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**Exploring School Choice for Muslim Children in Windsor, Ontario, Canada**

By

Ghazala Ahmed

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Faculty of 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**

This study explored reasons behind Muslim parents' decisions to choose either an Islamic or a public school for their children, their experiences with the schools where their children attend, and their views about their female children's experiences with the Islamic dress code, especially the Hijab. A qualitative research approach was employed, in which twelve parents were interviewed.

Findings of the study indicate that Muslim parents value the harmony between the school and home environments; conversely, for public school Muslim parents their children are alienated in school activities because of religion. The study reveals that parents with children in public schools are concerned about the peer pressure that makes it difficult for their daughters to conform to the Islamic dress code. All parents in the study expressed concerns with the stereotypical image of Muslims and the Hijab that is portrayed by the media, which ultimately affect their children's school experiences.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this research to my husband, my loving daughter Feryaal, and my dearest son Jazib who provided ongoing love and support. I would also like to dedicate my thesis to my parents who always believed in me and prayed for my success.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUTHORS DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
DEDICATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
<b>CHAPTER</b>	
<b>I. INTRODUCTION</b>	
Background Statement	1-3
Study Rationale	3-6
<b>II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE</b>	
Multiculturalism and Education	7-10
What is an Islamic Education	10-16
Islam and Cultural Influences	16-17
Islamic Dress Code and Hijab	17-21
<b>III. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</b>	
Overview of the Methodology	22-25
Procedure	25-26
The Position of the Researcher	27-29
Community Profile	29-30
Recruiting Participants	30-31
Profile of Participants	32-35
Participants Summary	35-37
Study Limitations	37-38
<b>IV. FINDINGS</b>	<b>39-41</b>
Choice of Schooling	41



Exposure to Islamic environment	41
Maintaining religious and cultural values	41-42
Exposure to Islamic studies and Arabic language	42
Exposure to non-Islamic subjects and pedagogy	43
Student -teacher ratio	43-44
Reasons offered by the parents in the public school system	44-45
Reasons offered by the parents who moved their children from the Islamic school to the public school system	45
Lack of academic resources	45
Standard of the English language	45
Small class size	46
Reasons offered by parents who moved their children from a public school to an Islamic school	47-48
Experiences of Parents with children in both school systems(Islamic and Public)	
Experiences of parents with children in the Islamic school system	48
Islamic environment	48-50
Exposure to religious studies	50
Islamic etiquette and mannerism	50-51
Celebrating religious Holidays	51-52
Good parental involvement	52
Co-education and gender mixing	52-53
Subject contents and pedagogy	53-54

Experiences of parents with children in the public school system	55
Representation of Muslims in the public school curriculum	55
Celebrating holidays	55-56
Subject contents and /or pedagogy	56-57
Co-education and gender mixing	57-58
Experiences of parents who moved their children from one school to another	58
Celebrating holidays	58-60
Religious experiences during Ramadan	60-61
School environment	61-63
Subject content and/or pedagogy	63-64
Co-education or Gender mixing	65
Small class size	65-66
Communication patterns and social interactions	66-68
Experiences with the Islamic dress code and the Hijab	69-71
Hijab experiences in the Islamic school	72-75
Hijab experiences in the public school	75-77

## **V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Overview of the findings	78
Discussions	79
Islamic Environment	79-81
Maintaining Islamic identity and values	81-82
Importance of Language	82-84
Curriculum and Pedagogy	84-87

Student-Teacher Ratio	87-89
Celebrating Holidays	89-90
Practicing Religion in Public schools	90-92
School Culture or School Environment	92-93
Co-education and Gender Mixing	93-96
Discussion on Islamic dress code and hijab	97-102
Conclusion	103-104
Implications and recommendations	104-107
End Notes	108
<b>REFERENCE</b>	<b>109-119</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
Appendix A: Community Newsletter	120
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form	121-122
Appendix C: Parent Consent Form	123-124
Appendix D: Audio consent Form	125
Appendix E: Participants Summary	126-127
Appendix E: Interview Questions	128-129
<b>VITA AUCTORIS</b>	<b>130</b>

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background Statement

Following the events of September 11, 2001, there has been an increase in incidents of hate crimes and prejudice against Muslims in North America and other developed countries in general (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, (n.d.); Helly, 2004 & Elmasry, 2007). According to Helly, after the September 11 attacks Muslims in Canada feared they would be attacked because of their religious and cultural practices (for example, clothing, beards and head scarves), and there was a 66 % percent increase in hate crimes in Ontario in 2001 (Toronto Police Services, 2001). Similar evidence of a 60% rise in discrimination against Muslims was also reported by the Council on American –Islamic Relations (CAIR) - Canada, in their annual report (May, 2002). Helly (2004) reports that the Canadian government, following the lead of the United States government in its new war against terrorism also took similar steps to implement an “Anti- Terrorism Act” in order to prevent terrorists from getting into Canada and also to protect Canadians from terrorist acts. Similar views were also shared by Elmasry (2007), who states that after September 11, the Patriot Act<sup>i</sup> was in effect in the United States, and within 100 days, Canada’s Anti- Terrorist act was approved by the Canadian parliament. Many Muslims in Canada were persecuted by security certificate investigations, which allow authorities to detain anyone indefinitely (Elmasry, 2007).

In local schools, parents and students reported numerous incidents of racism, Islamophobia<sup>ii</sup> and harassment. Clark & Sundaram (2007) reports incidents of racism and attempts to demonize Islam as a faith by associating it with terrorism. However,

Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination did not discourage Muslims from practicing their faith; on the contrary, Muslims have been forced to rethink their religious identity, that is, “moderate” and “lapsed” Muslims started to take notice of what was happening to their community. After September 11, the media has successfully managed to engender negative sentiments about Islam into the minds and hearts of average North American citizens. The backlash against Muslims and the negative media coverage about the teaching of the Qur’an brought many Muslims from all over the world under one umbrella to fight against discrimination and the misinterpretation of their religion. The images of Muslims presented in the media, post September 11, have been negative and as a result there have been a lot of critical responses from Muslim organizations regarding these images. The main criticism is the constant reference to “Muslim extremists” or “Islamic militants” whereas any religious affiliation is omitted when similar actions are taken by people of other religions. For example in the case of the Oklahoma bombing in United States there was no mention of religious affiliation of the people involved in the tragic incident. Even later when the identity of the bomber was known, Timothy McVeigh, there was no mention of his religious affiliation whatsoever, however, it is safe to guess that he was Christian.

With this rise in hate crime, Islamophobia, and negative media publicity, it should not be surprising that the negative attitude toward the Muslim community has trickled down to the educational system. As a result, many Muslim parents began to reconsider sending their children to public schools, and explored other options such as Islamic schools, and home schooling. Though it seems that September 11 may have prompted the rise in the number of parents sending their children to Islamic schools, evidence exists

that this trend was already underway prior to September 11, 2001 (Merry, 2005). According to Azmi, (2001) reporting on Muslim children's enrollment in public schools, virtually all Muslim children were educated in the public system during the period between 1960 and 1970. Azmi documents that by 1970, Muslims were frustrated with the distorted manner in which both Muslims and Islam were portrayed in the public school curriculum. According to Helly (2004) textbooks and the school curriculum during the 1980's, and thereafter, were reformed but the representation of Muslims did not change much. With regards to the importance of a coherent curriculum regarding ones culture, Mallea (1987) explains the pivotal role that a public curriculum plays in transmitting the values and knowledge of the dominant culture. Muslim parents therefore, are skeptical of the public curriculum and the role it plays in transmitting knowledge, which is mostly Christian based.

### **Study Rationale**

Canadian public schools have been involved in promoting multiculturalism and celebrating the diversity of students belonging to different cultures and religious beliefs. Though topics about ethnic diversity and religious tolerance are part of a multicultural curriculum they are not fully integrated or taught in core subjects like Social Studies or Language Arts. All students learn about diversity is through celebrations such as heritage day or multicultural day. Most of the activities are geared towards food, music and dances which do not cater to the religious needs of Muslim students. The ignorance towards Muslims, and lack of knowledge about Islam and its teachings were evident during my final placement in Regina, Saskatchewan, in September of 2001.

Looking at my placement I can somewhat relate to the miscommunication and the misrepresentation of the Muslim community in Canadian society as a whole. Although my experience endowed me with meaningful learning experiences regarding the teaching philosophy in Canada, and the use of different instructional strategies during my classroom placement, it became more challenging in the wake of the gruesome tragedy of September 11, 2001. Since I was the only Muslim student teacher in that school, I witnessed the silent treatment from a few teachers and negative comments about Islam in general.

After my convocation in 2002 from the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, I moved to Windsor, Ontario and began teaching grade three in a local Islamic school. In the beginning, I was unsure how Islamic schools operated in a Canadian setting. Having taught in an Islamic school for four years, my opinion about Islamic schools and the environment has changed considerably from being skeptical to being positively informed, and I was pleased to see the implementation of modern teaching methodologies. I also noticed that the enrolment in this Islamic school increased dramatically within four years. Despite this increase, however, there are parents like myself, who still choose to put their children in public schools, and yet, still want them to integrate into the host society without losing their language, culture and religious beliefs.

Hall (1996) describes language identification as an important factor in constructing shared characteristics with another person or group, and developing a solidarity established based on this foundation. Miller (2000) also stresses the importance of 'language' as being a primary resource for enacting social identity and displaying membership in social groups. In other words preserving language is another way of

preserving ones culture. I started this study with the assumption that, in Islamic schools, most parents believe that their children can preserve their language and cultural values, however, parents with children in the public schools have to deal with an environment that forces their children to assimilate into mainstream society. Gans (1997) explains assimilation as a process, where newcomers or new immigrants leave their ethnic culture and values and adapt the non-ethnic values which are accessible to them in that host society. However, I was not sure of the validity of these assumptions, therefore, I engaged in an examination that contributes to an understanding of how parents come to with the decisions they make for the schooling of their children, and whether or not there exist contradictions within these choices. Studies conducted by Bullock (1999); Kelly (1997) and Zine (1997) show that Muslim students in major cities like Toronto, and Montreal experience discrimination because of culture or religion in public schools. In this study, however, I have chosen to focus more on parents' experiences and the challenges that they face in both school systems.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the reasons and factors behind parents' decisions to choose one school system over another. Through this study I was to illuminate the central research question of what the reasons are for Muslim parents to choose a specific school system for their children in Windsor. This research also attempts to capture the general school related parent experiences in both school systems. Finally, this study builds on what other studies have found, and adds to them, since there is no work that has been done in small Muslim communities such as in Windsor.

The following Chapter Two deals with the review of the relevant literature on Islamic education, the purpose of Islamic schools, issues related to public curriculum, and



multicultural education. The literature review also offers relevant information regarding experiences of parents and their children with Islamic dress code and the perception of the hijab by western society. Chapter Three provides a review of the qualitative methodology used for this study. The chapter also explains the recruitment process, detail participant profile, and my position as a researcher. The section of coding and analyzing data also gives an overview of the process used to analyze the findings of this study. In Chapter Four, findings are presented with respect to parents' decision to choose one school over another, experiences of parents with children in Islamic schools, public schools, and also parents' experiences with children in both school systems. This chapter also concludes with the experiences of parents, with children in both school systems, with the Islamic dress code and the hijab. Chapter Five concludes with the discussion of the findings and implications. The discussion section also provides some suggestions on some areas for future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Literature Review**

This chapter presents scholarly literature that examines the factors behind recent trends in the enrollment of Muslim children in Islamic schools in Canada. The literature review helps to explain the decision of many Muslim parents to choose Islamic schools for their children, as well as objections on many educational practices in the public school system. The review of the literature is divided into four main sections consisting of the following topics: a) Multiculturalism and education; b) what is an Islamic education? c) Islam and cultural influences; and d) Islamic dress code and hijab.

#### **Multiculturalism and Education**

Canadian multicultural policy in 1971 gave a new ideological direction to the development of Canadian society. Canada was the first country in the world to have a policy of multiculturalism at the government level (Mcleod, 1987; Moodley, 1995; Abdi & Ghosh, 2004). According to Mcleod (1987) multiculturalism promotes a society and a Canadian identity in which people and groups of all cultures are accepted. In other words, the main focus is equality in status of all the ethnic groups in Canada and each ethnic cultural group actively participates in the growth of the Canadian society. Moreover, multiculturalism promotes understanding of people from all cultures, despite differences of language, religious beliefs, political and social views or national origins. The term multicultural is generally used for individuals who have competencies and can function in two or more different cultures and are called,

bicultural or multicultural (Gollnick, 1990). Multiculturalism can be defined as developing the skills necessary to feel comfortable and communicate effectively with people of the culture encountered, and with the people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Multiculturalism was adopted in many countries such as Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Australia and Denmark, after Canada had introduced it. There are, however, differences in how these countries implemented policies of multiculturalism; differences depending on their government policies and ethnic make-up. For example, in Australia, multiculturalism is described as 'ethnic selection', while Britain used the same term 'multiculturalism' as in Canada. In the United States, the idea of a 'melting pot' follows the assimilation theory in which a subordinate group adopts the dominant culture (Gollnick, 1990).

In Canada the multiculturalism policy does not require a minority group to lose their own values and beliefs in order to accept another. Though, there exists a comprehensive approach to multiculturalism, Canada still does not have a set definition of multicultural education. Ghosh (2004) relates this vaguely defined notion of multicultural education to the fact that education is a provincial responsibility. Mcleod (1987) shares similar views about Canadian government reluctance towards mandating multicultural education through overall policy statements in every province. He states that "there have been general, sometimes vague, commitments but very little that we classify as provincial multicultural education policy" (p. ix). Moodley (1995) also shares similar views, saying that no single model of multicultural education exists in Canada. He further states that multicultural education has been unevenly incorporated into school programs and into teacher education programs.

Nevertheless, despite the vague description of multicultural education in Canadian multicultural policy, it is believed that there are certain approaches that exist in different provinces. Mcleod (1987) mentions three main approaches which were adopted with respect to the implementation of multicultural education: a) ethnic specific; b) problem oriented, and c) the cultural / intercultural approach. For example, the Ontario government took the problem- oriented approach by encouraging the teaching of English as a Second Language, and also by focusing on race relations content in various subjects, and biases in textbooks. Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, on the other hand, took the ethnic specific approach by introducing the heritage language program and classes wherein children socialize more within the culture. Quebec on the other hand adopted the intercultural approach through three different programs that are publicly funded. These programs help newcomers to learn French, provide necessary tools to adjust to a French speaking society, and allow ethnic groups to keep their heritage language by managing their ethnic schools (Moodley, 1995).

Banks (1999) explains that one of the goals of multicultural education is to expose ethnic students to a curriculum that is not Anglo-centric and negative to their culture. The need of a multicultural education according to James (2004) is mostly in response to the demands of immigrant parents, who strongly advocate for education that can meet their own, and their children's academic, cultural, linguistic, and religious needs and interests. Ahmad (1968) describes the role of education as a venue to perpetuate people's culture. He further states that the sole purpose of education is lost if the society does not represent that culture. Culture, according to Gollnick (1990), provides a sketch that determines the

way an individual functions within a society through different processes. According to Gollnick, enculturation and socialization are the two processes that help a person to acquire the characteristics of a given culture, and generally, becoming competent in its language. Thus Gollnick recognizes language as a hub of cultural identity. Miller (2000) also explains enculturation and socialization as two interacting processes. According to Miller, “if students cannot be heard representing themselves and enacting social roles in ways that other students can recognize, a degree of exclusion from social interaction seems inevitable” (p. 73).

### What is an Islamic Education

The importance of education is emphasized in the Qur’an which stresses the pursuit of knowledge and the seeking of wisdom and guidance. Furthermore, the Qur’an states that ‘acquiring knowledge of things’ distinguishes man from a rest of the creation. According to Ahmad (1968) education is a process through which people transmit their culture or heritage. It is also a process by which people train their children to understand their mission and duty in life, so that they can be good human beings. Muhammad (1990) also describes Islamic education as a holistic approach where the education is not confined within the boundaries of the school, rather it involves every segment of the society, and it starts at home, in the schools, the mosques, and with friends. For example, Sarwar (1996) explains Islamic education in terms of remembering Allah and striving for moral excellence. According to Sarwar, the aim of an Islamic education is to prepare human agents to successfully carry out the obligations of Allah. Sarwar further explains

that without this education and obedience to Allah's commands, one cannot be a good agent of Allah.

For Muslims, the aim of an education is to produce good people with an understanding of Islamic rules and behaviours and strong knowledge of, and commitment to, their faith. The purpose of seeking and acquiring knowledge is to produce a good human being. Al- Attas (1979) describes the concept of a good man as a reference to mankind or humanity. He states that a person must not only be good to others in general, and in the social sense, but also be good to one self.

A Liberal or modern education, in contrast to Islamic education, is free from religious and moral values. According to Ahsraf (1979), faith and moral education are the most integral elements of an Islamic education, making it different from the Western educational system.

According to Ashraf:

Our education system must be heavily faith laden and value-laden. No learning is meaningful without a belief in its usefulness and no education is beneficial if it does not transmit and promote deeply cherished values of honesty, integrity, selflessness, concern for social welfare, and a strong sense of responsibility and service to others. Though the present education system aims to inculcate these values, such an aim is incompatible with the predominating materialistic outlook on life, thus it cannot be achieved through this [western] system (p. 32).

