are Muslims, they have to show it through their actions. I do too but the *hijab* makes others know right away so some of the challenges that guys have to go through like peer pressure, I don't.

In my analysis of the interviews I noted Randa's statement about Muslim males having to deal with more peer pressures than Muslim females *because* they did not overtly express their religion. Some of my participants even believed that it was the Muslim girls who *did not* wear the *hijab* who faced more pressures at schools than those who wore it. Nora, the high school senior explained that because she overtly represented Islam, she inevitably experienced fewer pressures at school than Muslims girls who did not wear the *hijab*. She explained:

I feel sorry for Muslim girls who are lost, like they're not sure if they really want to act Muslim and don't really know where they belong in society. I mean there are lots of Muslim girls I know that don't wear the *hijab*, they're always confused about everything in life, I swear! Like they're not allowed to do the same things that non-Muslims can do, like have boyfriends and party and stuff, but they try to anyway. It's sad, they're just confused!

Nora's statement can perhaps explain some of the issues regarding the struggles that some Muslims experience as a result of trying to "fit in" Perhaps it is those girls who are forced to wear the *hijab* by their families who struggle with their educational experiences. The comfort level that the girls had with wearing the *hijab* suggests that the *hijab* is a significant factor that offsets pressures and prevents some of the struggles that Muslim youth encounter in Western societies. The *hijab* as a mode of "protection" against society's temptation was viewed by one of my participants (Amal) as a "blessing" She stated:

I really am lucky that I wear the *hijab*, I mean for one I don't have to come home and keep thinking about whether I should lie to my parents and do stuff. There are so many girls, even non-Muslims who lie to their parents and tell them they're like at the library when they're really out doing drugs and stuff or with their boyfriends. For me I would never ever do that, I'm not scared of my parents, I'm scared of God! I mean that's what I mean that it's a blessing to wear the *hijab*. It's like your mother (laughing) when she's not there!

Amal's statement is very interesting to note, as seldom does one hear the 'positive' effects of the *hijab* in a Western society. It was their *hijab* that the girls pointed to as one of the main causes of alleviating them from the pressures that they believed 'others' often faced.

Challenges and New Perspectives

The findings revealed that the influence of family upbringing and the degree of comfort that the girls had with wearing the *hijab* were considered primary sources of motivation for the girls to maintain their religious values and identities. The "smart integration" model seems to best describe how the girls in this study countered the pressures to "fit in". The girls' ability to understand that they could not fully isolate themselves from Western society while at the same time they must create some boundaries to protect their religious identities fostered a healthy balance to maintaining an Islamic identity.

Although the interview excerpts revealed that the girls' selection of friends was mostly based on religious identification, they also revealed that they understood the importance of associating with and interacting with 'others' In an era where group projects, class debates and partner work are common activities during one's schooling years, Muslim girls cannot possibly detach themselves from interacting with non-

Muslims in both contributing their thoughts as well as exchanging their ideas with them.

Rarely does one encounter literature or media images depicting how the *hijab* can ease pressures on Muslims girls. Interestingly in this study, the girls expressed the importance of the *hijab* itself as a source of protection against pressures associated with being in high school- drugs, sex, dating, etc. and did not find that they faced pressures that were different than those faced by most youth who attend high schools. In fact, some of the participants believed that they faced fewer pressures in schools than Muslim girls who did not wear the *hijab*. Such finding sheds new light on the images associated with the *hijab*, in suggesting that in contrast to the negative connotations usually attached to the *hijab* in the Western world, its impact on the healthy development of girls should also be considered.

As a researcher I was expecting that my participants would highlight mostly negative experiences that were associated with wearing a *hijab*. However, I was surprised by the general consensus among participants that they felt very comfortable with their Muslim identities and did not report undue hardships associated with trying to “fit in” My participants’ interviews revealed a new and modern ‘voice’; one that contradicted the views presented in Canadian studies such as Zine’s (1997, 2000, 2001) which primarily highlighted Muslim youths’ obstacles that hindered them from successfully living an Islamic life in a non-Islamic society. Although participants revealed that obstacles and pressures did exist in their schools, the fact that such pressures were viewed as existent for all youth was an important explanation. It appeared that my participants made up a new generation that is not yet fully understood by researchers and administrators. The next chapter focuses on the last theme that has emerged in this study, that of the influence of family upbringing.

Chapter V

The Influence of Family Upbringing

Review of Literature

This chapter will address the important role that families play in shaping Muslim girls' identities and in fostering a healthy learning environment for their daughters who wear a *hijab*. First a review of literature pertaining to parental influence on adolescents' identity formation will be reviewed. Next, interview analyses will be presented to reveal the participants' viewpoints on their parental relationships. The chapter will end with a section dealing with challenges and new perspectives integrating themes emerging from the literature and the participants' interview analysis.

As cited by Bosma & Kunnen (2001), the early works of Erikson are the basis for contemporary works in the area of identity development. According to Erikson, adolescence is a distinct life stage, one that is characterized by the search for a sense of self. During each stage, a person would either resolve the crisis; achieving a sense of identity or on the other hand fails to resolve the crisis. Failure to resolve the crisis leads to confusion and the inability to commit to values. Later work in this field saw adolescent development as a process of individuation, and separation from one's own family as being central to formation of one's own identity (e.g. Blos, 1979, Josselson, 1988 as cited in Bosma & Kunnen, 2001).

Although the focus of this study is on Muslim girls who wear the *hijab*, the process of establishing an identity is one that all adolescents share and therefore is worth examining. The influence of family upbringing on the development of adolescents' identity development is essential to understanding the religious commitments made by the girls in this study. The participants in this study constantly

referred to their families as a significant source of motivation for wearing the *hijab*, as well as a source of comfort in resisting some of the pressures encountered in their schools.

Recent scholars (e.g. Bosma & Kumen, 2001; Kroger, 2000, 2004) stressed the role that important others, such as parents, play in their children's identity formation. More importantly, it is the reactions of parents to their adolescents' commitments that are seen as making those commitments either stronger or weaker. Hence, the positive or negative reactions from parents towards their adolescents' commitments can significantly affect those commitments.

Research has also shown that a strong network of support from family members correlates with adolescents' positive mental health and coping strategies (e.g. Guacci-Franco, Levitt & Levitt, 1993; Nada Rafa, McGee, & Stanton, 1992). Having a strong network of support at home could be viewed as a strategy to 'counter' negative experiences at school. The way that the participants in this study formed their religious commitments was connected to their family upbringing and specifically to their family's religious values.