In Western secular society, morality and a moral education are implemented without religious attachments or assumptions. The children in the public school system are taught moral values, however, their instructions are independent of religious

affiliation (Ashraf, 1994). Moral values in Islam, as Ashraf explains, are not separate entities, that is, one cannot be authentically religious and immoral at the same time. The purpose of education is to inculcate *adab* among pupils; where *adab* refers to morals, manners and human conduct. Islamic schools are responsible for providing an environment that helps to develop moral sensibility through the teaching of etiquette or *adab*. Islamic education follows the Qur'an, which provides moral and religious principles, and also follows the practices of the Prophet Muhammad.

Nakosteen (1964) documents that an Islamic education first started as mosque school dating back to the Prophet Muhammad, who used to give instructions, or explanation of his revelations, at the mosque. Later on, the mosque school was replaced by the Madrassa; a place for giving lessons. At this point the focus was only on educating students through the Qur'an, and to give students a complete understanding of the fundamental issues of the terms value and morality. Another focus was on teaching the Arabic language, since it was the language of the Qur'an. Less emphasis was given to subjects like science and philosophy, first because of its secular nature, and second, because of the intolerance towards innovation. Higendorf (2003) states that "from this point on, acquiring Islamic education was only in the form of memorization and requires submission without question or digression" (p. 69).

The most comprehensive approach to reform Islamic education, took place in 1979. For instance, at a 1979 Islamic conference held in Jeddah, King Abdul Aziz University, Ashraf and Al Attas stress on the need of education system that is Islamically- centered, follows the Qur'an and sunnah, while incorporating the Arabic language and the language of a region (Ashraf, 1979; Sarwar, 1996). Following on

events of this conference and of other writers with the similar view, Higendorf (2003), however, documents imbalances between an education system that enforces the Arabic language along with a local language, and English. According to Higendorf, a Muslim child in the west will need more assistance in learning Arabic, because English will be offered in the school curriculum. Consequently, a Muslim child in another part of the world, for example Pakistan, will need to study not only Arabic, Urdu (the mother tongue) and English, but the sciences and mathematics as well, which is not an easy task to accomplish. He argues that an Islamic education therefore is not necessarily positive because of the many challenges that result from location and language demands as demonstrated by the two latter given scenarios.

Panjwani (2004) also criticizes Islamic education, and the scholars who are proponents of Islamic education and are critical of the western education system. According to Panjwani, Muslim scholars continue to critique permissiveness, lack of discipline among students, and the violence and the peer pressure that exists in the western education systems. However, these scholars base their critique on the studies done by European and American researchers. This shows that Muslims are not alone in their concerns about the social failings of the educational structure in the school system. He further states that such criticism will only widen the gap between Islam and the West. Consequently, after September 11, Islamic education came under attack because of its critical scrutiny of western culture. Scrutiny of western culture, when conducted by Muslims, is often perceived by the West as fundamentalism or radical views. Douglas & Shaikh (2004) state that in the wake of September 11, politicians in the United States have targeted 'Islamic education' as a possible "cause" of so-called "Islamic radicalism"



or Islamic terrorism. This conceptualization of fundamentalism and its role in an Islamic education has recently placed Islamic schools in a difficult position and often experience the need to defend their education philosophy. For example, individuals who were caught plotting in Britain (July, 2005) and in Canada (June, 2006) were said to have ties with Islamic schools. Berdichevsky (2007) states that “since the terrorist attacks on the London Underground on July 7, Islamic schools have been criticized for their role in fostering social divisions or even worse alienating their pupils from the core values of British society” (Global Politician, August 20, 2007).

Fundamentalism, by its colloquial definition, is understood to mean a war between modernity and faith. Talbani (1996) describes religious fundamentalism or Islamization as a movement formulated to make Islam as a relevant source of power and social control. Similar views are shared by Tibi (1998) who states that “for a fundamentalist, religion is the expression of a divine order, which is a global alternative to the secular state, where God’s rule replaces humanity’s authority” (Tibi 1998, p. 21).

Nevertheless, the aim of Islamic schools is to provide an opportunity for Muslim students to attain an education that includes fulfilling the objectives of Islamic education within the context of western society. Moreover, despite the differences between Shia’s and Sunni schools of thought, Islamic schools are united in following the five pillars, or duties of the faith. These duties begin with profession of faith, (shahada), that is, there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger. Other pillars of the Islamic faith include obligatory prayer (salah) five times a day, almsgiving (zakah), fasting (sawm) and the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj). According to Merry (2006), despite the variation in the ways that Islamic schools are run, including varying degrees of orthodoxy, strictness,

and ethnic affiliation, many similarities unite them. Shamma (1999) also stresses the need to keep a balance between Islamic culture and the majority national culture in which the students live.

Ramadan (2004), however, points out that since Islamic schools take only a small percentage of children, the true purpose of Islamic education in the west is not fulfilled. He further states that there should be other approaches to educate Muslim children who do not attend Islamic schools. Ramadan also states that Islamic schools create an artificial, closed Islamic environment that almost completely cuts off children from the surrounding society. Despite the contradictions and complexities in definition, in the west, about Islam and Islamic teachings, for the majority of Muslim parents, the main purpose of an Islamic education is to expose their children to a culture that runs parallel to their own experiences (Zine, 2001). Islamic schools also provide an environment where students are not alienated and are free to exercise their religious duties without having to resist the dominant group interpretations of schooling (Merry, 2005). Mallea (1989) documents this cultural dominance, and the struggle to resist it since the arrival of Europeans in Canada in seventeenth century. According to Mallea (1989), the first conflict was with Native people, and later between two colonizing powers; English speaking and French speaking. The more complex conflicts arose during the late nineteenth century over the relationship between culture and schooling with the arrival of growing numbers of immigrants of different racial and ethno-cultural backgrounds. All these conflicts shaped Canadian policies to minimize the tension between the dominant culture (English) and the minority culture (French). According to Mallea (1989), the Canadian government made an effort to reduce inter-group tensions by introducing

Multiculturalism, official bilingualism, and rejecting the old mono-cultural and bicultural models of Canadian society.

### Islam and Cultural Influences

Religion, according to Tibi (1990), is a social reality, consisting of a symbolic system that is culturally variable, and which changes historically (p. 16). For example, in the Qur'an it says that *"He made us into nations and tribes, so that we may get to know one another, and not despise each other."*(49:13), and therefore, Islam, like other major religions, is not free from cultural influences and adapted to many traditions (Abu Laban, 1991). However, Ramadan (2004) argues that Islam is not a culture. He further states that the core of Islam is religious, that is 'tawhid' (professing faith in the unity of God), which is the foundation of faith and practice. He further points out that because of the existence of different practices, both in worship and social affairs that are open to the other cultures and customs, such as Persia and Ottoman (Turks), Islam therefore has integrated diversity within the fundamental principles of faith.

Tibi (1990) documents that Muslim philosophers influenced Islam by using the Arabic language, which is considered to be sacred because of the recordings of the Qur'an, to translate and transmit foreign ideas such as Greek theology. Another development came in the area of Islamic law, or *sharia*, which was also influenced by various regions wherein Muslims founded their states. Islamic laws merged with the regional practices and ultimately resulted in four schools of law that most Sunnis follow. Shi'a, on the other hand, has their own school of law following the traditions and practices of Ali, the fourth caliph (Bodman, 1998). Shi'ite means partisan, or the

followers of Ali. According to them, after Prophet Muhammad's death the leadership should have passed to Ali, who was the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad.

Despite these differences, the preservation of religious belief is central to the maintenance of a Muslim identity (Tibi, 1990; Abu Laban, 1991; Yousif, 1999). In other words, how much these beliefs are observed and practiced depends on the level of devotion and cultural influence of the surrounding regions.

### **Islamic Dress Code and Hijab**

The teachings of the Qur'an specifically encourage both Muslim men and women to embrace modesty in their daily lives out of respect for God, their faith, and each other. The following verses in the Qur'an addresses modesty and morality issues for both men and women, however, the rulings for women are stricter than those for men.

According to the Qur'an:

Say to the believing man that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands. (Quran 24:30-31).

On another occasion the Qur'an says:

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): this is most convenient, that they should be known (as such)

and not molested. And God is oft forgiving, most merciful (33: 59).

These two verses from the Qur'an are mostly cited to describe women's dress code in Islam. The veils over the bosom, is generally interpreted as a veil covering the head and the chest, whereas to cast the outer garment, is explained as wearing a long coat also known as the *abaya* or a *jilbab*. According to Mernissi (1991), the word "hijab" comes from the root word "hajaba", which in Arabic means 'to hide', and there are three dimensions to the word. The first refers to a physical or a visual dimension meaning to hide something from sight using a 'sitr', which in Arabic means "curtain". The second dimension is spatial, meaning to establish a threshold or a border. The final dimension is ethical; which denotes moral boundaries.

The differences in veiling practices have a very complex history, which predates Islam by many centuries. In the Near East, Assyrian kings first introduced veiling to the women belonging to high status. Women of low status: prostitutes and slaves, however, were told not to veil in order to distinguish between those who have higher status from those who belonged to a lower status (Mernissi, 1991; Bodman, 1998). Bodman also points out the particular relevance to the history of women in Islamic times in relation to Middle Assyrian law governing the use of a veil for the women of the nobility, widows, and married women to cover their heads in the street. Bodman (1998) explains further that prostitutes and female slaves were not to wear veils, seemingly distinguishing them from those who were under a man's protection and thus commanding social respect.

It is argued by Muslim feminists, such as Mernissi that veiling practices in the Qur'an specifically came down for the wives of the Prophet Muhammad because they were harassed by men on streets. The verses that came down on the Prophet Mohammad

at that time stated that the wives of the Prophet, and believing women, should cover themselves so that they are not harassed. However, Roald (2004) argues that Mernissi's statements are clouded with a feminist viewpoint, which failed to give the whole meaning of the text, where the verse actually includes wives of the Prophet and the women of the believers.

There are many controversial debates over the veiling practices and the way women dress (Hoodfar, 2003; Eid, 1999 & McDonough, 2003). Hoodfar (2003) describes the term 'dress code' in light of different regional practices. According to Hoodfar, wearing a similar style of clothing indicates certain cultural values with others similarly attired, while minor details may distinguish an individual from others in his or her social group. The same notion applies for women who are wearing certain styles of hijab. For example, women in Egypt wear a different style of hijab that varies in style and colour as compared to women in Saudi Arabia who are mostly covered in a black abaya or niqab (a black veil to cover the face). In Pakistan majority of the women wear a two piece suit called a *shalwar kameez* (a flare pant and a long shirt) along with a big chador or dupatta (a shawl). This variation in women's dressing raises controversies among Muslims on the legitimacy of wearing the hijab, along with the common belief that Islam is a monolithic religion. However, these variations in dressing in certain styles indicate that various cultural practices among Muslims do exist.

Recently, in multicultural countries like France and Canada, the legitimacy of allowing young Muslim girls to wear the hijab within public schools has raised controversies (McAndrew, 2006). The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms ensures women's freedom. Canadian women see themselves as progressive, modern, liberated,

and educated, whereas Muslim women are usually seen by western society as coming from third world countries and as backward, especially when wearing the hijab (Bullock & Jafri, 2000).

However, there are other reasons, some of them rooted in Canadian history. McDonough (2003) in her discussion about the perception of hijab explains that some of the underlying reasons for which the hijab is seen as a sign of backwardness. According to her, in Canadian history, women were generally oppressed by male religious leaders, both from the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. The very sight of a hijab may account for the triggering of the memory of oppression in women, by male religious leaders, against women, in the past. Thus the hijab is seen, by mainstream Canadian society, as a reflection of the dominant of power of Muslim men over Muslim women. In other words, the hijab is seen as the means by which religious clerics are believed to promote their fundamentalist view over moderate Muslims and others in the west.

Studies conducted in Canadian urban cities showed that Muslim women who wear the hijab face some discrimination in educational institutions such elementary schools, colleges and universities (Bullock, 1999; Hoodfar, 2003 & Zine, 2006). According to Zine, discrimination on the basis of religion was evident in France, Turkey, and Quebec (Canada), where public schools threaten girls who insist on wearing the hijab, with expulsion.

McAndrew (2006) states that current situation of Islamophobia might play a role in the decision by some women, whether or not to wear the hijab. According to Zine, (2006) engendered Islamophobia and the fear of fundamentalism are reasons that prevent many girls from wearing the hijab in schools. Parents are concerned about how their

daughters will be perceived in public schools when they follow the Islamic dress codes or wear the hijab.

In conclusion, the review of the literature gives a clear description of the situations that Muslim children face in public schools in terms of following the teachings of Islam and practicing religious duties freely. The review of the literature provides useful theoretical information that aids in discovering the reasons why many parents enroll their children in Islamic schools, as well as move them from public schools.



## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Overview of Methodology

This is a qualitative study in which a *case study* method is used to explore in-depth experiences of Muslim parents with their children in public schools, and Islamic schools, in Windsor. A case study provides in-depth exploration of a bounded system for example, a program, an event or an activity involving individuals based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2005). The intent of this research study is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2005), by examining the experiences of Muslim parents with their children in a school setting. As a result, a qualitative methodology was chosen because of its effectiveness in identifying information about the values, opinions, and behaviours of Muslim parents regarding their children's schooling in Windsor. Qualitative research also helps to answer questions by probing various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. According to Berg (2006), "qualitative researchers are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings, and how they make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth" (p. 7). According to Bogden and Biklen (1992), who state that the true point of conducting qualitative research is to understand the ways different people make sense out of their lives. Silverman (2002) also supported Bogden and Biklen's idea that qualitative research is beneficial in understanding the social and cultural construction of the *variables* that a quantitative research method often overlooks. Qualitative research methods are more

concerned with how people perceive things, while quantitative methods involve statistical procedures or other means of quantification.

The interview process is often one of the key elements in conducting qualitative research and is used differently by many researchers in different situations. Seidman (2006) states that the purpose of in-depth interview should not be only getting answers or testing hypotheses, or to evaluate, rather the purpose of in-depth interviewing is to understand the lived experience of other people, and the meaning they make of that experience. Silverman (2002) describes the interview process as located within the framework of positivism, emotionalism and constructionism which aids the researcher in approaching the interview according to the situation and gravity of the research. The positivism model, according to Silverman (2002), focuses more on facts about behaviours and attitudes. In the emotionalism model, interviewees are viewed as subjects who actively construct their social worlds. The constructionism model, on the other hand, is a more actively engaging process of collecting the data, and is guided mutually by both the interviewer and the interviewee.

For this research study I used the emotionalism model because during the interview process, I believed interviewees to be experienced participants and attempted to build a rapport with them, which meant getting along with them harmoniously and with affinity (Seidman, 2006). In this study the use of the emotionalism model serves to generate data that offers an authentic insight into the experiences of the participants. For example, as a researcher, my main objective was to elicit authentic accounts of the experiences of Muslim parents with children in both Islamic school and public school systems; that is, I wanted to develop an in -depth sense of what the interviewees feel in

regards to their children's schooling experiences. Berg (2006) describes three types of interviews; structured, unstructured and semi-structured. For this study I used open-ended semi-structured interviews. All the participants were asked twelve predetermined questions on special topics in a systematic and consistent order, however, this method allowed the interviewer freedom to digress or probe far beyond the answers to their prepared questions (Berg, 2006). Semi-structured interviews also aid the participants to articulate their inner thoughts and feelings without any interruptions (Berg, 2006; Creswell, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990 and Seidman, 2006). Thus, the interview questions were structured in a somewhat informal manner where the interviewing relationship was not affected (Seidman, 2006). Questions were focused mainly on what motivated Muslim parents to send their children either to a public or an Islamic school. For example, they were asked, What kind of similarities or differences did they find in terms of curriculum and religious experiences? What were the experiences of Muslim girls with respect to the Islamic dress code within the Canadian school setting? Parents were also asked whether or not their decisions were based on curriculum, or religious and cultural differences between the two school systems. They were also asked specific questions about gender and especially the Islamic dress code. For the list of questions see Appendix F.

Care was also taken to make sure that the interview process was not too long, since some participants had other family obligations. Most interviews were approximately 15- 20 minutes in length. As Berg (2006) describes, the length of the interview depends on the type of answers constructed between the interviewer and the participant. Therefore, during the interview process some interviews provided rich,

detailed, and lengthy answers to the questions. However in a few cases the response was rather short.

Seidman (2006) points out that since in-depth interviewing generates an enormous amount of text, it is the responsibility of a researcher to identify his or her interest in the subject and avoid any anger, bias response during the interview. Interviews were then reduced and shaped into a form so that they could be analyzed. An interpretive approach was used to analyze the data, which was in the form of text. This approach provided a means for discovering the practical understandings of meanings and actions. In other words, this approach helped me to understand and organize data to uncover patterns of Muslim parent's actions with regard to their children's schooling in Windsor. The content analysis of the textual descriptions helped me to categorize my topics into themes using an inductive approach. Berg (2006) describes the inductive approach as being helpful in linking the categorized themes to the data from which they were derived. Transcripts were organized with a systematic filing system using indexing, and coded data that helped to identify the transcripts. Pseudonyms and a case number were assigned to each interviewee.

### Procedure

The first activity of the research involved inviting Muslim parents to participate in the study, and this was done through newsletters and community announcements (Appendix A). The participants were selected through purposive sampling (Creswel, 2005; Berg, 2006). This meant that I, as researcher, could use my special knowledge and expertise about this group in selecting participants who represent the target population.

For this research, the criteria for selecting samples was Muslim parents living in Windsor for more than three years, and whose children were enrolled in Islamic schools, public schools, or had experiences in both school systems. The second activity was conducting interviews. All the ethical considerations were followed to make sure that participants were informed of their right to participate, or to withdraw at any time (Creswell, 2005; Berg, 2006 and Seidman, 2006). Furthermore, the pertinent information about the purpose of the research study was also outlined through, the informed consent form, the parent consent form, and the consent to audio tape (see: Appendixes B, C, and D). Third activity was the process of coding the data. During the interview some notes were also kept to remember nuances of the interview process. To ensure thoroughness, and to obtain rich data, the tapes were listened to several times. A categorical scheme was used in order to identify themes for assessing the central research question: What are the experiences of Muslim parents regarding their children's schooling?

The open coding process helped me to label the texts to form descriptions and broad themes in the data and to examine codes for overlap and redundancy (Creswell, 2005). The data was then categorized through axial coding into topics and themes, so that later, it could be analyzed through an interpretative approach, allowing for the discovery of the practical understanding of meanings and actions of many Muslim parents when enrolling their children (Berg, 2006) in school.

The findings were categorized into three major themes. The first major theme revolved around school choice. The second major theme was experiences of parents in the Islamic and /or public school systems, and the third major theme focused on the Islamic dress code and the perception of the hijab.

### **The Position of the Researcher**

As the investigator, I identify my position in this study as unbiased. I made efforts to avoid making comments on the topics being discussed. The efforts to remain unbiased throughout in this study helped me to gather objective data in order to obtain reliable findings. In some way, I was able to remain unbiased by, for example, avoiding making comments on the topics under discussed. The efforts to remain unbiased throughout in this study helped me to gather objective data in order to obtain reliable findings.

When I decided to take a job as a grade three homeroom teacher in an Islamic school in Windsor, I found myself negotiating my identity as a practicing Muslim. As a Pakistani woman, my ways of practicing Islam are different from people of the Middle Eastern countries. In Pakistan there are people who practice their religion moderately and there are people who follow the teachings of Islam in an orthodox manner leaving no room for modernity. Before starting my first teaching job in the Islamic school, I did not usually wear the hijab. In this religious school, however, I had to comply with the requirement to wear it. In the beginning, I was not very comfortable with this arrangement, and felt that I compromised myself. As time passed, and I became more accustomed to the school's Islamic environment, and the way young girls took pride in wearing the hijab, it made me rethink my view on life, and gave me the strength to accept the hijab as part of my identity. Thus, when I left the school in 2006 to pursue my Masters degree, I also wore the hijab as part of my identity.

During my tenure at the Islamic school I saw new students enrolled each year and at that time, wondered why their parents did not enroll them in the public school system with all its resources, and instead, choosing a school system which lacked adequate

funding. I also noted that only approximately six hundred students were attending Islamic schools, while the rest of the Muslim children, along with mine, were still in the public school system. This information led me to explore further and look for reasons and factors that motivated Muslim parents to choose one school system over the other.

Working in the Islamic school for four years, and having children in the public school system, enabled me to build a rapport among the parents, some of whom later were participants in my research (Seidman, 2006; Berg, 2006). Berg describes rapport as developing positive feelings between the interviewer and the interviewee. When I approached the Muslim community to ask them to participate in this study, I received very positive responses from the majority of parents who saw me as a trustworthy and respectable member of their community. The parents from both school systems put their trust in me as I conducted interviews and listened to their feelings and thoughts, examining the many reasons that resulted in a decision to choose one school system over another.

As a Pakistani, Muslim immigrant, as a parent, and as a female researcher, I had the benefit of understanding the participants on many different levels. First as a Muslim, I understood the teachings of Islam and the limitation that comes with it. For example when parents were explaining their apprehension and concerns regarding school dances or other activities, I completely related to them because I knew that these activities are against the teachings of Islam. Second, being an immigrant myself, though it had been almost 19 years, I still remembered my hesitation to interact with people because of the language and cultural barriers. Moreover, as a female researcher, I was able to communicate easily with female participants, since in this research study a majority of

the participants were female, with only one male. As a female, and a Muslim researcher, I was apprehensive about conducting interviews with male participants. I was aware of the Islamic gender teachings, and therefore, in that particular case, a phone interview was the best option to conduct the interview. I saw this as a limitation to my research because I could not get the responses from a male perspective. On the other hand I also saw this as an advantage in order to obtain the data which was not dismissive of a female interviewer. According to Seidman (2006), “the interviewing relationship that develops when participants and interviewer are different genders can be deeply affected by sexist attitudes and behaviours. All the problems that one can associate with sexist gender relationships can be played out in an interview”. (p. 102).

Lastly, as a former Islamic school teacher, I had an advantage in that I was more familiar with the level of implementation of the public curriculum in Islamic schools in Windsor, and also, the standard that these schools represent. Furthermore, being a parent of two teenage children attending the public school system in Ontario, and in Saskatchewan, gave me the opportunity to understand the curriculum issues with regard to some educational practices that resulted in a decision to move their children from one school system to another.

### Community Profile

The Muslim population of 10,000 comprises approximately 5% of the city of Windsor’s total population (205,865) (Statistics Canada, 2006). This percentage is small compared to larger Canadian cities such as Toronto or Montreal. However, Windsor’s Muslim community is made up of many ethnic groups from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh,



the Middle East, and Somalia. Three full time Islamic schools cater to the needs of approximately six hundred Muslim students.

### Recruiting Participants

The collection of data for this study was conducted after the approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Windsor. Participants were approached through the distribution of community newsletters, mosque announcements, community dinners, word of mouth, and some already existing contacts. Twelve Muslim parents agreed to participate in this study. Out of the twelve participants, eleven were female and one was male. More female responses were attributed to fact that the research was being conducted by a female Muslim researcher; therefore, female participants felt more comfortable in meeting with the researcher. The lower response rate from male participants was due to Islamic rulings that discourage close proximity between males and females in situations where they are alone.

In order to capture more voices of Muslim parents in Windsor, care was taken to have representation from different ethnic groups within the Muslim community. The selection of participants was purposive in nature (Berg, 2006), which means the main focus was to recruit participants who belonged to the Muslim community (both Sunni and Shi'a), so that the research could represent the two main sects of the Muslim community. The invitation letter to participate in this study was posted and announced in both religious centers and schools (Shia and Sunnis). For the purpose of this study, Sunni Muslims refers to those who follow the traditions of the prophet Muhammad, and also agree that after the prophet's death the new leader should have been elected from among

those capable of the job. Shi'a Muslims, on the other hand, are those who believe the leadership should have passed directly to his cousin, and son-in-law, Ali. Despite this difference in belief, both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims still practice the same tenets of Islam, and follow the teachings of the Qur'an. Like Sunni Muslims, there is a variation within the Shi'a Muslim community in the way they practice religion, with some adopting more orthodox practices, and others practicing in a less orthodox or liberal manner. For example, orthodox Muslims are against modernity and see modern education and western lifestyle as a way of forsaking the teachings of Islam, while liberal Muslims do not regard acquiring modern education, and adopting some western values, as being against Islam.

Another criterion for recruitment was that participants had been living in Windsor for more than three years. Out of twelve parents interviewed, six had children in the public school system, and the other six had children in the Islamic school system. Four of the six parents in the Islamic school reported that their children had never attended public schools, while the children of the other two parents had. Among the parents with children in the public school system, four had children who had previously attended Islamic schools for more than one year, while the other two parents stated that their children had no previous experiences in the Islamic school. Out of twelve participants only one participant belonged to Shi'a beliefs, whereas the rest of the participants Sunni Muslims. In the following section I offer a profile of the participants.

**Profile of Participants: All the names provided in here are pseudonyms and do not represent any person in the community.**

Tahira

Tahira is a homemaker, originally from India, and migrated to Canada when she was a teenager. She attended public school in Canada and is therefore familiar with the public education system. Her two daughters are in a high school, and her youngest daughter is in grade five in the public school system.

Sana

Sana holds a Bachelor of Islamic Studies from Algeria, her country of origin. She is a homemaker with three children. Sana's oldest daughter went to a public school for two years and then she moved her to the Islamic school. Currently, Sana's two school aged children are enrolled in an Islamic school, grade five and grade three respectively, while the youngest child is at home.

Maria

Maria, a mother of five children, and originally from Palestine, is a homemaker. She used to work in a bank in Abu Dhabi before migrating to Canada. Maria initially enrolled her three children in the Islamic school system. Her two daughters were in grade six, and grade four respectively, and her son was in grade two. After two years in the Islamic school system, she moved her two younger children to a public school system and enrolled her daughter in grade six and her son in grade four. Her oldest

daughter still attended the Islamic school. Two other young children are not school aged; stayed home.

### Shahla

Shahla, a mother of four, is originally from Pakistan. Two of her children are attending the Islamic school system, while her other two children are not school age and stayed home. Shahla's oldest daughter is in grade three and her son is in grade two.

### Fahima

Fahima, a mother of four, is originally from Libya. Her two daughters attend the Islamic school. Her oldest and second-oldest daughters are in grade five and grade two, respectively. Fahima's other two children, who are not yet school age; stay home.

### Alia

Alia is originally from Pakistan. Two of her four children are attending the public school. Her oldest daughter is in grade five and her son is in grade three. Alia's other two children are not old enough to attend school yet.

### Sakeena

Sakeena, a mother of five children, is originally from Algeria. She graduated from the B.Ed. program at the University of Windsor. When she first arrived in Windsor she enrolled her oldest son in the Islamic school system. After four years, she moved him to a public school, which her other three children are currently attending.

### Farah

Farah, a mother of three children, is originally from India. Her two sons are in grade seven and grade three, while her youngest daughter is in kindergarten. They all attend public school.

### Khadija

Khadija, a mother of four children, is originally from Pakistan. She went through the public school system. Khadija's three children are attending the Islamic school system. Her oldest daughter is in grade seven, while her two younger sons are in grade four and grade two. Khadija's youngest son is not school age yet.

### Natasha

Natasha, a mother of four children, is originally from Latin America. Unlike the rest of the participants who grew up as Muslims, Natasha converted to Islam when she married a Muslim fifteen years ago. Natasha first enrolled her two children in an Islamic school. After three years in the Islamic school she moved them to a public school. Her oldest son and two daughters stayed in the public school system for five years. After five years in the public school, Natasha once again decided to move her two daughters and her youngest son to an Islamic school. Currently, her two daughters are in grade eight and grade six, and her youngest son is in kindergarten. Her oldest son, who is now in grade ten, still attends public school.

### Aisha

Aisha, a mother of three, is originally from Palestine. Her children attended Islamic school for three years. Aisha moved her children from an Islamic school to a public school two years ago. Her two daughters are in grade four and grade two, while her son is in kindergarten.

### Rafi

Rafi, a teacher by profession, and a father of six children, is originally from Somalia. He holds a Master degree in Education from Ontario. All his children are enrolled in the Islamic school system. Currently, Rafi is unemployed.

### **Participants Summary**

During the analysis of the data, I found that, based on the central question of school choice and their experiences with the Islamic and the public school systems, the participants can be categorized into three major groups. The first group involves parents who have experiences with their children in the Islamic school system only. The second group involves parents who have experiences with their children only in the public school system. Finally, the third group involves parents who have experiences with their children in both school systems.

In the first group, Alia and Farah with children in the public school system had no experiences with the Islamic school system. In the second group, Fahima, Khadija, Shahla and Rafi, with children in the Islamic school, had no experiences with the public

school system. Khadija, who was raised as a teenager in Canada, has her own experiences with the public school system.

The third group involves parents who have experiences in both school systems. Tahira, Aisha, Maria and Sakeena had their children in the Islamic school before they moved them to a public school system. Sana and Natasha had their children in the public school system before they moved them to the Islamic school system.

Natasha's experiences in this study were unique in the sense that she experienced her children's schooling at different age levels in both school systems. She originally placed her children in the Islamic school system and after three years, moved them to a public school. Then, after five years in the public school system, she placed her children back in the Islamic school system.

Participants in this study are all women except for the one male participant. The majority of the women are homemakers, except for Natasha, Farah and Khadija. Natasha originally belonged to a Catholic family before she converted to Islam when she was at the University in Toronto. Her experiences with her children regarding holidays which are Christian based, were more authentic because she knew the background of holidays such as Valentine's Day and Halloween.

Rafi has a Masters in Education and a B.Ed from Ontario universities. Rafi's considerable knowledge of the public curriculum and its implementation in the public school system helped me to understand his misgivings about his decision to choose one school system over another. Similarly, Sakeena, also hold a Bachelors in Education from the university in Ontario, had the advantage of understanding the public

curriculum and the pedagogy. She also had experiences with her children in both school system; Islamic and public.

Other participants, such as Maria, Aisha, Sana, Shahla, Fahima, Alia and Tahira are all homemakers. All participants, (Natasha, Tahira and Khadija excluded), are immigrants to Canada for between three years to fifteen years. Natasha, Tahira and Khadija on the other hand arrived in Canada when they were teenagers. Participants such as Maria and Aisha experienced some difficulties in adjusting to a western lifestyle and to an education system which is foreign to them.

### **Study limitations**

First, it is important to acknowledge that because a case study approach was utilised, this study looked at a small sample of parents; therefore, the findings are not generalizable to a broader population. Another limitation is that the majority of participants in the study were female and there was only one male parent participated. This gender imbalance occurred even though I sent invitation to all Muslim parents in Windsor. The lack of responses from male participants were due to the Islamic teachings that discourage unrelated male and female Muslims to be alone, which in this case would have been necessary for me in order to conduct an interview with male participants. This method of conducting interview suggests that Muslim student researchers should find other ways to conduct the research in order to avoid situations where the researcher is alone with the participants of the opposite gender. Therefore, conducting research by sending out surveys could be a better way of including more participants. Another limitation is that the majority of the parent participants were



homemakers therefore their knowledge about school curriculum and related activities is limited when compared to parents who work outside the home. Lastly, it is worthy noting that only parents views were sought out- not the students. It would have been beneficial to have students' views because students look at the school environment and the learning that takes place in the school with a different approach as compared to their parents.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the data received from the twelve participants who were interviewed for this research study. The major key findings were that all parents, regardless of the school system they chose for their children value schools in which their children can freely perform religious duties, e.g., performing prayers, observing Ramadan and celebrating religious holidays such as Eid. Second, Muslim parents with children in Islamic schools have mixed views about co-education and the teaching of sex education. These major findings will be presented in the section, experiences of Muslim parents with children in the Islamic school.

Three major themes emerged during the interview process, which were then further categorized into sub themes.

The first major theme, *the choice of schooling*, is presented according to four groups of parents. The first group of parents consciously chose the Islamic school system over the public school system. The reasons for this choice are as follows: a) exposure to an Islamic environment, which helps maintain religious and cultural values as well as aiding with the exposure to Islamic studies and the Arabic language; b) exposure to non-Islamic subjects and its pedagogy; and c) student- teacher ratios.

The second group of parents, who chose to send their children to public schools, offered the following reasons: a) personal experience; b) convenient location; c) beliefs about institutional responsibility towards religion.

The third group of parents, those who had moved their children from an Islamic school to a public school, offered the following reasons for their decision: a) lack of academic resources; b) standard of the English language; and c) small class size.

The fourth group of parents, who moved their children from the public school to an Islamic school, offered the following two reasons for this decision: a) non-Islamic behaviours; and b) religious accommodations and acceptance.

The second major theme, *experiences of parents in the school systems*, is based on three groups of parents; parents who have children in the Islamic school system only, parents who had children in an Islamic school system or a public school system, and the parents who have children in a public school system only.

Experiences of parents in the Islamic school system are grouped as follows: a) Islamic school environment that reinforces Islamic beliefs, values and practices; b) good parental involvement; c) co-education or gender mixing; and d) subject content and/ or pedagogy.

Experiences of parents who have children in the public school system are grouped as follows: a) representation of Muslims in the public school curriculum; b) celebrating holidays; c) subject content and/or pedagogy; and d) co-education or gender mixing.

Also included are experiences that come from parents who are familiar with both school systems. These parents have had children attend an Islamic school as well as a public school. The reasons they gave fell into the following categories: a) celebrating holidays in the public school system; b) religious experiences during Ramadan in the public school; c) school environment; d) subject content and/ or pedagogy; e) co-

education or gender mixing; f) small class size; and g) communication patterns and social interactions in the public schools.

The last theme presents experiences with regards to the Islamic dress code and the perception of the hijab in western society.

## **Choice of Schooling**

### **Reasons offered by the parents in the Islamic school system**

The following findings are from the group of parents who consciously chose the Islamic school system.

#### **Exposure to Islamic Environment**

Parents with children in Islamic schools explained that exposure to an Islamic environment had influenced their choice of school for their children in order to maintain their religious values as well as provide exposure to Islamic studies and the Arabic language.

#### **Maintaining Religious and Cultural Values**

Three of the six parents who have children in the Islamic school said that exposure to Islamic values and culture was the reason they placed their children in the Islamic school. Rafi, for example expressed that one of the main reasons he placed his children in the Islamic school was to ensure that they learn Islamic values.

**Rafi:**

**As Muslims, our first responsibility as a parent is to make sure that we give our values and our identities to our kids.**

Similarly, Khadija indicated that she wanted to ensure that her children are exposed to Islamic culture and not Canadian or western culture.

Khadija:

I wanted them to be exposed more to the Islamic culture rather than the Canadian culture. I want them to learn the values, the morals that we believe in before they become adults and exposed to the negative Canadian culture.

Another parent stated:

Fahima:

We have a different culture, a different background than Canadians. We want our children to learn our culture, our religion and I am not familiar with the public school and my kids never attended public school, so I don't know what they are learning over there, but since I have a choice to have my children to be raised the same way as I was brought up, I chose this way.