Newman & Newman (2001) assert that adolescents evaluate the nature of their ties to their immediate families. The results of this study support Newman & Newman's assertion in that the role of the families and the degree of support provided for the girls in their homes help explain both their decisions to wear the *hijab*, as well as their perceptions that the *hijab* provided them with a safety net against existing pressures. Also, it was noted by the participants that their families helped them cope in times where they felt discriminated against or "picked on" in school.

Participants cited their families as being a major source of influence for their decisions to wear the *hijab*. Even when participants stated that the *hijab* was a

“commandment from God”, their families were almost automatically credited as having been role models in the girls’ decisions to overtly represent Islam. All of the girls cited their mothers or their sisters as their sources of motivation for wanting to wear the *hijab*; none of the girls mentioned their fathers’ influence in this matter. Therefore, the term “family” in this study is attributed to female members such as mothers, sisters and aunts. Because of the fact that the girls only noted female figures in their lives as being their role models, I have examined literature which focused on gender differences in adolescents’ identity achievement.

Samoulis, Layburn & Schiaffino’s (2001) study on college students has shown that even in late adolescence, males and females are affected differently by attachment relationships to their parents. The results of their study indicated that females were more affected by connectedness and attachment to their parents, whereas males focused on separation from their parents in the process of identity achievement. Samoulis et al. (2001) concluded that adolescents’ gender is a factor that influences the impact of parental influence. They showed that positive parental influence was due to adolescents’ secure attachments to parents, with identity commitment in females being the result, rather than identity exploration. Such findings suggest that parents have a larger impact on female adolescents in helping them *commit* to a certain identity than on the female adolescents’ exploration of their identity. Samoulis et al’s (2001) findings parallel the findings of this study, which also suggest that the girls’ identity commitment was made without independent exploration.

Sarator & Youniss’ (2002) findings confirmed Samoulis et al’s (2001) by showing that positive associations between parenting variables (support, social monitoring and school monitoring) and identity achievement were stronger for females than for

males. Although my study did not involve any Muslim males, the fact that parenting played a major role in my participants' religious identity commitment cannot be denied. Of more interest to the results of this study was the role of the mothers in influencing their daughters' decisions to wear the *hijab*. A study by Beyers & Goosens (2008) found that lack of autonomy support in mother-daughter relationships was linked to female adolescents' tendency to base their commitments on parental values and expectations, without ever exploring alternative choices.

None of the girls in this study cited that their mothers encouraged them to research Islam's stance on the obligation of wearing the *hijab*, rather the girls were only *told* about the benefits that came along with wearing it. The parental expectations cannot be viewed as the only source of motivation for the girls in this study; however they can be viewed as a major source that was used to 'defend' the girls' choice of wearing the *hijab*.

In further explaining the girls' unexplored decisions to commit to a religious identity, Schultheiss & Blustein (1994) explained that the relationship between mothers and daughters is associated with a premature commitment to certain values as a result of lack of normative exploration in some identity domains. Kroger (2004) stated that identity in adolescence can be viewed as the balance between the self and others that surround the adolescent. This study found that the relationship between mothers and daughters was a strong influence on the girls' acceptance and rationale for wearing the *hijab*; all the mothers of the girls in this study wore the *hijab*. The mothers in this case played an important and pivotal role in the development of the girls' religious identity formation.

Participant Interview Analysis

The literature I reviewed on Muslim girls maintaining their religious identity while living in Canada underscored themes that dealt with assimilation, isolation, stereotyping and discrimination; most notably the struggle for Muslim youth to “fit in” to mainstream society. The importance of family upbringing and the influence that it had on adolescent identity development was not encountered in literature about Muslim youth. Therefore, this study reveals an important measure that propelled Muslim girls to maintain their religious identity, one that dealt with adolescents’ self-image and their motivations to lead an Islamic lifestyle and wear the *hijab* to represent their Muslim identity.

The participants revealed that their mothers, and other female figures in their lives, played a significant role in the sense of providing moral direction and helping them cope with difficulties or uncertainties that can arise in wearing a *hijab*- e.g., proper social boundaries with the opposite sex, proper clothing, etc. Participants also viewed their female family members, especially their mothers, as their main sources of motivation for wearing the *hijab*. Growing up with significant female figures- mothers, aunts, sisters- who wore the *hijab* seemed to be a basis for the girls’ full acceptance of wearing it. The following points generated from the girls’ interviews, point to the importance of upbringing at home and the role of mothers especially in shaping Muslim girls’ identity,

- The participants in this study revealed that their mothers wore the *hijab*.
- Reasons given for wearing the *hijab* reflected the influence of the family.

- The *hijab* was seen as a commandment from God and an “expectation” for these girls.
- No uncertainties were associated with the obligation to wear the *hijab*.

The interview questions did not intentionally seek to understand the impact of families. However, it was through questions about identification and coping with challenges that the common theme of the influence of family upbringing began to emerge. The questions that related to self-identification were:

- Why do you wear the *hijab* and what does it mean to you?
- What is your definition of being a Muslim?
- How do you express your identity as a Muslim?
(clothing/behaviour/manners)
- What are some of the challenges of being a Muslim in a non-Muslim society?
- How do you cope with some of these challenges?

The role of female figures.

It is evident that the level of comfort the girls felt with wearing the *hijab* was related to their having significant female figures (mothers, sisters, aunts, etc.) who also wore the *hijab*. This fact contributed to positive reactions for the girls. Although all participants in this study stated that they were never forced to wear the *hijab* by their families, they also stated that they were encouraged to wear it, as family members, specifically mothers educated the girls about the “importance” of the *hijab* and the benefits of wearing it. All the girls in this study gave similar reasons why they chose to wear the *hijab*, stating that it was a religious obligation. In explaining the

girls' rather unquestioned commitment to the *hijab*, the *reactions* of important others was a crucial factor in making their religious commitments stronger. In explaining her decision to commit to the *hijab*, Dana, the 11th grade fashion-conscious participant explained:

Wearing the *hijab* means protection against everything, I wear it because first of all it's a rule from Allah. I always knew I was going to wear it at one point. My mom wore it and she told me about its advantages, it made it more normal. All my friends and family wear it; it's become like a tradition. It was never forced.