### Exposure to Islamic Studies and Arabic language

Three of the six parents who have children in Islamic school, articulated that exposure to Islamic studies and the Arabic language motivated their choice of school.

Rafi:

One of the things that motivated us to put our kids in the Islamic school was not only that they are fulfilling their needs of academics for example mathematics, science and whatever goes with that. However, in addition to that, they are exposed to Islamic studies. For example my son already memorized the first juzz [chapter] of the Qur'an. Also they speak Arabic which is a very strong subject that is encouraged at the school.

Khadija:

I wanted them to have religious education especially since I am so busy. We don't have time in the home to teach them religion and the religious aspects of the education.

### **Exposure to Non-Islamic Subjects and Pedagogy**

Another determining factor for this group of parents was the make-up of the curriculum; more specifically, the nature of some subjects such as music, dance in Arts and sex education in Health curriculum.

Rafi stated that in the Islamic school some academic subjects, such as music, are taught in such a way that Muslim parents choose the Islamic school over the public school.

Rafi:

The other thing is the subjects that are being taught like music; some of the Muslim parents are not happy to expose their children to a place where they teach music in such a way that involves intermingling of boys and girls. These are the things that attracted us to make our decision.

### **Student -Teacher Ratio**

Two of the six parents stated that their reason for sending their children to an Islamic school is class size, since it allows them to get individual attention from the teacher and one to one interaction between students.

Rafi:

In the Islamic school there is less number of students than the public school. We have that interaction. In other words teacher-student ratio is less than in the public school, so you have smaller classes.

To sum up, parents in this group offered an Islamic environment and exposure to Islamic education as a major reason for preferring Islamic schools over public schools. In addition, other parents offered reasons such as small class sizes and the fear of exposure to non-Islamic subjects and related pedagogy in the public curriculum.

### **Reasons Offered by Parents in the Public School System**

The following findings are from the group of parents who chose to send their children to the public school system.

One of the six parents who has children in a public school reported that her decision for this choice came naturally to her because she also went through a public school system.

**Tahira:**

I really didn't think about it much and as far as I am concerned, I am okay with it. I have gone to the public school system myself so I am fine with it.

Another parent based her decision on the information that was available to her at the time that she first arrived in Windsor.

**Alia:**

When we came here my daughter was three years old and she was going to start school in September. We were almost new in the country, and as we were not familiar with other things here [Windsor], we know about the public school. Later we came to know about the Islamic school, but it was far away. We did not have the means [financial] to go there, so that is why we prefer public school.

Another parent stated:

Farah:

My decision was based on religion and culture from home, basically, and what kind of environment they are exposed to, and how much parents are involved in the religious activities, and how much information they are giving to the kids. Because I lived in India and I never went to a religious school of any kind, whatever I know about my religion and our culture was from my own family.

In conclusion, parents in this group based their decisions on personal experiences and the information that was available for them at that time. The third parent believes that religious responsibilities are institutionalized by the home environment.

### **Reasons offered by the Parents who moved their Children from the Islamic Schools to a Public School.**

The following findings represent the group of parents who chose to move their children from the Islamic school to a public school.

#### **Lack of Academic Resources**

One parent, with children in the public school system, articulated that the lack of educational resources was one of the main reasons for moving their children from an Islamic school to a public school.

Maria:

To be honest I was not very happy with the academics in the Islamic school. Before we came to Canada, everything in Abu Dhabi was in Arabic, so my children got behind in subjects like math, and science. My friend told me that the public schools have more experience in dealing with



children like this [ESL students] and they have more educational resources to deal with the children. So I said I would try it because it was too difficult to teach ESL at home.

### **Standard of the English Language**

One of the six parents in the public school system reported that a main reason for moving her children from the Islamic school to a public school was the standard of English.

Aisha:

The language is very important because when they were in the Islamic school, my husband noticed that when my children talk to each other at home they started to speak the wrong English, not the right way. They also have a little bit of difficulty when they want to explain things in English, for example their feelings or when they want to ask about something.

### **Small Class Size**

Sakeena reported that one of the reasons she moved her son from the Islamic school to a public school was the number of students in the classroom

Sakeena:

For lots of reasons, one of them was the number of students. There were only three boys and three girls. At the end of the school year there were only four girls and two boys left (my son and one another boy). My son was not comfortable. He was asking for more friends and he couldn't have more friends in this classroom. He was also struggling and wanted to move to another school. At the end we decided to switch him to another school, especially because next year he will be in high school.

The reasons the parents in this group moved their children from an Islamic school to a public school was the standard of English in the Islamic schools and smaller class size.

### **Reasons Offered by the Parents who moved their Children from a Public School to an Islamic School**

The following findings represent the group of parents who chose to move their children from a public school to an Islamic school. Exposure to non-Muslim behaviour and the lack of accommodation and acceptance were the major reasons offered by two parents.

One parent articulated that non- Islamic behaviour in the public school was the main reason she moved her children to an Islamic school.

Sana:

The main thing was behaviour of children. I enrolled my kids four years ago, when I came to Canada, in a public school. I noticed that children were bringing in things that “We don’t tolerate as Muslims”, for example the swearing and talking about other things like faith and beliefs that other kids talk about.

Another parent stated that her decision to move her children from a public school to an Islamic school was based on the difficulties that her children faced being Muslims. Natasha expressed that this public school failed her children because it was not accommodating and accepting them.

Natasha:

In public school personally I found struggle to try to tell the teacher about it. I have weekly or daily conversation with my kids' teacher on trying to make them understand that we don't celebrate the dances, the Valentine, so many things that are against to what we are trying to teach our children as Muslim...

After five years of my kids being in a public school, I saw year after year the difficulties of having my kids being "Muslim" in a public school system. Every year it got harder as they grew older and the peer pressure, the social pressure of the friends, and the things that other kids talk about; the things that they are exposed to. In other words they were not getting the service from the school.

Parents in this group offered exposure to non-Islamic behaviour and the lack of religious acceptance in the public school as reasons for making the decision to move their children from a public school to an Islamic school.

### **Experiences of Parents with children in the School Systems**

This section presents the experiences of parents whose children are in the Islamic school system.

#### **Islamic School Environment**

Two of the six parents with children in the Islamic school expressed that the Islamic environment has a very positive impact on their children.

Sana:

It's a good environment to express themselves, especially, when we are living in a non-Muslim country. It is good for the children, especially at younger ages, to reinforce their beliefs; like all the kids and all the family believe in the same thing. So

they have the opportunity to think about the religion and to express it. If you saw the spring mix; I was so happy to see all the children have the same theme to talk about and to express themselves and they were so proud to be like Muslim and to talk freely. It's like a big family and I am a member of it. They are very friendly and are open if something happens and if it's related to my kids' behaviour or to education. There is always a communication between us. So it's a positive environment.

Shahla also commented on her experience with the school environment.

Shahla:

My oldest daughter is in grade 5, she started covering her head and wearing full dresses, full sleeves and pants. She does not want to wear Capris and things like that. So I don't think so if she was going into public school she would be able to follow the religion that good. So I think this is the best thing.

Three of the six parents in this group reported that an Islamic environment allows the establishment of religious duties, such as daily prayers and fasting, and was another positive experience for their children.

Rafi:

One of the things that I mainly observed in the public school is establishing five daily prayers. Kids do go to public school at nine in the morning and they finish at three in the afternoon, so we have at least one prayer that should be established and they cannot get that accommodation, the younger ones especially, who need to be told and to be taught that there are prayers to be done. So the duhur prayer, which is the noon prayer, can be established in the Islamic school.

With respect to prayers, Sana also articulated her positive experience of her children attending Friday, or Jum'a, prayer.

Sana:

Jum'a [Friday] prayer is really a major positive thing in the Islamic school, especially for the boys. They really loved that. My daughter is attached to Jum'a. Sometimes they have a P.A. Day and we stay home and she feels something is missing. They are learning a lot from the Jum'a sermon.

Khadija:

With religious experiences as far as prayers go, the children realize how important prayers are in our religion, because one of the main prayers which is [zuhur], they have there, and in winter they have two prayers in the school. They know the dress code. They know that certain things are not allowed. My son knows when they are going for school they cannot wear shorts. When they do wear shorts, they have to be below their knees. They know that they should not be talking to the girls inappropriately. These, again, are all mannerisms and etiquette that they are learning

### Exposure to Religious Studies

Two of the six parents with children in an Islamic school reported that the school helps their children to learn Islamic studies and the Arabic language.

Shahla:

I have good comments about the school. I like it because the way I want them to learn my religion, and because I can't teach them so well, especially Arabic.

### Islamic Etiquette and Mannerisms

Four parents with children in the Islamic school reported that the school has played an integral part in developing good manners in their children.

Shahla:

In the Islamic school, the teachers tell them to respect their parents in an Islamic way. In public school they also tell

them, but not religiously. They just tell them good manners, but in our religion they have to follow it.

**Khadija:**

The kids in the Islamic school don't have that teenage attitude that I find lots of public school kids have; rolling their eyes, the deep sigh that is disrespectful; despite... there is no words to it, but it is disrespectful in our culture, and I don't find it that much in the private Islamic school. I think it is more mannerisms and definitely comes from religious education.

### Celebrating Religious Holidays

Two of the six parents offered their experiences in regards to celebrating religious holidays in an Islamic school. According to Sana these celebrations reinforce Islamic values and beliefs, which are very positive for their children.

**Sana:**

With Alhamdulillah [Blessing of Allah] in the Islamic school they celebrate Ramadan and Eid. I think it's good for them. It is reinforcing the things that we talk about at home. The school is helping us to bring our children in an Islamic way.

### **Good Parental Involvement**

Three of the six parents articulated that the Islamic school helps parents build a good relationship with teachers and administrators.

**Rafi:**

Usually what I do is that I always go inside the school and say "hello" to the teacher. They immediately communicate with me. This is something that I really see that is a very good motivation for Muslims parents to send their kids to

an Islamic school. You have one to one; that cooperation between teachers and parents because we are all Muslims and we know the very reason why we put our kids in an Islamic school. We have very a close relationship between the teachers and the parents, and also we have parent council at the school where we can discuss issues that are school related.

### **Co-Education and Gender Mixing**

In responding to questions about gender mixing and gender-specific activities, some parents in this group expressed the need to follow the teachings of Islam. The necessity of these teachings became more important as their children grew older and enter high school

Rafi:

My take on this is, when kids are in elementary grades, I don't have any difficulties mixing the two genders. As kids move to higher grades or high school, we as Muslims have very clear indication in the Quran, and as well in the traditional hadiths [sayings of Prophet Muhammad], that the two sexes should be separated, and there is wisdom in this. We know in this day and age and according to research that kids do better when they are separated and even they are finding this in the United States and in Canada. So, Islamically speaking, the two sexes should be separated as they head to higher grades or high school. As for elementary I don't have any problem.

Sana also expressed her concerns with regards to co-education.

Sana:

Well this is the thing that I really don't like. I know it is hard, because of the financial issue, but I would love to see boys and girls separated. It's a major thing in my opinion. I think when the girls and the boys are separated they show

more concentration on education. The girls are different than the boys. I see for my daughter, she picks up things from the boys who are the ones, who do these things. I am really worried that she is picking up things; the way she talks and uses some words. I know that girls don't use these typical words. This is the thing that I love to see change.

Two other parents indicated that they were fine with having boys and girls together in the classroom as long as it does not involve close contact with one another.

Fahima:

It will be great if they are separate but, they have to face it in the future in high school. I am happy that we have boys and girls here. It wouldn't interfere with their learning and knowledge. I have no problems having boys and girls together, because they are going to be together in the high school like that. They will know that it is normal and that is o.k. to have boys and girls together in your class, so, I have no problem with that.

Khadija:

I think it is perfectly o.k. Again, co-education is not anything bad as long as it is controlled. I think the teachers and the staff do a very good job of controlling the environment with the older girls.

### **Subject Content and Pedagogy**

In responding to the question, "Are there any subject areas that, in your opinion, need the material modified for your child's religious purposes?" Two parents in this group expressed the view that topics related to puberty needed inclusion in the school's health curriculum.



**Khadija:**

They have to teach them sex education, because ignorance is not bliss. The difference with our sex education is that we teach abstinence, while in public school, they teach do it safely, whereas our kids are taught that this is the way, but we don't do it until we are married.

**Fahima:**

I know that in our Islamic school the health and physical education has some weaknesses. They are not learning much in health and physical education. It is up to the parents also, that whatever is missing, they should try to cover it at home and give them some knowledge. As we know that for teachers it is difficult to explain everything in the class, especially when they are mixed boys and girls, because boys start to be funny and make noises and because of this, I tried to teach my daughter myself.

The teachers they don't go into details, like talking about the body changes, the hormones or your physical changes. They don't go into explaining everything just the basics, that is, you have one, two, three parts of the body and that is it. If there area separate classes for boys and girls, I would like to see my daughter telling me when she has changes in her body and would like to hear their teachers telling them about stuff, so that I wouldn't have to do it, but since there are mixed classes, I understand that they are not going into details.

These are the experiences of parents with children in the Islamic school describing thoughts and feelings around the celebration of religious holidays, exposure to an Islamic environment, religious studies, and gender mixing.

## **Experiences of parents with children in the public school system**

The following are findings of the experiences of parents with children in the public school system.

### **Representation of Muslims in the public school curriculum**

One parent with children in the public school system felt that the history of Muslim scholars and their contributions to the world is not discussed in the public school curriculum, especially in such areas as Mathematics, Chemistry and History.

Sakeena:

We are in a multicultural society. We need to make lots of changes to fit all the people into the community. The students need to understand what their culture is, because this is very important to them and they are not represented in the curriculum....

### **Celebrating Holidays**

Two parents with children in the public school system offered views of how they look at public holidays, especially Halloween and Valentine's Days.

Tahira:

My youngest kid, she's in grade four now, and they have Valentine's Day and Halloween. At this point she understood that we don't do that, but when she was younger, I had to explain to her, and on couple of occasions I did send the Valentine's cards with her. We didn't celebrate Halloween but we did send cards on Valentine's Day, because I felt that young kids do not understand the exact concept of this holiday.

They have Christmas concerts; things like that. I have sent my youngest daughter once, but this year I opted out. I said

to her, you are old enough to understand what's going on. We don't celebrate this. So it becomes hard, as when we have our Eid [festival], I feel that they don't feel it. Of course it is going on at home but there is nothing going on in the school for them. I think if they were in the Islamic school, definitely it would be a plus point. The whole classroom will be celebrating with you basically, and you know that is Ramadan or Eid.

In contrast, Farah, who also has children in the public school system, viewed holidays such as Halloween, as a time for fun.

Farah:

In our religion we do not encourage dance and too much interaction between girls and boys, so whenever they have this, it is already decided. For example, if it is Halloween it is for fun and it is not related to religion. It is just a fun activity, so they do it. We go for Halloween, only for the candy and things. In a multicultural society you should be welcoming, but if something clashes with your religion you are free to say no.

### **Subjects Content and/or Pedagogy**

Parents in this group expressed concern about teaching materials in the health curriculum that are more focused on sexual and intimate relationships, rather than growth and development.

Tahira:

I do feel that it's not appropriate at this stage for my daughter. I know they will eventually learn from television and I know usually in grade six they do start. I am not too thrilled about it but I would like to know that they are talking about it with the teacher themselves and what exactly they will be discussing. So I am not too happy with that idea. I know in grade nine they do talk about it in health.

I don't mind about growing up, and puberty, and things like that, because it's happening to them and it is part of changing. Kids very early are changing these days. So I don't know, depending on their personal thing. I don't mind that, but, when it comes to relationships and sexual relationships and intimate things, I am not too happy about it because I think it is very personal and I think if I want to talk about it with my kid I will do it. I don't think schools should get involved with this type of personal issue.

Alia:

First of all I would like to talk to the teacher, and want to know what kind of information they are going to share with the children. I think to some extent they should know because they are going through puberty, and they should know what is coming. So for the sex education, and sexual relationships, I am not in favour of this topic and they should not have this information at this stage.

### **Co-Education and Gender Mixing**

In response to the question, "Did gender have any influence on your choice of school for your child?"

Tahira recounted her daughter's experiences in high school with regard to cross- gender interactions.

Tahira:

I think in certain subjects, girls prefer if they are by themselves, like in math or science. I am not sure but mostly for math. I know that physical education is separated, but I know that my daughters are shy when asking questions from a male [teacher]. I noticed my girls hesitate and somehow they have distance. If there are female teachers, I think they are more approachable and my girls don't mind asking them, I guess. I think same thing happens if you are in a group of boys. I think it is better if there are just girls and they can all communicate more freely, but I know that if you are in a working environment you have to work with males too,

because the way the society is, we cannot expect to be segregated all the time. So I think if you are in an Islamic school and if you have that environment you can keep your distance.

Farah also stated that activities based on gender interaction such as dances are not allowed in Islam.

Farah:

In our religion we do not encourage dance and too much interaction between girls and boys, so whenever they have those activities, it is already decided about that.

### **Experiences of parents who moved their children from one school system to another.**

The following section presents accounts of those parents who had experiences in both Islamic and public school systems.

### **Celebrating Holidays in Public Schools**

Regardless of the school system that parents moved their children from, all expressed concerns about the way public schools deal with the holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. Two parents who have experiences in both school systems, expressed negative accounts with respect to celebrating holidays in the public school system. Natasha, who moved her children from a public school to an Islamic school, expressed her discontent with the way Halloween and Valentine's Day, are celebrated in the public school.

One parent expressed that public schools spent too much time in celebrating holidays that are not really part of the curriculum and are wasteful for students who do not belong to the mainstream culture.

Natasha:

I found that in the public school it is like the whole week is “Valentines”. The two weeks before, it’s all about Valentines, and I went to the teacher and I said, why are you are shoving this down our throats and encouraging this romantic holiday for our children. It has no place for them. No! She said, it is a friendship holiday and I said, it’s not a friendship holiday, it is cupid O.k. cupid. If you know the roots of Valentine, it’s St. Valentino! It’s Italian from Roman Catholics. They are so ignorant.

In the public school, personally, I found it a struggle to try to have a weekly or daily conversation with my kids’ teacher on trying to make them understand that we don’t celebrate dances, or Valentine’s Day. There are so many things that are against what we are trying to teach our children as Muslim.

Natasha later compared her religious experience with celebrating holidays in the public school to the religious experiences in the Islamic school.

Natasha:

Religious experience in Islamic schools is so normal and so easy. They fast, they go home, they break their fast and the next day in school, everyone is fasting and they talk about Eid, what are you going to have for Eid. You know, instead of when they were asked what you are getting for Christmas, and you say we don’t celebrate, and you kind of, immediately, become an out cast. It is so much easier and kids are more secured about who they are.

Another parent, Maria, also expressed concerns about the focus public schools have on holidays such as Valentine’s Day and Halloween.

**Maria:**

You know they have a lot of activities. The ordinary ones are fine, like track and field. They send a consent form for my son, if he can send Valentine's card. I told them it is nothing to do with us. It's not even Christian. I don't know where it came from. He did receive some, but he did not give any. In Halloween, my children they like going around and getting candies and this gives me a problem. I told them I will buy you candy, but you don't have to go around people's homes, and I don't allow it. In the school they focus on these ideas; this is how we do Halloween, or wear costumes and cards, like I love you; stuff like that. Some ideas are very foreign to us as Muslims, like Halloween, and Valentines, which are totally unacceptable to me. You can draw pictures of pumpkins which is fine, but so much getting into the spirit of it, I don't allow it.

Aisha, who moved her children from an Islamic school to the public school system, also offered her experiences with such holidays.

**Aisha:**

My kids, they don't celebrate all these things because they understand that we do not celebrate at home. But at school, during Halloween time, they do pumpkins and they do crafts on Thanksgiving and the Christmas time. I don't mind it because it is craft.

Aisha further explained that because her children had previously attended the Islamic school, they have the Islamic foundation and that is the reason her children understand why they do not celebrate these holidays.

### **Religious Experience during Ramadan in Public Schools**

Two of the six parents with children in the public school system, who moved their children from the Islamic school to a public school, offered positive experiences in terms of religious accommodation during Ramadan.

Sakeena:

For Ramadan they [teachers] will ask students to go to the library. The principal will go to the library and supervise the students and ask them about the customs, or what they have to do this month.

Similarly, Maria, whose children are in the public school system, also stated the way in which her children were accommodated in the public school during Ramadan.

Maria:

During our Ramadan, we told the principal that our children are fasting, and asked if they can go to a separate room. He was very understanding and he knows stuff with that. During our Eid we told them that they will be away and he also understood that.

However, compared to other parents who had good experiences with observing Ramadan in the public system, Natasha expressed negative experiences faced by her children when observing this holiday, stating that the kids are teased and made fun of by others.

Natasha:

For some reason my kids love Ramadan. They have been always adamant about it that they are going to fast in Ramadan... The kids would make fun of them; oh you cannot eat this, so they wave it in front of their face [her children]. My children have a lot of negative experiences, as trying to behave as Muslims. People don't just get it, and kids definitely don't know, because their parents don't get it. They just think they [Muslims] are crazy or fanatics.

### **School Environment**

Aisha compared her experience in the public school with the experiences that she had in the Islamic school in terms of school atmosphere. She stated that her relationship with teachers and staff was very friendly in the Islamic school because teachers and the staff speak



her language. Aisha further expressed that in the public school she sends her husband to communicate with her children's teachers because she feels that she would not be able to speak English fluently. Aisha stated that in the Islamic school, her relationship with teachers was very close, because the teachers speak her language and they understood her and she understood them. She was continuously in touch with them because she can call the teachers all the time and sometimes the teachers call her if something is wrong. Aisha then recalled her experience in the public school.

Aisha:

In the public school, it is the opposite thing. I cannot communicate with the teachers and this is my problem. Maybe because of the language, they don't give you time to sit with you, or try to understand you, or to know you. Everything for them is weird, or they wonder why she acts like this. I came from another culture they don't understand this point...I go to the office and when I ask something or speak with broken English, they start to be rude with me. I don't know why!

Natasha, who moved her children from the public school to an Islamic school, also articulated her negative experiences with the public school environment. She expressed that she found a lack of acceptance as well as ignorance about Muslims in general.

Natasha:

I found that people don't have a particular issue with the hijab or anything, but with our beliefs. Why do we have to fast, why do we have to do this, you have to constantly educate teachers. They are so ignorant it scares me. I really have no problem telling them, what I think. In a way, they didn't like that I was so out spoken. I was there all the time, educating them, and I said to them, you are teaching them wrong ideas about Islam, about Arabs and terrorism,

especially after the Iraq war and after 9/11. They were just overtly racist and one sided. It was very difficult to try to make a balance for my children and for me, so I thought it was an immense task for me to teach them who is ignorant.

Natasha further compared her experiences in the Islamic school with the experiences that she had in the public school. According to Natasha, the environment in Islamic schools' is friendly, where everyone knows everyone else. However, in the public schools, this kind of affection between teachers and students is not witnessed.

Natasha:

Well, first of all, being in a small community and most of the teachers are personal friends. It is like a family. My children know these people, the teachers, as a part of their community; a much closer relationship.

Every day, when I go pick up my children, they say good bye to their friends with hugs and kisses; that is not allowed for teachers to hug a child in a public school. They see the teacher hugging; it is not cool and is not allowed in their policy. So that affection, and personal and close affection is part of our culture, and who we are, and kids need to know who we are, and maintain that.

### **Subject Content and/or Pedagogy**

Two parents who moved their children from the Islamic school to a public school commented that curriculum related to sex education should not be taught in elementary grades.

Sakeena:

Until now, I did not see any classes of sex education, but I heard about it when I was in Quebec. They have to present sex education classes in grade 2-3, and lots of people who were not Muslims were against these classes. I don't think it is necessary at this age, as students will know about it

eventually in science, in grade 10 or 11, and I think it is sufficient. I have objections of this in elementary grades.

Similarly, Natasha, who moved her children from a public school to an Islamic school, also articulated her strong views on the way the public school uses the health curriculum to expose young children to sex-related materials. Natasha showed her anger over the topics that are covered in a grade six health curriculum. According to her, teachers are providing too much information about sex and birth control to very young children.

Natasha:

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

Natasha later compared her daughter's experiences in the health classroom in the Islamic school system. According to her, in the Islamic school, sex education is taught within the context of Islam and in a separate classroom.

Natasha:

If you are teaching this within the Islamic context, the kids will understand it with a faith, and know what is right and what is wrong from the start. When you teach them without this, anything can happen. You are teaching birth control, because you are assuming it, when you decide, if you decide. There is no "When" and "If" for Muslims.

## **Co-Education or Gender Mixing**

Maria, who moved her children from the Islamic school to a public school, indicated that the public school system should consider gender differences when arranging class activities.

**Maria:**

The way they did in an Islamic school, I liked it. I don't like them separated, because real life is not like that. If you give this issue too much importance, like the girl or the boy, this is not natural, but at the same time girls should have their own special space, so that they can sit beside each other, but in the public school, they mix them up and they don't make a difference between a boys and girls. I think they should make a difference up to a certain point especially, when discussing health lessons, because girls need their privacy.

Sakeena, who also moved her son from the Islamic school to a public school, recalled her negative experience with co-education in the Islamic school.

**Sakeena:**

In the Islamic school when I enter the classroom, I see the boys on one side and the girls on another side. I think they [Islamic schools] are creating more distance between the genders, because you can tell them that you are a boy and a girl and they can respect that without any barrier or any limits; any obligations. I saw this with my son, because, before he attended the Islamic school, he had lots of friends who were girls; and I didn't find any problem with this; and I want my son to respect the girls as they are. But, I think if someone other than me tells my son that you cannot talk to a girl, I don't think this will help boys and girls to have a good relationship.

## **Small Class Size in Islamic Schools**

Natasha, who moved her children from the public school to an Islamic school, offered her experience with class size.

Natasha:

My daughter, this year in the public school, would have been in grade four, in a class of thirty eight kids. How can you possibly give any attention or any education with such a large class? My daughter is very quiet, and you know, grade three and grade four in the public system, basically, go through the cracks. They don't learn very much, and I noticed that because my daughter is now in an Islamic school, and in a much smaller classroom, she is accountable. The teacher is aware of what she's doing. So class size makes an incredible difference of course. It benefits academics and also makes strong bonds with other kids.

For Sakeena, her son's negative experience with a small class in the Islamic school influenced her to move him to a public school.

Sakeena:

By the end of school year, there were only four girls and only two boys left; my son and one another boy. I think my son was not comfortable with the situation. He was asking for more friends and he couldn't have more friends. He was also struggling, and he wants to change to another school, and we decided at the end to switch to another school, especially since, in few years, he has to go to high school.

### **Communication Patterns and Social Interaction in Public Schools**

Three of the parents who have experiences in both the public and Islamic school systems expressed their concerns about the way in which children socialize, the way they dress, as well as the tone and body language used to communicate with one another.

Natasha:

When I walk into my son's high school, and the way the girls are dressed, or even the way the boys are dressed, the colour of their hair, and the earrings, and the piercing, the make up, it just draws so much attention away from the academics. I would

definitely petition for school uniforms, private or public; whatever. Uniforms serve such a great purpose for education. It [uniforms] draw a lot of attention away from our image. We live in an image driven culture. In North America, or probably everywhere; it's about image. The problem is that when you have boys and girls together, at that age of puberty, the focus is not on school work—the focus is on the social interaction between them. Everything that they do, or they wear is about that; the social interaction. It kind of defeats the whole purpose of school.

**Maria:**

Sometimes I worry about the company they keep, what they talk about, basically, they can talk about anything. Their vocabulary increases, but so do other words that you don't want them to learn. I am surprised they know them, and that is not very good for me, and I don't know how to separate this from that. You just have to keep on top of your children and see who their friends are, because their life is totally different than my life.

Maria elaborated on her experiences by recalling an expression used by one of her son's teachers in public school, where he called 'Google' as a 'God'. Maria expressed that she wanted to call the teacher, but later decided to not to and tried to explain herself. She later said that the expressions used by teachers in public schools are very different than theirs.

Aisha, who also moved her children from the Islamic school to a public school, related her concerns about the behaviour of children in the public school system.

**Aisha:**

The public school environment and the kids, and how they act, I don't like it. I always try to explain to my kids that you are going to school just to learn, not to catch bad words, or to copy the ways they deal with each other. There are so many things that I don't like in the public school what they wear now. For example in summer, because kids like to copy each other, this is little bit hard for me, but alhamdulillah [blessing of Allah] because my kids go to

Saturday school[Islamic weekend school] they understand why we shouldn't do this and why we should do that, and also, they were in the Islamic school before, so they know the values. They have the foundation, and I did not cut ties, and I keep them at the Saturday school, and sometimes in the middle of the week, I sit with them and read Quran with them. We study Arabic also, and I explain Islam to them.

Natasha also expressed her negative experiences in the public school system over social issues that are against the teachings of Islam.

Natasha:

My youngest son went to J.K. in the public school, and was younger than rest of the class, but very mature. They talk about a mother's boy friend, and the father's girl friend, and all the divorce, and it makes such an impact on young children to understand. It is very difficult for them to feel the foundation of family that we want to instill in them. There is a main difference socially. My daughter said that they feel that they are really taken care of. They really feel safe in an Islamic school.

The parents in this group related their experiences with regard to celebrating holidays in the public school system, religious experiences during Ramadan, subject content and/or pedagogy. Other experiences were presented in terms of co-education, gender mixing, class size and communication patterns and social interactions.

## **Experiences of Parents with the Islamic Dress Code and the Hijab**

### **Islamic Dress Code**

In response to the question; what are your views about the Islamic dress code for Muslim girls in Islamic/ public school? Parents in both the Islamic and the public school systems presented similar views. One of these views regards the impact of today's mode of dress, especially when it comes to women's clothing. Five of the twelve parents expressed their frustrations when it comes to buying clothes for their daughters which are decent, modern looking and, at the same time, conform to the rulings of Islam.

Khadija, whose children are in an Islamic school, offered her experience with respect to the Islamic dress code.

Khadija:

Well, our dress code is much stricter, and peer pressure is so strong. For kids it is very difficult not to dress like your friends, unless inside your heart and your mind, you know what you are doing is right or better. I think if my kids didn't go to the Islamic school, I would have a very hard time guiding them, or making them wear things that are appropriate for our culture or religion. When you go shopping, lots of Canadian parents complained that everything that you buy for these young teenage girls are too short, too tight and show too much cleavage, so it is very hard to find clothes. If you go to Islamic clothing shops, kids really don't want to wear them because it is not in.

Tahira with children in a public school system offered her experience with finding proper and decent clothing for her daughters. Tahira expressed that, for her, dress code is very important and she gets very stressed out. According to her, "it is a struggle between my daughters when it comes to clothing. I go out in the stores and I cannot find anything that is suitable. For that matter my husband is very particular



about these things. So it's a big struggle for me, and I wish, I always wish that there should be a uniform in the public school".

Further, Tahira stated that in Islamic schools, Muslim girls do not have to experience the peer pressure of dressing in certain ways, which is often experienced by girls in the public school system.

Tahira:

When it comes to summer things like that, they [daughters] end up wearing T-shirts and things like that, so it is a struggle for me, it really is. I think if they were in the Islamic school that will be a big plus point there. I know they have uniforms in the Islamic school, and girls, you know, they don't feel any different if they are wearing full sleeves or the hijab, or whatever weather it is, but in a public school system, you do feel that if you are fully covered, and especially if you are wearing a hijab. I feel it and it's a very difficult task for them in that environment to try to follow whatever our teachings are.

Farah, whose children are in a public school, offered her comments about the dress code in the public school system. Farah expressed that in a public school system it would be better to have uniforms, and this would avoid indecent dressing. She further stated that girls in the schools should not be provocative because they are there for the education.

Two parents, who moved their children from the Islamic school to a public school, offered their experiences with regards to the Islamic dress code in the public school environment. Maria pointed out that since her daughter was used to the uniform in the Islamic school, the new environment in the public school certainly had some effect on the way she will be dressing in the future.

**Maria:**

In the public school, they gave us leaflets stating that you cannot wear very short shorts, but we don't care about that, because we are not going to do that. I am worried that my daughter will see all these girls wearing fashion clothes, or wearing short skirts, mini skirts, t-shirts, or very tight clothes. I don't want her to get used to these types of clothes, because this is not us, this is not how we dress, and this is not how we live. So I have to keep sort of reminding her of that, because she might think it's a nice fashion.

I know she doesn't have to wear the abaya or jilbab [a long coat] but at least it should be decent and not too tight, not too short. When she grows up she has to cover all her body.

Aisha also articulated her experiences with the Islamic dress code and how she finds it difficult to follow fashion in the public school environment.

**Aisha:**

I am not allowing my daughter to wear shorts, but sometimes she wants to, because she looks at other girls at school and she wants to copy them. I told her no, because we are different, and when I explained it to her, she understood. She doesn't say anything now, because she knows by herself. She knows it is haram [forbidden] and she cannot wear this, but, for example, sometimes, I let her wear capri pants and maybe a little sleeveless, because she still did not reach her puberty.

Natasha, who moved her children from a public school to an Islamic school, explained the experiences of her oldest daughter, who is in grade eight. According to Natasha, her daughter's experiences in the Islamic school will guide her to adjust in high school, since she will not be wearing the hijab and the jilbab anymore, and needed to dress according to Islamic requirements.

**Natasha:**

Right now, my daughter wears the hijab and jilbab [a long coat] and the uniform in the Islamic school, and she is fine with it. My daughter is looking forward to going to high

school next year, and I already talked to her that she has to make some serious adjustments to her wardrobe because, Islamically, she needs to dress differently, which is without the hijab, and that is the problem [because the hijab act as a as a barrier for any advances from opposite gender]. She has been in an Islamic school for the past two years, and she knows her limits, plus the home education. Once you have that Islamic experience at the elementary level it will help the girls tremendously to carry on.

Sana with children in the Islamic school offered her thoughts on following the Islamic dress code. According to her, “we know that dress code for girls is to wear the hijab and decent clothes and we know these since we are children. Girls from early age know that they should wear long sleeves and long skirt, even though they don’t wear the hijab”.

### **Hijab Experiences in the Islamic School System**

Four of the twelve parents with children in the Islamic school system expressed their experiences with the hijab and how it was perceived by the western media, especially after September 11. Rafi offered his experiences in light of September 11 and how the media portrayed Islam. For example, he stated that in the western hemisphere, if you see any woman wearing the hijab or a man with a beard, the first thing that comes to peoples’ minds is a ‘terrorist’. He further stated that this is because of the negative portrayal of Islam by the media, especially after September 11. Similar comments were made by Khadija who also thinks that the hijab is considered as an expression of fundamentalism.