Dana's assertion that she always "knew" that she was going to wear the *hijab* at one point supports studies that highlight the influence of parents on adolescent females' identity commitment (i.e. Schultheiss & Blustein 1994; Sarator & Youniss, 2002; Beyers & Goosens, 2008). The influence of the reactions of the mothers to the girls' acceptance of wearing the *hijab* can also be explained by Layla, the high school senior who lies on the more conservative end of the *hijab* spectrum. She stated:

Well, I started wearing it in grade seven. My mother and aunt talked to me about it that summer, they told me about why girls wear it, what it means and stuff and told me that when I'm ready to wear it to tell them. I was ready a couple of months later so I told my mom, and she was so proud!

By wearing the *hijab*, Layla and the rest of the participants in this study experienced positive reinforcement and feedback from their family members, especially their mothers and/or older sisters. In other words, the girls felt accepted and experienced a sense of belonging due to their decision to wear the *hijab*. The role of the families in the religious identity development of Muslim girls is indeed a major finding that not only explains the participants' choice of wearing the *hijab*, but also

helps to explain the perceived mainly positive experiences of their schooling environments.

The following excerpt from one of the participants further affirms the importance of the reactions of mothers in shaping their daughters' religious development. Zeinab, the 11th grade student who was the daughter of a local mosque leader, further affirmed the importance of the reactions of important others by stating her reasons for wearing the *hijab*:

Because it's a must in Islam. When a girl reaches puberty she wears a *hijab*. I wear it because it protects me and gets me closer to *jannah*. My mom wears it and my sister wears it, even my younger one, so it's something that is an expectation for me.

The fact that Zeinab considered the *hijab* an "expectation" confirms her dependence on the reactions of important others in that she based her decision mostly (and perhaps solely) on the influence of her mother and sisters. It is also apparent that being the daughter of a mosque leader, Zeinab grew up in a conservative Islamic household, making it a given that wearing the *hijab* was always considered a must for her. The role of Muslim families, especially Muslim mothers in shaping their daughters' religious beliefs is an important finding. The fact that participants were not asked any direct questions regarding their families' involvement in their lives did not stop the girls from always referring to the importance of a supportive network at home in order to "get them through" certain challenges that they sometimes encountered because of wearing the *hijab*.

Families' roles in decreasing pressures.

The girls mostly cited their sisters and mothers; not fathers, as the main "go to" people in times of stress. Amal the 10th grade student of Somali background explained

that she was once picked on in Gym class because she wore her shorts over her pants- something that her gym teacher required her to do in order to participate in class.

Although Amal was very frustrated and did not know how to deal with that situation, she credited her family's support as her way of feeling better. In order to explain this situation, Amal explained:

Wearing the *hijab* is sometimes hard, because people don't know why you wear it and you know you don't look like everyone else. The first day of gym last year sucked, I was crying all afternoon. These girls were making fun of me because I had shorts over jogging pants. They probably looked stupid on me but I had to wear the shorts because it was part of the gym uniform. They were like imitating me to make fun and wearing their shorts over their pants. It was just so retarded of them. The teacher didn't say anything; I don't think she knew what they were doing. My mom explained to me that night that God will put us in situations like this to judge how we react. If you have a strong faith then you shouldn't get bothered by people's stupid comments. You know that made me feel so much better. I mean at the end, I am pleasing God, and that's all that matters!

Although Amal spoke of the difficulties associated with the *hijab*, her point about the reassurance that her mother gave her when the girls made fun of what she was wearing, highlights the importance of the role of the mothers in helping Muslim girls affirm their Muslim identities and counter the pressures felt at school. The mothers and older sisters were also considered a type of resource for the participants in this study in times of uncertainties. Some of the girls pointed to "uncomfortable" times where their teachers 'put them on the spot' with questions about Islam. The girls cited that their mothers helped them with answering some of the tough questions that they

could not respond to in class. Their mothers' reassurance and support was seen as making the girls "feel better" about their high school experiences.

Fitting in at home.

The girls seemed more motivated to maintain the approval of their mothers and sisters, rather than seek the approval of their non-Muslim peers and teachers. "Fitting in" at home seemed to play a more significant role than "fitting in" at school. The important role that the mothers and significant female figures played in the identity development and the self-esteem of the participants is a theme that requires educators and researchers to move beyond examining only external pressures that Muslim students face. The need to acknowledge and credit the families as major players in the quality of education that their daughters receive is a theme that should be explored further.

Challenges and New Perspectives

The girls' responses to questions dealing with their experiences of stereotyping, discrimination, pressures and overall self-identification as *muhajabat* in the Canadian public schooling system all point to the influence of their family upbringing and the degree of support that they received at home. Therefore, family upbringing is seen in this study as a main factor that influenced the girls' interpretations of issues such as stereotyping, discrimination and pressures faced in schools. The girls in this study considered the *hijab* to be a "must" in Islam and indicated that the influence of their female family members played a significant role in their motivation for wearing it. The self-confidence in their decisions seems to stem directly from the affirmation and positive reinforcement that the girls received from their significant female figures in their lives.

Some of the challenges that arise from the girls' unquestioned dedication to representing Islam by wearing a *hijab* stem from their lack of exploration and reflection about their commitments. The ultimate question of whether or not the decision to 'cover up' was actually accepted by the girls and not forced upon by their families cannot be clearly answered. However, the results strongly yield the conclusion that the support of female figures in the girls' lives for wearing the *hijab* affirmed to the girls that they were "doing the right thing"

The fact that none of the girls cited their fathers as their source of motivation for their decisions to wear the *hijab* is one that perhaps could be addressed in another study. The role of the mothers dominated in influencing the participants' decisions to wear the *hijab*, as well as helped facilitate more positive educational experiences for the participants. Due to the nature of this study, the personal narratives of the girls' were the primary data collected. Thus, the extent of 'truth' in their answers cannot be guaranteed. However, whether or not the girls really believed that they should wear a *hijab* was partially unrelated to the scope of this study, as the focus was on the girls' experiences with wearing the *hijab* and less on the reasons for why they wore it. Moreover, the girls all seemed very comfortable in their overt representation of Islam and seemed very proud of their decisions to wear the *hijab*.

All forms of negative experiences that the girls perceived as stemming from their wearing of the *hijab* were countered by the role that their female family members played in comforting them, supporting them and reminding them that they were on the "right path"; and that their end goal was to please God. The importance of such findings offers new perspectives on the experiences of Muslim girls in the public education system; the role of families is seen as integral in the development of measures to counter such pressures that are cited in literature as hindering learning for

Muslim students. The next chapter builds on the assumption that family plays a dominant and vital role in shaping the identity of Muslim girls.