Khadija:

Unfortunately the hijab is now considered a form of extremism in Islam, and because of media, it is strongly

influencing our views and our decisions. I find that, when I was growing up, people never really looked at a woman who wears the hijab as much, but now they look at them differently, like if they are extremists, or the followers of Bin Laden, or something. I think it is more hatred or disgust. It is a different look in their eyes. When I was growing up, few girls did wear the hijab, and if someone asked these girls about it, they just said it is part of the religion and that was end of it. Now it is so much deeper. They [people] think Muslim women are oppressed, and they don't have rights. They [people] think all negative things. I am sure that teachers understand in the public school, but most of the public is ignorant about the reasons, women wear the hijab.

Fahima, with children in the Islamic school, reflected on a negative experience she had with the hijab.

Fahima:

We get some comments, like Ninjas [wearing a tight head cover like Ninja warriors], just two days ago. My daughter, who is 11 years old, held her head high, and was proud to be called Muslim. I think this is because people judge you, what you look like, and they don't have knowledge.

Khadija, with children in the Islamic school also commented on negative experiences she has experienced because of the hijab. She stated that her daughter is very confident when she wears the hijab even though she herself does not wear it. She further expressed that her daughter does not care if someone looks at her because she is wearing the hijab. Khadija also expressed her belief that if her daughter went to a public school it would be a miracle that she would have chosen this on her own, unless she is forced to wear it, or she herself was wearing it.

Another parent who moved her children from a public school to an Islamic school also recalled her negative experience in the public school over the perception of the hijab.

Natasha:

Four years ago in the middle of the year, I decided to wear the hijab, and all of a sudden, I became the visible Muslim. Before that, I was like everybody else; I was a hockey mom, the soccer mom, and going to the school meetings, and all of the volunteering at the bake sale. All of a sudden, in a very small town with no other Muslims, I stood out. For me it was more of a political decision for my own children to make sure that everybody knows that we are Muslim, and that they have to recognize that we are part of the community.

Natasha agreed that, in some cases, the hijab is forced on girls, but the majority of Muslim girls choose to wear it.

I know in my son's high school, more and more Muslim girl students are wearing the hijab. It's still a handful, but they are visible somewhat. I know someone from the student body that thinks that Muslim girls are forced to wear it, perhaps that is true in some cases because the parents are too afraid of what their girls are going to be exposed to.

Sana, who moved her daughter from a public to an Islamic school, offered her comments about the hijab.

Sana:

My daughter already started way before we enrolled her in the Islamic school. Allhumdulillah [blessing of Allah], it was a positive thing and it was reinforcing the same ideas. I mean, seeing other girls wearing the hijab gives her a push forward to wear it, even earlier than we thought. I thought she would wear it around 12 or 13 years old. She is wearing it for a year now.

Sana also stated that she does not have any problems with regards to hijab because her daughter is in the Islamic school. She further expressed that her friends also told her that their daughters do not have any problem wearing the hijab in a public school. According

to Sana, "... it's a common thing now in Canada to see girls in hijab or at least in a scarf or covering their head." Rafi, with children in the Islamic school, commented on how Muslims can educate the greater community which may be misguided by the media about the perception of the hijab.

Rafi:

Sometimes, there is pressure and they feel that not everyone looks the same. This is the responsibility of the school and the community as well as the parent. We have to teach our kids that this is their identity. As a matter of fact, some of the Muslim sisters, they feel comfortable with the hijab. They are very confident. This is the only way we can show our identity. We have many kids that loose that confidence; they have what we say is an identity crisis; they are suffering from that. So I think problem is not the wearing of the hijab, the problem is, are we educating our kids to a maximum that they have that confidence [about wearing the hijab].

### **Hijab Experiences in the Public School System**

Alia with children in the public school system stated that they had no negative experiences with the hijab, and she credited this to the large number of Muslim students in the schools which their children attend.

Alia:

My daughter wears the hijab, and she does not have any problem with it. There are lots of girls in her school who are wearing the hijab, and I told you before that this school is a multicultural school. My daughter herself decided to wear the hijab and other girls are wearing it too.

Maria, who moved her children from the Islamic school to a public school, offered her views towards her daughter's on and off experience with the hijab, in the public school system.

**Maria:**

Well, my daughter wore the hijab for half year, and then she told me that she wanted to take it off. I said fine, take it off because she didn't reach puberty yet, but I made sure that she understood that once [she reaches the puberty] you put it on; that's it. But anyways, the children asked her why she wore this, but she didn't tell me anything about different treatment of her when she was wearing it, or wasn't in the school. Also, especially in Canada, they [people] are so diverse and are used to the sari, the Abaya or to our clothes.

Aisha, who also moved her children from the Islamic school to a public school, is hesitant to let her daughter wear the hijab because very few girls are wearing it.

**Aisha**

Actually, my daughter wants to wear the hijab, she didn't put it on yet, but you know, I am afraid a little bit for her, because no one is wearing the hijab. Actually, in her school, there are not many Muslims that live around this area and they are not in this school; maybe couple of them and most of them are boys.

**Aisha:**

There was a cultural day two days ago, so I send our traditional dress with my daughter. She told me she wanted to wear the hijab. Later, I asked her about the teacher's reaction, and she told me he just laughed, he didn't say anything. The kids on the other hand started to make fun, and asked why are you wearing this? She told them, because this is a Muslim uniform, and this is how we wear it, and we should cover our hair. But sometime, some teachers ask me when is she supposed to put this on, and why. They don't have any idea about the hijab, and why we put it on.

All the parents in both school systems offered their experiences with regard to their children in Windsor. The findings also illuminate various conceptions of parents regarding

the Islamic dress code. With respect to their experiences with the hijab, parents had very mixed views. All these views will be further elaborated upon in the Discussion section.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION, DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This chapter will start with an overview of the findings, followed by the discussion section, where the conformity and nonconformity of the findings with the existing literature will be explained. The section will conclude with a presentation of the implications of this study to related educational institutions, the Windsor Essex Board of Education, teachers, and parents.

### **Overview of the Findings**

The study indicates three major reasons that propel Muslim parents to choose the Islamic school system over the public school system, and are as follows: exposure to Islamic environment, curriculum content, pedagogy, and the student/teacher ratio. The study also shows that parents with children in the public school system chose that school system because of their previous personal experiences, and their cultural and religious beliefs and convictions. Other parents who chose the public school system based their decision on the availability of information with regard to school systems.

Parents who had children in a public school offered three reasons as to why they moved their sons and daughters to an Islamic school. These were: a) a lack of religious accommodation and acceptance in the public school system; b) social behaviour and communication patterns; and c) the curriculum content, and pedagogy. Parents who had their children in an Islamic school offered their reasons as to why they decided to move their children from an Islamic school to a public school. These reasons were: low academic standards with respect to the English language, and the large number of students, were among two factors that contributed to a decision to move their children into a public school.

## **Discussions**

### **Islamic Environment**

One of the key findings of the study is that parents value school environments that support, rather than contradict or even ignore, the needs of Muslim children. All parents, regardless of the school system they chose for their children, expressed that they value schools in which their children can freely perform religious duties which are a central component of Islam, and must be performed five times a day. Parents with children in Islamic schools offered the religious supportive environment as one of the reasons for choosing to send their children to this school. Those parents who had moved their children from one school system to another, regardless of school system, also mentioned that they value the support children get from schools. The study also reveals that Muslim parents consider the harmony between the school environment and the home environment as important. According to these parents, the Islamic environment is crucial to the upbringing of children in a society where values outside the home are different. Parents also revealed that Islamic schools promote the same values and reinforce the same ideology that are essential for their children, if they are to be able to practice their Islamic beliefs. This finding is in accordance with (James, 2004); Kelly (1997) and Zine (1997), who document Islamic schools provide a place for Muslim students to perform their religious duties freely.

In relation to performing religious duties, prayers are a central component, because they are one of the five pillars of Islam, and are required to be performed five times a day. This means that for the majority of practicing Muslims, performing prayers is very important, even if they are at school or at work. As a result, this lack of

accommodation to perform religious duties in public schools compels many parents to choose to send their children to Islamic schools. For example, as indicated by the findings, some parents like Rafi expressed that an Islamic school provides the opportunity for students to perform the five daily prayers. This accommodation however, is not available in public schools; that is, many public schools fail to provide space or the extra time for Muslim or any students who want to perform prayers.

The parents who chose Islamic schools did so because they consider Islamic education to be an integral element in creating an Islamic environment. The majority of parents believed that Islamic schools play a significant role in creating an environment that helps to instill Islamic values and beliefs in their children. As one parent put it, "... our first responsibility as [Muslim] parents is to make sure that we inculcate our values and our identities in our kids". This finding confirms literature that stipulates the importance of religion as part of children's school lives. For instance, Sarwar (1996) supports the need for Islamic education in order to create an environment that is meaningful, and promotes values of honesty, integrity, and concern for the development of social welfare, and strong sense of responsibility.

Findings of the study also indicate similar concerns expressed by the parents with children in the public schools, who also value Islam as part of their children's upbringing. These parents are concerned with the way public schools portray social values such as the use of inappropriate language, or relationships that are outside of marriage. Sarwar (1996) explains that the public education system also promotes moral values, but their outlook on life is more materialistic, as compared to the values that are promoted through religion and faith.

Khan (1996) describes faith as the central point of Islamic education. The Islamic codes, as presented by the Qur'an, are not merely words to be uttered and forgotten as a person goes about his or her practical worldly affairs; rather the codes orient the learning process in terms of knowledge, skills and values. When discussing the aims of Islamic education, values are given priority.

### Maintaining Islamic Identity and Values

Data in this study also provides parents' expressions of the reasons for the need to protect their children from environments that may influence them to lose their culture and religion. For instance, parents with children in an Islamic school stressed the importance of preserving cultural and religious identities. One parent stated that "I wanted them to be exposed more to the Islamic culture, rather than the Canadian culture. I want them to learn the values, the morals that we believe in, before they become adults and exposed to the Canadian culture." This fear, expressed by parents in this study, is in accordance with the literature that reports Muslim parents anguish over sending their children to a public school system (Yousif, 1993; Halstead, 1995; Zine 2000, and James 2004). James (2004) reports that many parents fear that if the environment is not supportive of their cultural or religious beliefs, children will lose their identity.

The present study also shows that parents who had children in a public school moved their children to an Islamic school after many encounters with social and moral issues. According to one parent, in her son's classroom, children discussed adult relationships that are not age appropriate, such as a mom's boyfriend or a father's girlfriend. According to her, "it is very difficult for them to feel the foundation of family

that we want to instill in them and this kind of behavior and communication patterns are not encouraged in Islam”. This finding is also in accordance with the literature that states that in Islam, much of the priority is given to moral and social values that encompass etiquette and mannerisms (Sarwar, 2004; Ashraf, 1996).

The study reveals that parents with children in the public school system are also concerned that their children will try to imitate or adopt the values of the mainstream culture. This finding is coherent with the literature that reports peer pressure as one of the contributing factors that cause some Muslim children to be pressured to adopt the values of the mainstream culture. According to Rashti (1994) and Zine (2001) those Muslim students who try to resist peer pressure are generally alienated by their peers. Similarly, Yousif (1993) also documents anxiety by parents over raising their children according to Islamic traditions, culture, and religion, which are, most of the time, in conflict with Canadian mainstream mores. However, almost all of the parents, regardless of the school system, expressed that their children are involved in other religious activities, and so, they could avoid the mainstream cultural influences. This finding is coherent with Gans (1997) who also supports this view of engaging youth and children in ethnic oriented activities in order to retain their cultural values and language.

### Importance of Language

Data in this study reveals that Language plays an important role in the choices that parents made about the schools to which they send their children. Ovando (1993) points out the importance of language in terms of giving individuals, groups and cultures

their identity. The data also reveals that there are two competing, yet valued languages that parents have to deal with: English and the Arabic language.

### *The Arabic Language*

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

### *The English Language*

The data in this study reveals that parents also valued their children learning good English, and that this fact would enable them to be successful in school. In fact, the desire for "good English" for their children was referenced as one of the reasons some parents chose to send their children to public schools. These parents stated that public schools offer meaningful resources for their children to learn ESL, and integrate into mainstream

Canadian classrooms, and society in general, for example more job opportunities. On the other hand, these very parents expressed the concerns that in learning the dominant language English, these children also learn words and phrases that are inappropriate, and are against the teachings of Islam; such as swearing, and openly discussing sex related topics. Even though the use of foul or offensive language is not permitted in the public schools, children do use it.

The desire for children to acquire English language competence, in order to function well in school, supports Miller's (2000) views, which stress the importance of learning English for minority students, whose first language is not English. According to Miller, minority children must achieve self-representation in the dominant language if they are to participate in mainstream social and academic contexts. Miller (2000) also states that learning the dominant language will help minority students renegotiate their identities, and gain necessary skills, so they can integrate into school, and later, into the larger society. The contradictory value of learning English posed some problems at home when children communicated with their parents differently.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

The study reveals that one of the reasons for many parents to enroll their children in an Islamic school is to avoid the public school curriculum, which promotes educational practices that are contrary to the teachings of Islam. Curriculum subjects such as health and arts presented concerns for some parents. For example, Rafi expressed that one of the main reasons he enrolled his children in the Islamic school, was to avoid subjects such as the arts, where music and dance are part of the curriculum. According to Rafi, the

pedagogy of music and dance generally requires that students have close contact with the opposite gender; a requirement that is contrary to the teachings of Islam. Music and dance are also discouraged, since these areas involve public displays and physical contact between boys and girls. This finding is in tune with literature that supports evidence of a curriculum that is in contradiction to what some Muslims perceive as contrary to their faith (Ghosh, 2004; James, 2004, and Zine, 2001). According to Zine, educational practices in subjects such as music, dance, or physical education, are against the teachings of Islam because such activities usually require close physical contact between boys and girls.

### Sex Education

An overwhelming majority of participants in this study reported their concerns and frustrations over the implementation of sex education in the health curriculum. Data in this study show that parents with children in Islamic schools were critical of the level of information these schools offer to children. The parents argue that the information is often too vague and meaningless. For example, one parent stated that “teachers they don’t go into details like talking about the body changes, the hormones or your physical changes, they explain just the basic, such as you have one, two three parts of the body and that is it”. Some parents even suggested that topics related to puberty could be introduced, if they have separate classes for both boys and girls. The need to meaningfully engage children in learning about puberty is in accordance with Islamic teachings that do encourage Muslims to learn about issues related to sex. Sarwar (1996) states that asking about sex, and related topics are not considered a sin or a shameful act;



in fact, it is a part of the religious upbringing of a child. What is not permissible is the use of this knowledge to promote pre-marital relationships, or use the information to try to engage in a sexual act or other activities that could lead to committing a sin. Islam, like all other religions, preaches chastity and morality; however, Islam goes further by enforcing strict rulings and punishment for pre-marital and extra-marital sex. In the Quran Allah says: Do not go near to adultery. Surely it is a shameful deed and evil, opening roads (to other evils) (17:32).

In contrast to Islamic schools, the study shows that parents with children in the public school system are distressed with the use of explicit materials to teach young children about sex. Some parents regarded sex education as one of the reasons to move their children from a public school to an Islamic school system. One parent who decided to move her children from a public school expressed her anger towards the pedagogy of sexual topics such as birth control and sexual relationships in her son's grade six classroom. According to her, when she complained about sexual content, the teachers informed her that each year the students are becoming more sexually active, so this is why the school feels there is a need to discuss these materials in early grades. Consequently, those parents with children in the public school system expressed concerns about the contents of the health curriculum taught in class. Data also indicates that parents with children in the public school system want to be informed about the information that is given to their children during sex education. These parents acknowledged that topics related to puberty and physical changes should be age appropriate, and should be given without going into intimate details that include sexual relationships. One parent expressed that discussing sex related topics in public schools is

another way of promoting sex. This finding is in tune with the literature that supports Muslim parents' objections to sex education. Sanjakdar (2000) affirms the views of parents that topics such as 'free sex', 'safe sex', and 'boyfriend /girlfriend relationships, as they are discussed in contemporary sexual health education, are devoid of any responsibility and accountability, and hence, are in direct violation of appropriate Islamic behaviour and Islamic law" ( p. 7). Halstead (1997) also supports the views of Muslim parents. According to Halstead, sex education tends to undermine the Islamic concept of family life, and Muslim parents have valid reasons to withdraw their children from sex education classes.

#### **Student-Teacher Ratio and Class size**

The study shows that the teacher/student ratio was mentioned by some parents as a learning enhancing factor, while one parent saw it as a barrier to learning; specifically, in the interactions that students develop among each other. Those parents who saw small class sizes as a learning enhancement mentioned that in the Islamic school, small class sizes are an important factor in developing a good relationship with students, as well as with teachers. A similar situation regarding the number of students in classrooms influenced another parent to move her children from a public school to an Islamic school. Parents believed that in public schools, students in a large class do not learn well, and the teachers are unable to give students individualized attention. This finding is in tune with Finn and Pannozzo (2003), who report that when class sizes are reduced (i.e. is less than 20 students) they are more manageable and students can better concentrate on learning.

One parent, however, saw small class size as a disadvantage in the Islamic school. Sakeena stated that her son wanted to have more friends, and in her son's classroom, there were only five students: three girls and two boys, and so it was very difficult for her son to have a meaningful choice of friends. Blatchford, Edmonds and Martin, in 2003, document that increase or decrease in class size have no correlation with peer social interaction.