Chapter VI

Towards a New Model

Overview of the Model

This chapter offers a model to explain the motivations and criteria needed for Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* to successfully maintain their religious identities and experience a positive learning environment in Canadian public high schools. The model will be explained in detail and related to the literature encountered in previous chapters, as well as related to the framework used in this study. A discussion section and a conclusion will be presented at the end of this chapter.

I borrow from Maslow's (1968) motivation theory to explain the motivations that shape Muslim girls' development and to create a model to explain Muslim girls' needs and motivations. The rationale for basing my model on Maslow's is due to the fact that as human beings, we share similarities as well as differences in basic human needs. Although Muslims differ in practices, beliefs and physical appearance, such as attire, from their non-Muslim peers, they also share basic similarities relating to identity formation and human needs. Maslow's original hierarchy of needs is illustrated (Figure 3) as well as briefly explained in relation to the needs and motivation of the participants in this study:

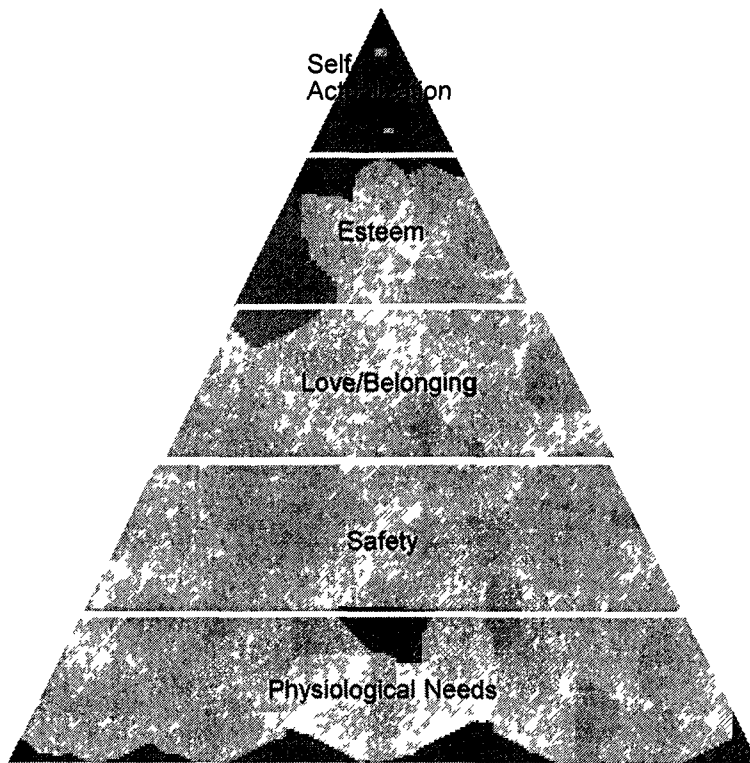


Figure 3. Maslow's Original Hierarchy of Needs and Motivations.

Maslow asserts that as humans meet basic physiological needs, they seek to satisfy higher needs that can be viewed as a hierarchy. In examining how religious affiliation relates to Maslow's hierarchy one can look at the love and belonging needs in examining group identification as well as esteem and safety needs in explaining the motivations that drive Muslim youth to maintain their religious identities. Maslow explained that humans generally need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, which can come from a social group such as religious groups and clubs. Humans need to love and be loved by others and feel a social belongingness to a group. The need to belong is important for humans. In the absence of these elements, people can become prone to loneliness and social anxiety

I borrow from Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs to create a hierarchy of needs model based on the following criteria that have emerged from analyzing the

interviews of my participants: Influence of family upbringing, *hijab* as a protection against pressures, “smart integration” and acceptance of self and others. These three themes were generated through analyzing the girls’ interview answers, suggesting that once the girls have ‘achieved’ these categories, then their experiences in Canadian public high schools are perceived not as hostile and alienating but rather as positive and inclusive. My model seeks to explain Muslim girls’ needs according to Maslow’s hierarchy in the sense that the ultimate need of self-actualization can only be reached if the lower needs are met. In this model family upbringing, acceptance of being different, acceptance and expectation of stereotypes as existent represent the lower needs, while positive school experience and self-actualization represent the two higher needs. Each concept in my diagram (Figure 4) will be explained in relation to my findings.

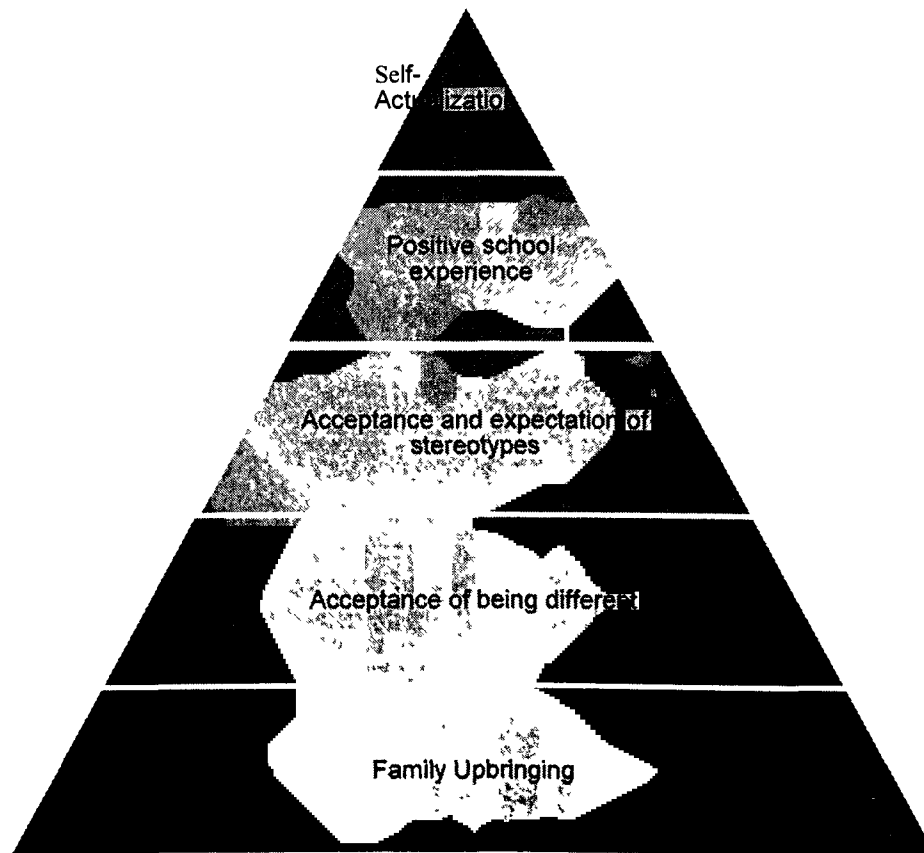


Figure 4: Muslim Girls’ Hierarchy of Needs and Motivations.

A Positive Educational Experience for Muslim Girls

This study began with an interrogation of the problematic issues related to wearing the *hijab* in a Western society; one that from most literature's stance criticizes women's role in Islam and negatively views those who wear the *hijab*. Thus, my stance as a researcher was shaped partially by extant debate on this topic. As evident in the preceding chapters, the *hijab* has been a subject of scrutiny long before the tragic events of September 11th, 2001, with laws banning the representation of religious symbols, being incorporated in Canada prior to 2001. However, one cannot deny that the issues of the *hijab* and Islam in general have become more popular topics of debate since the terrorist attacks of September, 11- attacks that were launched by a group of terrorists, unfortunately, under the banner of Islam.

As a researcher and an educator my quest is to understand some of the issues that surrounded the wearing of the *hijab* in Canadian society. Although I appreciate Canadian society's values of democracy, multiculturalism and high sensitivity to minorities, I also realize that as educators, our own interpretations of the *hijab* and its significance can impact our dealings with Muslim students. As noted by studies on Muslim youth, the struggle to find a healthy balance between being a 'good' Muslim and being a Canadian faces Muslim youth in our current milieu.

This study, however, brings new perspectives to the issues pertaining to Muslim girls who wear the *hijab*, especially those who claim they do so by choice. The findings revealed by my participants sharply contradict the rather negative findings found in studies about Muslim students. While it cannot be denied that my participants spoke of similar stereotyping, discrimination and pressures experienced as did participants in other studies, my participants' interpretations of these external

obstacles represent a 'fresh' type of thinking. I believe that my participants presented encouraging methods for other Muslims to consider in the quest to finding a balance between being visible, practicing Muslims while positively contributing to and becoming part of the school culture.

Figure 4 was created based on analysis of the participants' interviews, as well as from the literature encountered about Muslim youth. It can be interpreted as a hierarchy of dependent factors, in that the higher stages can only be achieved when the lower stages are met. Family upbringing is depicted as the 'base' for this pyramid of needs, as the supportive role of the families (notably female figures) is seen as the most important requirement for Muslim girls to successfully experience high school and successfully maintain their religious identities. A supportive family is the basis for Muslim girls in order to move on to the next stage of the acceptance of being different. Accepting that they are different than non-Muslims in both physical attire as well as in beliefs and values helped Muslims girls affirm their identities and maintain their religious practices. Muslim girls' acceptance and even expectations of stereotyping is the next step to their positively interpreting their high schooling experiences. When the three "lower" needs are met, then only can Muslim girls experience a healthy balance between "fitting in" in a non-Muslim society, i.e. their educational settings, and comfortably maintaining their Muslim identities. The end goal for those Muslim girls who successfully attain these stages is ultimately the stage of self-actualization, in this case meaning the success of their future integration into Canadian society, while at the same time maintaining their unique religious beliefs and values.

Family upbringing.

The influence of the family plays a central role in shaping the girls' overall self-esteem and experiences with being a visible religious group in Canadian society. The families' positive reinforcement of the girls' wearing of the *hijab* represents what seems to be the most important motivator for wearing it. The pressures of "fitting in" and the sometimes negative experiences of stereotyping and discrimination were lessened due to the support of the families that the girls had. The explanation for the influence of family goes back to the framework of this study, using Marcia's (1966, 1967) and Fowler's (1981) theories to explain the process of how Muslim girls achieve their religious identities: their beliefs were embedded with little or no self-exploration of alternative views.

It is the result of the influence of the families that the girls in this study maintained their religious values, as well as viewed the *hijab* as their main source for countering negative pressures experienced in the high school system. With the encouragement of their mothers, sisters or aunts, the participants seemed to find the key ingredient- i.e. one's own beliefs and comfort level with the *hijab*- that fosters a positive learning environment, and thus the necessary factor that Muslim girls need to have established in order to experience a positive schooling experience in a non-Muslim society.

Some of the negative associations with the *hijab* cited in literature (i.e. Todd, 1995; Zine, 1997, 2000, & 2001) were associated with the Western world's connotations of the *hijab* as being a form of oppression of women. The girls in this study, however, seemed very comfortable with wearing the *hijab*, while admitting that the *hijab* was usually associated with derogatory labels by their peers or teachers. The family upbringing again, is seen as the main contributor in facilitating such

confidence in the girls. It is upon the acceptance that they indeed are different than their peers in Western society that the next component of the diagram is built.

The acceptance of being different.

The girls in this study all acknowledged that they were different from those who did not wear a *hijab*, in both physical attire and more importantly in values and beliefs. The girls' responses to their selection of friends and their relationships to non-Muslim peers revealed that they not only acknowledged that they looked different than others, but that their different values and beliefs often clashed with those of their non-Muslims peers. Therefore, the girls' choice of friends was made up of mainly of other Muslims girls who also wore the *hijab*.

The acceptance of being different plays a role in shaping a positive schooling experience, as it was seen by the girls as a means of countering numerous types of peer pressures. "No one will ever come up to you and ask if you want to smoke", is an example given by one of the participants in explaining how by looking different, Muslim girls have the 'advantage' of not experiencing the "usual" temptations faced by most adolescents. An interesting notion that further affirms that the acceptance of being different helped the girls achieve a stronger sense of identity was the fact that most of them asserted that they "felt bad" for those Muslim girls who did not wear a *hijab*. Manal's opinion was that "these girls are often confused about which path to follow"

Rather than being an obstacle to their learning, the *hijab* was seen as eliminating most of the difficult decisions that the girls felt they would have otherwise had to make if they did not wear it. Manal went so far as to state that it was easier to wear the *hijab* in Canada rather than in her native land of Syria, a statement that was very shocking to hear. She explained her opinion by stating "it's much easier to wear it in

Canada... because over here you can see the wrong things, you want to put on the *hijab* just to protect yourself'. She explained that in most Arab countries, culture and religion are so integrated that it makes it difficult to "know" what is *haram* and what is not. However, she explained that in Canada it is much easier to "see" the wrong things, as they are very apparent and explicit, especially in high schools. Manal stated:

When people go out (date) in Syria, you really don't know like if it's *haram* or not. They don't kiss and hold hands and stuff in public, so it seems like it's okay...you won't know somebody's going out with a guy unless she tells you. So it's kind of messed up. They're still dating which is *haram* even if they don't hold hands in front of everyone. But here in school you can see it and it's easier to get away from it when you can see it.