It was interesting to note that the idea of small class sizes were a positive factor for some parents who moved their children to an Islamic school, whereas it became a negative factor for other parents. These opposite findings suggest that parents hold varied experiences about the number of students in the Islamic school classroom. A number of studies have been conducted in this area to discover the variables, or factors, that facilitate learning in large and small classes. Finn, (2003), & Pedder, (2006), report that in large classes, (twenty-one and above in the public system), a teacher cannot attend to the needs of all the students, while in smaller classes, (less than fifteen), problems may occur regarding peer relations, and the teacher/student relationship.

During my time as a teacher in an Islamic school, I found that class size does matter. I taught a class of twenty students, as well as a class of only six students. There was a vast difference in learning and behaviour in each class, and it is not accurate to assume that a class of six students is as easily manageable as a larger class. In my experience, teaching a small class requires similar disciplinary skills for a class of twenty students. The variables that influence the learning environment depend on how well the teacher communicates with the students, the peer relationships, and also the kind of learning that is offered in the classroom. Based on my own experiences with small class

sizes, group work in small classes is difficult since there is a limited choice of partners to work with.

### **Celebrating Holidays**

Data in this study reveals that parents with children in Islamic schools have positive experiences in terms of their children's schooling, especially when the children celebrate Islamic religious holidays together. Parents expressed that these religious celebrations have a strong impact on their children, as all the students fast together during the month of Ramadan and celebrate the Eid festival as one community.

On the contrary, parents with children in the public system hold different views about the celebration of holidays in the schools. There were those parents who expressed concerns about the celebration of holidays such as Halloween, and Valentine's Day. One parent mentioned that when her children were young she allowed them to celebrate these holidays because she thought that her children would be alienated, and would not understand why they should not celebrate them. Other parents however, did not share these views, and were, in fact, fine with these holidays. To these parents, holidays are designed for fun and they should be open to such activities since Canada is a multicultural society. One parent, however, expressed that celebrating holidays is fine as long as it does not clash with the tenets of Islam.

Data in the study also reveals that parents who had children in public schools moved their children because of the negative experiences that they encountered with the celebration of holidays. Natasha, for instance, expressed her distress over lack of knowledge about Islamic values and beliefs in public schools. She further stated that

Islamic holidays, such as celebrating religious holidays, or observing Ramadan, are not acknowledged in public schools as compared to other holidays.

Natasha's experiences and those of other parents are similar to the arguments presented by James (2004) and Merry (2005), who document that Muslim children in the public school environment are alienated, and their religious and cultural values are compromised by the implementation of certain educational practices, such as celebrating Halloween or Christmas, and participation in school dances or musicals. This finding is in tune with Merry's study which reports the discontent experienced by Muslim parents over the Eurocentric educational practices exhibited in the celebration of Halloween, Valentine's Day, and religious holidays such as, Christmas, and Easter. Merry (2005) stresses the importance of having a school culture which is coherent with the child's culture and religion; culture and religion are crucial in helping to sustain an individual's identity.

### **Practicing Religion in Public Schools**

The study also indicates that while practicing religion in public schools was important for Muslim students, this undertaking challenged their sense of identity. Findings in the study indicate that parents expressed two contradicting experiences regarding the way their children are treated in public schools: when practicing Islam and when engaged in Islam based celebrations such as Ramadan. Parents expressed that teachers and staff are not educated enough to explain to other students about Muslims, and their religious duties or beliefs. Additionally, as one parent expressed, Muslim children are ridiculed and teased by their classmates because of their religious

convictions. Overall, for these Muslim children, practicing Islam in public schools is important but challenging. On the other hand, those parents who found public schools accommodating to their children, complimented the school administration for providing accommodation, such as a separate room during lunchtime for students who were required to observe Ramadan. Accommodation also included the provision of a separate room during school dances to which students who did not wish to participate could go.

These two contrary responses over the same issue of respecting and accommodating Muslim students, in the public school system, deserve detailed analysis. The questions to be asked are why do two different schools in the same public system respond or treat students differently during Ramadan. Does each school make up its own policy regarding the respect of the religious practices of minority students?

To find the answers for these questions we first need to look at how multicultural education is implemented in public schools and how these schools teach students to respect different cultures and religions. Second, we need to discover the role of school administrations, especially the role of the principal, in facilitating respect for minority students. Banks (1993) explains that in order to transform schools, and to implement educational equality, all the major components of the school must be changed. Focusing only on one area, such as acknowledging cultural days, will not create a truly multicultural education. Most of the time, the focus is on teachers because they are the ones who are dealing with the culturally diverse student population on a regular basis. The school principal however, has the authority and the means to bring about transformational changes. Reihl (2000) reports that principals are often not ready for change, because in order to bring change, they have to admit that there are problems

related to race, class or gender. It is crucial that school principals monitor the daily affairs in the school; a process that must involve parents, teachers, and the ethnically diverse community, in participating in fostering a multicultural education. As Reihl reports, a principal in a school is more effective when he or she acknowledges the increasing needs of culturally diverse students, and seeks new resources to bridge the gap between the minority students and the mainstream students.

### **School Culture and Environment**

Data in this study reveals that parents in the public school system have mixed experiences in terms of school environment and how school, staff and the administration treat parents of ethnic backgrounds. One parent expressed that teachers in her daughter's school were not welcoming because of the language barrier. She further stated that teachers and staff in public schools did not attempt to understand her concerns. This finding is in tune with the literature that documented similar negative accounts regarding discrimination. Haw (1994), Jenkins (1997) and Zine (1997) affirm similar discriminatory incidents throughout Britain, and in some urban schools in Canada, where students and parents were not welcomed because of their language, religion or a cultural background.

On the contrary, the data in this study reveals that parents with children in Islamic schools expressed that the Islamic school's friendly environment helped them to build a strong relationship with teachers and staff. Parents also commented that because of the close knit community, everyone knows everyone else. One parent described Islamic schools as one big family. She further expressed that, because of a friendly environment,

she can easily communicate with teachers and administration. Ezzeldein (2005), however, viewed this close knit school environment as a drawback, preventing Islamic schools from progressing professionally. He also suggested that Islamic schools could learn how to create a professional school environment from the public school system

### **Co-education and Gender Mixing**

The study reveals that parents with children in the public system are more concerned with issues of gender mixing, as compared to parents whose children attend Islamic schools. One parent expressed that girls should have their personal space because, in public schools, girls and boys interact with each other without restrictions. The issue of sex education was mentioned again in the context of co-ed classes. The majority of parents showed concerns about the manner in which teachers in junior and senior grades address issue of puberty; issues that cause embarrassment for some girls, especially if boys are attending the class. Muslim parents feel that teachers in the public schools should acknowledge gender differences when it comes to the interaction of boys and girls, because, in some cultures or religions, free mixing of two genders is not allowed.

The study reveals that most parents with children in Islamic schools are satisfied with co-education, because the school enforces strict rules which dictate that girls and boys should be separated in a way in which there is no close physical contact among them. Islam clearly states that boys and girls must be separated as soon as they reach the age of puberty (Sarwar, 1996; Zine, 2006). However, practicing these rules differs among schools, depending on the administration, and the community that supports it. For Sakeena, who moved her son from an Islamic school to a public school, the application of



these strict rules in the Islamic school, where her son had attended, were more damaging than favorable. She stated that by enforcing these rules, Islamic schools create more distance between boys and girls, which she viewed as unhealthy. As a result of her son's negative experiences, Sakeena concluded that Islamic schools do not teach students to respect each other; on the contrary, they dictate to the students with whom they can or cannot have conversations. The approach by Islamic schools to separate the genders, in Sakeena's view, would not help her son learn to have respectable relationships with girls.

Sakeena's views about co-education and gender mixing in Islamic schools opens a discussion of how much interaction should be allowed between boys and girls in Islam. Islamic doctrines do not have set rules to control interactions between boys and girls, however, according to the Qur'an and the sunnah, girls and boys cannot have close physical contact with each other. In most Islamic schools students are allowed to talk to each other in the classroom, because of adult supervision, but once they are out of the classrooms, boys and girls interact separately. For most Muslim children, this restriction is normal because of the fact that the same Islamic teachings are followed at home.

The study also reveals that parents in both school systems mentioned single sex classes as being beneficial for both genders. For instance, one parent, Tahira, mentioned her concern regarding her daughter's inhibition to approach male teachers. According to Tahira, her daughters shy away when asking questions of a male teacher. She mentioned that she prefers that subjects such as math and science have teachers who are the same gender as the students, so as not to risk their academic achievement. While recognizing, and acknowledging Tahira's concerns, it is worth noting that girls, like her daughters, are very competent in math and science content. The difficulty they have is with approaching

male teachers with questions, and this difficulty is mainly because of the gender of the teachers, rather than the content of the subject per se. However, living in a co-educational environment, it is not possible to be segregated all the time.

The findings that parents favour single sex classes is in agreement with literature that documents that girls and boys pay more attention to their studies, and excel more academically, when they are in a separate classroom. This finding is coherent with literature that reports high achievement in a single sex class (Carpenter & Hayden, 1987 and Warrington & Younger, 2001). According to Warrington and Younger, single sex classes are seen by staff, students, and parents, to provide a protected environment for learning, one which is more conducive to the learning of both girls and (to a lesser extent) boys. They further state that single sex classes also provide an insulated environment free from distractions, and off task behavior of the other sex.

The findings show that some parents prefer single -sex school over co-education. Because of the gender teachings in Islam, some Muslim girls shy away from asking male teachers, however, this finding does not suggest that Muslim girls are not competent in subjects such as math or science. However, literature does reports that girls start out ahead of boys in early grades, boys go on to surpass girls in higher grades in the area of mathematics and science (Fennema & Sherman, 1978; Sadker & Sadker 1993; Sadker & Zittleman, 2005). Fennema & Sherman (1978) find significant sex-related differences in math and science. The authors show that boys perceive mathematics as being more useful than girls do, and this difference usually starts in middle school, becoming more significant in high school. Also, male students are found to be more confident in mathematics compared to females, and that boys consider mathematic as a male domain.

In summary the study found that Muslim parents with children in Islamic schools emphasize the importance of exposing their children to an Islamic environment, where children can learn and practice their religious duties freely. Muslim parents also expressed that some curriculum subjects in the public school system, such as arts and health, are instructed in a way that interferes with their religious and cultural values; examples being figurative art, music, and dance, in the Arts curriculum. The majority of the parents expressed the view that sex education in the health curriculum should be age appropriate, and should be taught separately; that is, boys and girls separate. Parents with children in Islamic schools expressed that there is a need to modify the existing style of teaching in health education, especially for students in junior grades.

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

## **Parents' Experiences with Islamic Dress Code and Hijab**

Migration and globalization have spread a wide variety of religions, including Islam, to places where they are regarded as new, and so occasioning religious settlement. Religious settlement, according to Bouma & Govan (2000), refers to the processes where a religion migrates to a place and is incorporated into its religious economy. Bouma and Govan explain this process in terms of individual experiences, organizational responses, and adaptations, as well as the ways in which the society and culture interact with the religious group. In light of Bouma's definition of religious settlement, some Muslim women adapted to local practices, while some women experience difficulties retaining their cultural and religious identities. In this study many Muslim parents with children in both school systems mentioned their positive and negative experiences regarding their religious settlement in terms of adhering to the Islamic dress code and the hijab.

### **The Islamic Dress Code**

Parents with children in both school systems mentioned that it is an immense undertaking for Muslim girls to adhere to the rulings of Islam regarding dress code. In terms of dress code, Islam has clear rulings for both men and women, that is, both are required to dress modestly. For women, however, the rulings are stricter and more detailed compared to men. For instance on one occasion the Qur'an states:

‘Say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof. "Say to the believing man that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them, and God is well acquainted with all they do'. Quran: 24.30.

The study reveals that parents expressed that the Islamic dress code is stricter than that of the general Canadian population. One parent stated that the uniform in Islamic schools makes it easier for girls to adhere to the Islamic dress code, since these days, it is very frustrating to shop for girls' clothes in general, and for teenage clothes in particular.

Similar comments about dress were made by many parents with children in public schools. According to these parents, peer pressure makes it difficult for their daughters to conform to the Islamic codes. Tahira recounted the same difficulty of finding proper and decent dress for her daughters in clothing stores. She also stated that her husband is more concerned about how their daughters dress, which puts her under more pressure to find suitable clothing for their daughters. Tahira further elaborated that her struggle and frustrations could be lessened if public schools adopt uniforms for students.

Tahira:

Yes, dress code is very important to me and I got very stressed out and it is a struggle between my daughters, when it comes to clothing. I go out in the stores and I cannot find anything that is suitable. For that matter my husband is very particular about these things. So it's a big struggle for me, and I wish, I always wish that there should be a uniform in the public school.

This finding is in tune with Osler and Hussain (1995) who report similar types of pressure faced by Muslim mothers with children, in British state schools. According to Osler and Hussain, Muslim mothers felt a huge responsibility for the upbringing of their children. They further report that Muslim women felt they were under considerable pressure and subjected to heavy scrutiny in the wider family, as well as by the Muslim community, if their children, especially their daughters, failed to behave in an acceptable

way. Osler and Hussain also raised questions about the role and the responsibility of fathers in the upbringing of their children.

The study also indicates that parents are frustrated that western shops offer limited appropriate and decent clothes for their daughters. One parent expressed that if they try to shop in western Islamic stores, the clothes are not trendy, which creates a struggle between parent and daughter. The challenge is to find trendy and decent clothes that their daughters would wear, and feel comfortable and fashionable in, among their peers. Khadija expressed that clothes that are sold for teenage girls are too short, too tight and show too much cleavage, and so, it is very hard to find appropriate clothes.

#### Experiences of the Hijab in both School Systems

The study illustrates that parents with children in both school systems view wearing the hijab as an important aspect of being a Muslim. The data in this study reveals that parents with children in the public school system stated that their daughters have not reported the wearing of the hijab as problematic. According to these parents, there are many other girls who wear the hijab in public schools their children attend, consequently making it easier and acceptable. However, for another parent in a similar situation, the experience was not positive. Aisha, who moved her children from an Islamic school to a public school, related her daughter's negative experiences, while wearing the hijab, and attributed this to ignorance and a lack of understanding about Islam as a religion. Aisha gave an example of an incident that happened to her daughter during the celebration of Multicultural Day. Aisha's daughter was ridiculed and laughed at by other children in class for wearing the hijab as her way of celebrating Multicultural Day. When this

happened, Aisha mentioned that the teacher was not very responsive, and did not try to explain to other children in the classroom what the hijab is, and to intervene when they ridiculed her daughter. As a result of this incident Aisha, and many parents, are skeptical about the possibility of public schools respecting Muslims' religious beliefs. The above views warrant discussion concerning the knowledge teachers possess about cultures, and religious beliefs, that differ from their own. Landorf & Pagan (2005) explain that the hijab can be used as a "touch stone" to provide students with useful information about Islam, and the reasons behind wearing the hijab. In schools, teachers can use incidents of discrimination towards religious beliefs or practices, as opportunities to investigate cultural and religious differences, such as the wearing of the hijab. An opportunity should not be missed for discussion on how the hijab is used as a social, political and religious expression of Islam, by different groups, both inside and outside, the religion. According to Moore (2006), who stresses that Social Studies teachers must play a vital role in educating students about Islam. He further documents that teachers can help transmit accurate information, stop negative stereotypes, reduce bias and discrimination, and improve intercultural understanding.

The two different experiences which emerged in this study could be due to the fact that one school, which models meaningful multicultural practices, does so because half the student population is from an ethnic minority, while in the school that Aisha's children attend, multicultural practices are limited because there are few Muslims, and other ethnic minority groups, in general.

Findings of this study indicate that, in general, parents in both Islamic and public schools expressed concerns with the stereotypical image of the hijab that is portrayed by

the media. Two parents related their responses to the misrepresentation of the hijab in the mainstream media, as well by individuals. According to one parent, the hijab is seen as a form of extremism because of how the media portrayed it. She further stated that the hijab is linked with extremist groups related to Bin Laden, and that puts women, who are wearing the hijab, in a difficult position. She pointed out that she thought, "... it is more hatred or disgust". She further mentioned that when she was growing up, girls were wearing the hijab, but it was more part of the religious dress code as compared to now, where people think that women, who are wearing it, are oppressed and have no rights. Jafri (1998) points out that Muslim women are subjected to stereotypical comments because of the tension and negative responses to the hijab by the western media. In other words, within the western media, the hijab has become a symbol of the gendered oppression of Muslim women (Ruby, 2004). According to Ruby, the majority of print media suggests that women who wear the hijab are subjugated, and the wearing of the hijab should be condemned.

Fahima, whose children are in an Islamic school, recounted her negative experiences with the hijab, when she and her daughter were referred to as Ninjas<sup>¶</sup> by some teenagers in the mall. She expressed her disappointment with the way mainstream people perceive others from different cultures or religions. She pointed out that people judge one on how one looks in ignorance of different cultural and religious values. This treatment of Fahima and her daughter, in a public place, is a usual response from people who see Muslim girls wearing a hijab as oppressed, or that Islam does not value education for women (Zine, 2001).



The study also indicates that parents with children in Islamic schools expressed the need to build self esteem in Muslim children, so that they can educate others. According to Rafi, the peer pressure to be like everyone else, on Muslim children, is so huge that they either feel alienated, or become like everyone else. He further stated that it is the school and the community's responsibility to provide guidance and support so that Muslim children are confident enough to think that wearing the hijab is part of their identity. He stated that he thought "... the problem is not wearing the hijab, the problem is, are we educating our kids to a maximum that they have that confidence of adopting the hijab".