The view of the *hijab* as an 'automatic' reminder of the things forbidden in Islam helped the participants interpret that being different in both attire and beliefs could also be an advantage for Muslims. The acceptance of being different consists of both the awareness on the part of Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* that they are different, as well as the acceptance that 'others' view them differently because of their *hijab*. The acceptance of being different facilitates the third requirement, the acceptance and expectations of the fact that stereotyping exists.

Acceptance and expectations of the existence of stereotypes.

The "unintentional" discrimination that some teachers were seen as having against their Muslim students made the girls in this study feel under pressure to "always represent" Islam. Some of the girls revealed that they felt targeted against during class discussions and topics that related to Islam. However, the fact that some of the girls perceived some questions/comments as a possible interest in Islam raises an interesting point. The acknowledgement that they were not the only group who

experienced stereotyping presents a rather mature stance on behalf of the girls and suggests that their comfort level with the *hijab* was quite high. The expectation of stereotypes also stems from the participants being Canadian-Muslims. Being either born in Canada or having moved to Canada at a very young age, the girls identified with Canada as being “home” Therefore, prior to wearing the *hijab*, the girls were once ‘only’ Canadian, without visibly being Muslims. The fact that they grew up in Canada differentiates my participants from Canadian immigrants who are somewhat distant from Canadian culture. Rather, the girls were well versed in the current culture that exists and seemed to fully understand that there will be stereotypes about their religion. More interesting is the fact that they accepted stereotypes as being “normal” as some of the girls spoke about having their own stereotypes about other groups that existed in society.

Towards self-actualization.

A sense of self-actualization can only be attained once Muslim girls maintain a balance between their Muslim identity and their Canadian identity. The “smart integration” model described by Elmasry (2005, 2006) is one that best describes how the girls in this study, although citing several occasions of being discriminated against by their peers and teachers, described their experiences of wearing the *hijab* as rather positive.

The “Eurocentric” focus of Canadian education as cited by Zine (2001) did not significantly affect my participants, nor did it alienate them from being part of mainstream society. Rather, the girls saw themselves as Canadian-Muslims, identifying themselves as being loyal to both identities and acknowledging that they had responsibilities to both of these identities. It is in hope of helping girls who wear a *hijab* in Canadian society that Figure 4 was developed. The girls in my study give

hope to future Muslim girls who may have insecurities about their personal and religious identities. The girls in my study further give evidence that it is possible to be a 'good' Muslim *and* experience a positive education in Canada, without jeopardizing one's identity. The next section offers a discussion as well as provides some recommendations for policy-makers and educators to consider when dealing with Muslim students.

Discussion

Prior to interviewing the girls in this study, I was discouraged by what literature had to offer regarding the experiences of Muslim youth in the post-September 11th world. Canadian education as an alienating experience for Muslim youth, as well as the pressures that Muslims faced in their quest to maintain their religious identities were cited as obstacles that hinder the learning of this minority religious group. By choosing a sample of participants that overtly represented Islam, I was expecting the participants to mostly speak of the obstacles and prejudices that they encountered by wearing the *hijab* in Canadian society. However, this study proves that being a Canadian and being Muslim are not viewed by all Muslims as contradictory entities, but can peacefully coexist. Perhaps it is this 'new' generation of young Muslims who were either born in Canada or moved to Canada at a very young age who does not find that it must choose between being Canadian *or* being Muslim.

By integrating into society while maintaining their religious values and beliefs, Muslim girls can successfully experience and contribute to Canadian society. The girls' revelations that their families, notably their mothers and other female figures in their lives helped them cope with some of the pressures experienced in schools point to the family's role in fostering the healthy development of their daughter's identities. Muslim families must understand and realize the extent of their support of their

daughters and its impact on how their daughters experience schooling in Canada. The onus cannot be on schools and teachers alone to alleviate the pressures, discrimination and stereotyping that Muslim girls noted as stemming from wearing the *hijab*.

With reference to the Muslim father who murdered his daughter for allegedly not wearing the *hijab* (Wattie, 2007), the responsibility of the Muslim community and Muslim leaders in condemning such behavior as un-Islamic must be noted as crucial to improving the interpretations and connotations associated with the *hijab* in the Western world. Also, a call for Muslim representatives to educate Muslim families about the dangers of forcing the *hijab* upon their daughters is a major necessity.

According to the girls in this study, as well as my own experiences being a Muslim, it is those girls who are forced to embody Islam who often develop a double-identity, or leave Islam altogether. Only by acknowledging that the onus is on Muslim leaders and non-Muslim educational systems alike to take responsibility for some of the troubling issues that Muslim youth face, can appropriate measures be taken to better accommodate Muslim students in Canadian education. At the same time, some reforms that need to be taking place in the public education system must be addressed. Although the girls in this study cited rather positive experiences, some of the concerns relating to teachers' discrimination against the girls are troubling for the success of the girls who wear a *hijab*; such concerns question the idea that tolerance and quality in education exists for all students.

The participants' references to incidents where their teachers overtly embarrassed them, put them on the spot, and explicitly mocked their religious values need educators' and administrators' attention and require certain reforms. The incident of the gym class is representative of problems for Muslim girls who wear a *hijab*.

Although most girls stated that their teachers understood that they could not wear the

uniform prescribed by their schools, others said that it required long explanations and several attempts to convince their teachers that they were not allowed to wear the uniforms.

Other concerns include some teachers' lack of knowledge of Islamic beliefs. For example, the fact that a teacher mockingly put up signs outside the pool stating that "no boys are allowed" points to that teacher's ignorance, even hostility to Muslims' religious beliefs, and disregards the fact that it is a religious requirement for girls who wear the *hijab* not to show any part of their bodies, except for their hands and faces in the presence of males. Therefore, a male entering the pool for any reason violates the religious practices of Muslim girls.

Although none of the participants expected that their schools would directly teach anything about Islam, the fact the only time that Islam was mentioned in class was related to September 11th reveals that some teachers associate discussions about Islam as being related to political issues. Wingfield (2006) argues that Muslim topics are usually seen by school systems as too complex and too controversial to teach. However, not every discussion about Muslims must deal with political issues. He further stated that many school systems in the United States are making serious efforts to accommodate Muslim concerns; however, he noted that while classes are often given lessons on Hanukkah, or singing Christmas carols, *Ramadan* and the Muslim holy days may or may not be in the school calendar.