The findings of this study are in agreement with the literature that suggests Islam is vilified in the west because of its alleged repressive treatment of women (Rashti, 1994; Bullock, 1998; Zine, 2001; Hoodfar, Kelly, 2003 and Haddad, 2006). Rashti (1994) reports her experiences with respect to the stereotyping of Muslim women in Canadian society. According to Rashti, Muslim women are considered subjugated and secluded. Furthermore, veiled Muslim women are seen as a symbol of backwardness, and the veil was considered as the most visible sign of the inferiority of Islamic societies.

In conclusion, the findings of this study support the views that exist on the interpretation of the hijab in the western society. The first finding is that the wearing of the hijab represents the oppression of Muslim women, and those Muslim women are victims of religious practices that force them to wear the hijab. The second dominant view of the hijab is that of fundamentalism; that the wearing of the hijab is a religious symbol to state their existence as Muslims.

## Conclusion

Overall, the current Ontario curriculum fails to address or recognize the culture and religion of Muslims. The only recognition that public schools give to Islam is celebrating multiculturalism on one day. Again, I will offer my own personal experience which happened in my daughter's school during a celebration of multiculturalism. This experience will help to gauge how mainstream people perceive these celebrations. A multicultural day is partially designed to educate students in general, and mainstream Canadians in particular, about the heritage of ethnic minorities. For instance, students may be informed about why someone wears a turban or why a Muslim girl wears a hijab. However, what I noticed in my daughter's school is that on the Multicultural Day, the school was full of mainly ethnic minority groups. Since I was a member of the school council I wanted to discuss this point with the principal in the school council meeting. The principal, though very sensitive to the needs of ethnic students in his school, could not understand why I was troubled by this. For him it was a successful event because there were samosas along with other ethnic food, music and dance.

This I argue is how multicultural day is perceived by most educators: a single day to bring music and dances to the schools, so the school can claim that they have fulfilled the needs of ethnic minorities. Research supports that celebrating multicultural activities for only a day or two is not enough to fulfill the educational needs of any ethnic or religious group (Beirsto and Carrigan, 2004; Ghosh, 2004; James, 2004; Rahnema, 2006 and Zine, 2001). This shows that most schools focus on the celebrations, and do very little to teach about ethnic minority groups in general, and religious groups, in particular. Ghosh and Abdi (2004) put forward an important point meant to redefine multicultural

education. They argue that “multicultural education must recognize the politics of difference and culture, and capitalize on the potential offered by difference, in order to develop it as a creative force, rather than treat it as a deficiency” (p. 43). In other words, we need to look at the school as a venue to bring about social change, which means we need to move away from celebrating cultural festivities, and start educating students on how to respect each other’s values and beliefs through the curriculum.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The findings of the present study have implications for the Canadian education system, The Windsor-Essex Board of Education, and public school administrators. The study findings can be utilized along with other studies that were conducted in Ontario on the educational needs of Muslim children in public schools.

*First* this study provides a snap shot of the education system in Canada, particularly in Windsor, Ontario. This study provides information about the educational needs of Muslim children in Windsor public schools because Ontario schools are still focused on a curriculum that is Eurocentric rather than addressing the educational needs of ethnically diverse students. The education policy makers will benefit from this study when they become aware of the problems and challenges Muslim children face with respect to religious accommodations, such as prayers. The study shows that Muslim children feel alienated in public schools because of the Christian based curriculum activities throughout the school year. According to Mallea (1987), who explains the pivotal role that the public curriculum plays in creating a cultural hegemony, where the knowledge and the values are controlled by the dominant culture, and are transmitted

through the public curriculum. Therefore, it is suggested that education policy makers should take a step to design a curriculum which is devoid of cultural hegemony in order to avoid larger tensions between the mainstream culture, and religious and ethnic minority groups. Furthermore, through this study, it is critical that the public curriculum also be modified in areas such as the arts, health and physical education, to reflect religious sensitivity.

*Second*, the public school system should not focus solely on celebrating one or two multicultural days, rather, it should focus on educating children about sensitive issues such as wearing of the hijab or fasting during the Ramadan. Also, public school teachers should have more knowledge about the cultural reality of their classroom; that is, it is important that schools in Windsor provide teachers and staff with the tools to understand the nature of the diverse student body, many of which may be new to the country.

The findings of this study have implications for the school administrators, principals and teachers. From the study it was evident that some parents commented on how school administrators and staff showed ignorance towards Muslims' religious beliefs and practices. This finding has implications for school principals, in that they need to be aware of the realities of the Muslim student population in their schools. Principals should organize workshops to educate in-service teachers about the values and religious beliefs of all the minority groups that are present in the school. This is necessary in order to build a friendly and respectable environment for all the students. The study also recommends that public school principals ask for a Muslim mentor, or a Mosque leader, to inform public school teachers of many objections related to curriculum subjects, such as music, dance and sex education. Most teachers in the public schools are not conscious of why

Muslim students act or react to certain situations, such as working in groups with the opposite gender. Furthermore, sex education can be implemented in a public school, by inviting Muslim teachers to provide how information about sex education could be respectful to Islamic teachings.

*Third*, the findings of this study have implications for the Muslim parents whose children are attending public schools because of the expressed concern with the minimal representation of Muslims in public schools, which impacts on children's celebration of Muslim holidays. It is recommended that Muslim parents should be more pro-active and take leadership roles in school related responsibilities, such as school councils. Another suggestion for Muslim parents is to get involved in school based activities, such as Multicultural Day, sports events, or even to volunteer to help in classrooms. The study also suggests that the school board and the Muslim organizations in Windsor should work with each other to arrange workshops which can help bridge the gap between culture.,. These workshops could be part of professional development days, so that the teachers are more informed about what to expect from students of different religious backgrounds.

*Lastly*, the findings of this study have implications for Islamic schools in Windsor. It provides information about the needs of Muslim children who are recent immigrants and lack English language skills because of inadequate ESL resources in Islamic schools. The study recommends that Islamic schools provide more assistance and adequate educational resources in English for students who are new immigrants. There is a dire need for more certified teachers in the area of ESL, in Islamic schools.

## Future Research

The findings of this study point to several directions for future research.

*First*, research is needed to determine how Islamic schools are performing academically.

*Second*, research is required to uncover how the implementation of multicultural education can prevent bias or ignorance toward religious and cultural practices, such as wearing of the hijab, or observing Ramadan in public schools. *Third*, research is needed to explore the co relation of cultural coherence between home and school. This is important because children can practice their religious beliefs without any pressure and any conflicts that could arise if the values and beliefs taught at home are not parallel with the values that are taught at school. Also research is needed to look into the parenting styles of Muslim parents in upbringing the children according to their religious beliefs or cultural beliefs or both. Future research is also needed to look at the Muslim children's perspective on many issues such as celebrating holidays, participating in school dances, issues with co-education.

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

## End notes

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<sup>i</sup> The USA PATRIOT Act, commonly known as the "Patriot" Act, is an Act of Congress that United States President George W. Bush signed into law on October 26, 2001. The backronym stands for " Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001" (Public Law Pub.L. 107-56). The act expands the authority of US law enforcement agencies for the stated purpose of fighting terrorism in the United States and abroad. Among its provisions, the Act increases the ability of law enforcement agencies to search telephone, e-mail communications, medical, financial and other records; eases restrictions on foreign intelligence gathering within the United States; expands the Secretary of the Treasury's authority to regulate financial transactions, particularly those involving foreign individuals and entities; and enhances the discretion of law enforcement and immigration authorities in detaining and deporting immigrants suspected of terrorism-related acts. The act also expands the definition of terrorism to include domestic terrorism, thus enlarging the number of activities to which the USA Patriot Act's expanded law enforcement powers can be applied. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USA\\_PATRIOT\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USA_PATRIOT_Act))

<sup>ii</sup> Islamophobia refers to a fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents that translates into individual, ideological and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination" (Zine, 2003).

<sup>iii</sup> Ninja word is used as a negative remark because of the similarities between the hijab and the tight head cover of Ninja warriors

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH**

**STUDY CONDUCTED  
BY  
GHAZALA AHMED (MASTER STUDENT)**

**UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR**

Dear Parents,

I am a Master student at the University of Windsor. I am conducting a research on the experiences of Muslim parents who have children in schools in Windsor. The proposed research will contribute towards the fulfilment of a Masters in Education degree. My research is supervised by Dr. Dlamini Nombuso, Associate Professor at the University of Windsor, Ontario.

My intention for conducting this research is to explore the reasons for the fast growing trend of Muslim parents enrolling their children in private Islamic schools in Windsor. I am also interested in how gender plays a part when selecting schools for children.

If you are willing to participate please contact me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Any information that is obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with the participants will remain confidential. All the interviews will be coded or assigned a number to maintain confidentiality. The data will be kept locked and will be destroyed within two years of the completion of this research project.

Sincerely,

Ghazala Ahmed

## Appendix B

### LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: *Exploring School Choices for Muslim Children in Windsor*

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by **Ghazala Ahmed**, from the **Education Department** at the University of Windsor. The proposed research will contribute towards a Master thesis. My research is supervised by Dr. Dlamini, Associate Professor at the University of Windsor.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact me (student researcher), at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or my **Faculty Supervisor at (519)253-3000 Ext 2331**.

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The research focus and the central question offered for this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of Muslim parents regarding their children's schooling in Windsor.

#### PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be contacted by the researcher to conduct a semi-structured interview. The interview will be recorded on audio tape and notes will be taken to assist the researcher in recording the interview process. Since Islamic teaching recommends that both males and females should avoid situations where males and females are alone therefore, for female participants, the interview will take place at a location convenient to the participant and conducive to audio recording and privacy and for male participants a phone interview will be the option to conduct the interview.

#### POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

During the interview session if you want to withdraw, or that you are unable to continue because of some emotional aspect of the interview you are free to do so. If you need some assistance to cope or manage the emotional distress the researcher has provided with resources and the name of the contact person who can help the participant if needed.

Contact Person:

Jacqueline Couch (519)255-1127  
Victim Service/Multicultural Liaison  
Coordinator Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County

#### POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Windsor community will benefit from this study because little or no research has been done into the experiences of Muslim parents regarding their children's education. This type of research has mainly been conducted in larger cities such as Toronto and Montreal.

#### PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

No payment is involved in this research study.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

All names and the data will be kept confidential and will be coded or assigned a number to maintain confidentiality. The data will be kept locked in a filing cabinet and will be destroyed after two years of the completion of this research project.

#### PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study.

#### FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE SUBJECTS

Feedback for this result will be provided through copies of thesis and also on the website of ethics board review.

<http://web4.uwindsor.ca/units/researchEthicsBoard/studyresultsforms.nsf/VisitorView?OpenForm>

Date when results are available: January, 2008

#### SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

This data will be used in subsequent studies.

Do you give consent for the subsequent use of the data from this study?

No

Yes

I give my permission for the data to be used in the subsequent studies

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3916; e-mail: lbunn@uwindsor.ca.

#### SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study **Exploring School Choices for Muslim Children in Windsor** as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

#### SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix C**

### **Parent Consent Form**

#### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

Title of Study: *Exploring School Choices for Muslim Children in Windsor*

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by **Ghazala Ahmed**, from the **Education Department** at the University of Windsor. The proposed research will contribute towards a Master thesis. My research is supervised by Dr. Dlamini, Associate Professor at the University of Windsor.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact me (student researcher), at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or my **Faculty Supervisor at (519)253-3000 Ext 2331**.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The research focus and the central question offered for this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of Muslim parents regarding their children's schooling in Windsor.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be contacted by the researcher to conduct a semi-structured interview. The interview will be recorded on audio tape and notes will be taken to assist the researcher in recording the interview process. Since Islamic teaching recommends that both males and females should avoid situations where males and females are alone therefore, for female participants, the interview will take place at a location convenient to the participant and conducive to audio recording and privacy and for male participants a phone interview will be the option to conduct the interview.

#### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

During the interview session if you want to withdraw, or that you are unable to continue because of some emotional aspect of the interview you are free to do so. If you need some assistance to cope or manage the emotional distress the researcher has provided with resources and the name of the contact person who can help the participant if needed.

Contact Person: Jacqueline Couch (519)255-1127

Victim Service/Multicultural Liaison

Coordinator Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County

#### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Windsor community will benefit from this study because little or no research has been done into the experiences of Muslim parents regarding their children's education. This type of research has mainly been conducted in larger cities such as Toronto and Montreal.

#### **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

No payment is involved in this research study.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

All names and the data will be kept confidential and will be coded or assigned a number to maintain confidentiality. The data will be kept locked in a filing cabinet and will be destroyed after two years of the completion of this research project.

#### PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study.

#### FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE SUBJECTS

Feedback for this result will be provided through copies of thesis and also on the website of ethics board review.

Web address:  
<http://web4.uwindsor.ca/units/researchEthicsBoard/studyresultsforms.nsf/VisitorView?OpenForm>

Date when results are available: January, 2008

#### SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

This data will be used in subsequent studies.

Do you give consent for the subsequent use of the data from this study?  Yes  
 No

I give my permission for the data to be used in the subsequent studies

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3916; e-mail: lbunn@uwindsor.ca.

#### SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study **Exploring School Choices for Muslim Children in Windsor** as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

#### SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix D

### CONSENT FOR AUDIO TAPING

Research Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of the Project: Exploring School Choices for Muslim Children in Windsor

I consent to the audio taping of interviews in this study.

I understand these are voluntary procedures and that I am free to withdraw at any time by requesting that the taping be stopped. I also understand that my name will not be revealed to anyone and that taping will be kept confidential. Tapes will be filed by number only and stored in a locked cabinet.

I understand that confidentiality will be respected and that the recorded interview data will be for professional use only.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Research Participant's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)



## Appendix E

**Name: Tahira**

**Education:** High school

**Children:** 3

**Country of Origin:** India

**Occupation:** Homemaker

**Years in Canada:** 20

**Name: Sana**

**Education:** Bachelors of Islamic Studies, Algeria

**Children:** 3

**Country of Origin:** Algeria

**Occupation:** Homemaker

**Years in Canada:** 5

**Name: Maria**

**Education:** Accounting (Abu Dhabi)

**Children:** 5

**Country of Origin:** Palestine

**Occupation:** Homemaker

**Years in Canada:** 5

**Name: Shahla**

**Education:** Bachelors of Arts, Pakistan

**Children:** 4

**Country of Origin:** Pakistan

**Occupation:** Homemaker

**Years in Canada:** 15

**Name: Fahima**

**Education:** Nursing (Libya)

**Children:** 4

**Country of Origin:** Libya

**Occupation:** Homemaker

**Years in Canada:** 15

**Name: Alia**

**Education:** Masters of Psychology, Pakistan

**Children:** 4

**Country of Origin:** Pakistan

**Occupation:** Homemaker

**Years in Canada:** 10

**Name: Sakeena**

**Education:** Bachelors of Education, Canada

**Children:** 5

**Country of Origin:** Algeria

**Occupation:** Teacher

**Years in Canada:** 15

**Name: Farah**

**Education:** Medical Degree, India

**Children:** 3

**Country of Origin:** India

**Occupation:** Physician (Canada)

**Years in Canada:** 3

**Name: Khadija**

**Education:** Bachelors in Nursing (Canada)

**Children:** 4

**Country of Origin:** Pakistan

**Occupation:** Nursing (Canada)

**Years in Canada:** 30

**Name: Natasha**

**Education:** Bachelor of Arts (Canada)

**Children:** 4

**Country of Origin:** Chile

**Occupation:** Teacher assistant

**Years in Canada:** 20

**Name: Aisha**

**Education:** Interior Decorator (Certificate)

**Children:** 3

**Country of Origin:** Palestine

**Occupation:** Homemaker

**Years in Canada:** 12 years

**Name: Rafi**

**Education:** Masters of Education (Canada)

**Children:** 6

**Country of Origin:** Somalia

**Occupation:** Teacher

**Years in Canada:** 21

## **Appendix F**

### **Demographic Questions for Parents (Public/Islamic) Revised**

1. How long have you been in Canada?
2. What is your country of origin?
3. How many kids do you have?
4. What age are your children?
5. What schools do they go to?

### **Interview Questions: Parents (public /Islamic)**

1. Are your children in a public or the Islamic school?
2. When did your child/ children begin to attend at this school?
3. What led you to decide to place your child in a Public school/ Islamic school?
- 3 a) [This question will be asked if the parent indicates that the child has been moved from one school system to another] What led you to move your child from an Islamic to a public school (or from public to Islamic school)?
4. Could you describe (a) similarities and (b) differences that you have observed between public and Islamic schools.
5. Did gender have any influence on your choice of school for your child?
6. Could you describe the relationship you had with (a) teacher (b) other parents in the school where you children attend.
7. What are your views about having co-ed Islamic schools?
8. Do you have any comments about your child's religious experiences in school?

9. Are there any subject areas that in your opinion need the material modified for your child's religious purposes?

**Interview questions: Parents of Muslim girls**

1. To your knowledge, how do teachers treat Muslim girls who wear the Hijab in public schools?
2. What are your views about the Islamic dress code for Muslim girls in Islamic/ public school?
3. What have been your daughter's experiences in the Health/Physical Education classroom?

## VITA AUCTIONIS

Ghazala Ahmed was born in London, England in 1964. She holds a Master degree in Physiology from Pakistan and received her Bachelors of Education from University of Regina, Saskatchewan. Currently she is a candidate for the Master's degree in Education at the University of Windsor.