Wingfield (2006) explained the problem as one of "institutional avoidance" and pointed out that Muslim students remain stigmatized today because they are associated with political violence. Although I do not agree that such institutional avoidance is characteristic of the Canadian curriculum, especially in a city as diverse as Windsor, I agree with Wingfield that Muslim topics are mainly viewed as too

controversial to teach. However, giving a lesson about *Ramadan* and why Muslims fast during this month (perhaps in a World Religions or Contemporary History class) both incorporates Muslim students into the curriculum while at the same time educating their peers and teacher about the importance of *Ramadan* to Muslims.

A Handbook for Muslim Students

In Ontario, Canada, there are currently 33 Islamic schools, with 4, 000 students enrolled (Muslim World League, 2008). In Windsor, Ontario, where this study was conducted there are four Islamic elementary schools. The fact that there are no Islamic high schools in Windsor makes it mandatory for Muslim families to send their children to one of the Catholic, private, or public secondary level schools. Participants in this study were enrolled in the public system and thus attended high schools that belonged to the Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB). Although the girls attended different schools in the city, the fact their schools belonged to the same school board requires that policy-reform recommendations and suggestions be made to this board. In examining the beliefs and visions of the GECDSB, the following mandates are found on their website:

- All students can learn.
- A safe, stimulating, caring, and welcoming environment, which accommodates individual student learning styles and needs, promotes and facilitates the learning process.
- Planned, comprehensive programs and services enrich the lives of learners.
- Well prepared, motivated educators can make a significant positive difference in the lives of our students.

- Family and community interaction with the school promotes and enhances student success.
- Embracing diversity and celebrating creativity strengthens our school system and enriches all of us as Canadians.
- Open, honest, interactive communication builds trust and commitment.
- Skilled, caring and motivated employees are an integral part of our success and our future.
- Effective planning and fiscally responsible decisions are necessary to direct our limited resources to maximize the learning process.
- We are accountable for our decisions. (GECDSB)

Embracing diversity, having well-prepared, motivated educators as well as interacting with families and the community are three foundational beliefs of the GECDSB that pertain to this study. In an effort to enhance the future experience of Muslim students in the education system, and as well as to alleviate some of the uncertainties that some teachers have in regards to Muslim rules and beliefs, a proposal for the GECDSB to create a handbook for understanding Muslim students is required. The creation of this handbook can prove to be beneficial not only to Muslim students, but to their teachers and school administrators as well.

The creation of such a handbook does not imply that teachers should be required to know everything about Muslim students in order to accommodate them. Rather, this handbook is targeted towards teachers as well as Muslim students and their families. The goal of this handbook is to inform educators about the beliefs and needs of Muslim students. An equally important goal of this handbook is to inform

Muslim students and their families of their responsibilities to the schools as Canadian-Muslims. The creation of such a handbook should be seen as inclusive and as providing supports for all stakeholders in the education system. I provide the following two scenarios created based on what some participants revealed to me during the interview process. I will explain how this handbook could alleviate some of the uncertainties and perceived prejudices that can occur in the school system:

Scenario 1: It is *Ramadan* and Ms. Pags knew that her Muslim students were fasting. Ms. Pags did not know much about *Ramadan*, except for the fact that Muslims abstained from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. Two of her Muslim students approached her and asked for permission to skip the math test she had scheduled for this afternoon. The students claimed that they were fasting and did not have the energy to take the test. Ms. Pags hesitantly agreed to have the two students re-take the test the following week when *Ramadan* was over.

Scenario 2: Ms. Thomas, like Ms. Pags did not know much about *Ramadan*. The same two students approached her the following day and asked for permission to be exempted from running the required mile during gym class that day, because they were fasting. Ms. Thomas told the students that there were no excuses in her class and that they would have to run just like everybody else in the class if they wanted full marks. The students went to the principal to tell him how Ms. Thomas was prejudiced against Muslim students and that their other teacher Ms. Pags was “so nice” as she postponed their math test because they were fasting.

The role of the handbook.

The above scenarios give realistic representations of the situations that some teachers could face when dealing with issues that are of a religious nature. Ms. Pags did not want to be perceived as intolerant or insensitive to her Muslim students' needs, and thus exempted them from writing the test. Ms. Thomas, did not want to accept "excuses" from her students, and did not allow the fasting students to be exempt from running. The Muslim students viewed the latter teacher as intolerant of their religion and approached the principal. The defence of "Ms. Pags let us do it" was used by the students to legitimize their claim against Ms. Thomas. In a real-life setting, if such a situation occurred, the principal's solution to the problem would be highly dependent on his/her own views and beliefs about Islam.

In my own experience as a university instructor during the summer of 2008, I witnessed how teachers' lack of information on Islamic rules/practices could create hostility between the teacher and the Muslim student. Being a non-visible Muslim, my students did not know my religious affiliation. One of my students decided to 'pull a fast one' and claimed that due to a Muslim religious holiday, he was not coming to class the following day. Knowing that there was no Muslim holiday and that the student was trying to get out of class, I politely informed the student that I was a Muslim as well. That was the end of the use of the Muslim holiday 'excuse' Had I not been a Muslim my reaction to this student's request to miss class would probably have been different as I, too, would not have wanted to be perceived as an "intolerant" teacher. Notably, most teachers, and especially principals do not want to be regarded as insensitive to their students' needs.

The frustration on the part of the teachers who are faced with making their own choices while having no information about Muslim practices could easily be alleviated by providing teachers as well as Muslim students with a handbook explaining the major rules of Islam. A brief section highlighting the “rights” of the students during *Ramadan* for example, as well as the “obligations” that are required of Muslim students during *Ramadan* could easily and objectively clarify the issues for both parties- teachers and students alike. An example of such a handbook is provided by RMIT University in Australia. In 2005, RMIT launched a Muslim student handbook.

The RMIT (2008) Student Handbook for Muslims was designed to “clarify issues and work on inclusive approaches to teaching and learning of Islamic practices” (p 2). The book was designed as a tool for easy reference when educators faced questions regarding the specific needs of Muslim students. The RMIT handbook proves how helpful having such a tool could be to all parties involved in education. By providing Muslim students with information regarding both their rights and responsibilities as Australian citizens, the uncertainties held by both faculty and Muslim students about certain topics such as academic requirements when fasting, or leaving class to attend prayer, were all explained in uniform fashion, and not left up to individual interpretation. The objectivity of the book is perhaps its best asset. The fact that the faculty has a reference book in order to address certain matters that pertain to Muslim students certainly makes the communication process between students and their teachers much clearer.

The teacher is expected to refer to his/her handbook and less to his/her opinion when addressing matters that relate to Muslim students. Further, students know their rights and responsibilities, thus eliminating the chances of some Muslim students

“making excuses” in the name of Islam and at the same time providing Muslim students with justification when it comes to stances that contradict their beliefs. The most pertinent part which can be replicated by the GECDSB system is the segment covering the stance of the RMIT University on fundamental Muslim beliefs. For example, a section dedicated to *Ramadan*, the month of fasting, makes it clear that students are to not use fasting as an “excuse” to get out of academic matters. It is supported by verses from the Qur’an stressing that fasting is meant to teach discipline and not meant to be taken as an act of hardship.

Such a handbook would ultimately facilitate a positive schooling experience for Muslim students as their teachers would have access to important information about Muslim matters. It would eliminate many instances of unintentional or even intentional hostility and discrimination against Muslim girls. Having a set of uniform rules across the school board promotes the equal treatment of all Muslim students and educates students about their rights as well as their responsibilities. The handbook would ideally be created in collaboration with the school board and the Muslim community.

It is vital to acknowledge the limitations of such a handbook. For one, it cannot be guaranteed that all teachers will refer to it. A suggestion on how to implement this handbook is to create a liaison between the GECDSB and its Muslim students and their families. Perhaps a committee of mosque leaders and Muslim parents can act as facilitators between Muslim students and the school board. By having local Muslim leaders take part in initiating and creating this handbook, it is likely that the Muslim community, parents and students alike, will positively react to being educated about their rights and will be eager to learn about their responsibilities as Canadians in the

education system. The benefits of creating such a handbook cannot be overlooked and it is strongly urged for our local school board.

Concluding Thoughts

The connotations attached to the *hijab* and to Islam in general could lead to discrimination against Muslim students in the education system. The clash of values between Islam and the Western world, however, was not noted by participants as an obstacle to their learning experience. The girls in this study reported that they did not expect their teachers to fully understand them. Further, they revealed that they *expected* stereotypes as a matter of fact. Of the major findings of this study is that the girls viewed their *hijab* as a mode of protection against existing pressures in western society. By wearing the *hijab*, the girls stated that they were constantly reminded that they represented Islam and were not tempted to engage in events that jeopardized their religion. The stress is on the important role that the girls' families played in instilling a sense of empowerment in the girls and helping the girls maintain a positive schooling experience in Canada. The role of the mothers and significant female-figures was a major motivator for the girls wearing of the *hijab*, as well as a source of comfort in times of distress and frustration.

Suggestions for future research on Muslim girls include the need to examine the extent of family influence and upbringing on both the decision to wear the *hijab* and on the quality of education that Muslim girls experience. The role of Muslim mothers in particular should be closely examined in its relation to Muslim girls' comfort level in wearing the *hijab*. I believe that the future research should also investigate the liberating aspects of the *hijab* and study the positive effects that it can have on the girls wearing it given that participants in this study stated that the *hijab* alleviated them of some of the pressures that existed in their schools.

The role of the fathers in the identity development of Muslim girls could not be determined in this study as questions about family influence were not included in the design of this study but emerged from participants' constant referral to their mothers as supportive figures in their lives. It would be interesting for future research to examine the role of the fathers in the identity development of Muslim girls who wear a *hijab*.

As stated earlier, the age group of my participants makes it difficult to determine whether or not the *hijab* was actually that of 'choice' in that my participants were simply too young. A suggestion for future research is to implement a similar study on an adult population of Muslim girls who wear the *hijab*, perhaps a sample of university students. I believe that conducting research on an adult sample of Muslim girls would provide more insights to the rationale of wearing the *hijab* as well as provide more in-depth information about how Muslim females encounter education in Canada. The fact that the girls all seemed very proud and comfortable wearing the *hijab* suggests that their positive schooling experience was largely based on their own self-esteem and their own perceptions of the *hijab*. The most pertinent suggestion given by the results of this study calls for the collaboration between school boards and the Muslim community in working together to facilitate a just and positive learning experience for Muslim students. This study ends with a reiteration of the encouraging information cited by the participants in stating that it is possible to be a Canadian *and* a Muslim. The 'clash' of civilizations does not seem to be characteristic of the 'new' generation of Muslims in my study who consider Canada their home. Rather, my participants bring a new voice to Canadian literature, one that is full of hope and encouragement for the future of Muslims in Canada.

Appendix. Questionnaire

Section A: Background

- 1) Age
- 2) Number of years in Canada
- 3) Number of years/months of wearing a *hijab*
- 4) Number of years in Islamic school (if applicable)
- 5) Number of years in public school

Section B: Issues of identification

- 1) What is your definition of being a Muslim?
- 2) Why do you wear the *hijab* and what does it mean to you?
- 3) How do you express your identity as a Muslim? (clothing/behaviour/manners)
- 4) What are some of the challenges of being a Muslim in a non-Muslim society?
- 5) How do you cope with some of these challenges?
- 6) Is integrating into Canadian society important to you as a Muslim? Explain.

Section C: School experience

- 1) Describe your experience as a Muslim student in a public high school.
 - a. Relation to teachers/peers
 - b. Curriculum school activities
 - c. Overall
- 2) Do you find pressures to assimilate to the school culture? If so, how do you deal with it?
- 3) What are some concerns that Muslim students have with regards to the public education system?
- 4) Does your school make any accommodations for your Islamic way of life?
(food, prayer location, etc?)

- 5) Is there a Muslim student organization at your school? If so, what activities do you participate in?
- 6) Do you feel that Islam is represented in the school curriculum?
- 7) Are there any changes you would like to see in your school or in the education system generally? Explain.
- 8) Have you ever experienced racism or felt discriminated against as a Muslim in school? Explain.
- 9) Do you feel that there are negative stereotypes about Muslims in your own school? Explain.
- 10) What are your academic goals/career goals?
- 11) What are your personal goals?

Section D: peers and social activities

- 1) Are your school friends primarily Muslim? If yes, then how are your relations with non-Muslim peers/classmates?
- 2) How do you interact with members of the opposite sex (Muslim and non-Muslim)?
- 3) What social events do you attend?
- 4) Are you involved in any Muslim organizations?
- 5) Are you involved in any non-Muslim organizations?

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