A multiple case study on parents’ perspective about the influence of the Islamic culture on Muslim children’s daily lives

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how Muslim parents interpret the influence of the Islamic culture on their children’s daily lives. Using a qualitative multiple case study, family members from five ethnically diverse households were observed and interviewed. Data were analyzed employing a within-case and a cross-case analysis using a framework adapted from Stake (2006). Eight themes emerged from the study which focused on the centrality of religion in these households, the collective cultural paradigm and the scope of identity negotiation taking place on a daily basis. Implications point towards cultural responsive teaching so as to integrate Muslim students into classroom pedagogies.

Introduction

As the number of minority students continues to grow in Canada, there is a pressing need to address the issue of making the schooling experience more compatible with their cultural patterns (Azmi, 2001). This need is even more crucial for cultures that are widely distorted and often surrounded by misconceptions. For example, research on the various practices of culturally responsive teaching of African and Aboriginal students is well documented in the literature (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nielsen, Nicol, & Owuor, 2008). These studies call for trying to understand the families of the minority students so as to appreciate the lives of the minority students themselves. Moreover, recent evidence from multicultural education suggests that one of the cultures that need to be further explored in the teacher education and professional development literature is the Islamic culture (Berkson, 2005; Esposito, 1995; Khamela & Wannas-Jones, 2003; Mastrilli & Sardo-Brown, 2002;
Subedi, 2008; Zine, 2007 & 2008). Taken together, these studies have shown that there are intensive and persistent fallacies and stereotypes about Muslims and Islam around the world.

Across school levels, a lack of understanding of Muslims’ daily lives may spark hostility towards Muslim students. Statistics Canada (2008) alarmingly reported that young people, age twelve to seventeen years old, contributed to over one third of hate crimes in Canada. This is double the proportion of non-hate crimes committed by the same age group. It is interesting to note here that about half of these hate crimes were attributed to race, ethnicity or religion. Since this age group is found in both elementary and secondary schools, it makes such environments in most need for re-constructing the understanding of various cultures in order to facilitate tolerance and empathy.

In a Canadian context, various studies have explored the experiences of Muslim students and the challenges they face to avoid pressures of assimilation, and the challenges they encounter while trying to fit in the main stream culture (Berns- McGown, 1999; Hoodfar, 2003; Rezai-Rashty, 2005). These studies were primarily ethnographic in nature where Muslim parents and Muslim students from various ethnic backgrounds were interviewed. However, the issue of culturally responsive pedagogy, which is influenced by students’ households, is rarely addressed in studies about Muslim children.

Various interdisciplinary fields, such as psychology of minorities and cultural counselling are beginning to recognize the effects of social inequalities and injustices inflicted upon Muslims based on the lack of knowledge about this population. Many researchers are now advocating for becoming culturally responsive to Muslims in workplaces and social work practices (Bullis, 2001; Hodge & Nadir, 2008; Irving & Barker, 2004; Nadir & Dziegielewski, 2001). However, integrating Muslims’ funds of knowledge as part of the classroom experience for students is not considered in a systematic manner. With the number of Muslim students in Canadian public schools growing significantly, this study aimed to explore the influence of the Islamic culture by examining Muslim children’s daily funds of knowledge. This new information may help educators develop strategies to create learning environments
that integrate the Islamic culture in the Canadian educational and social fabric. The study was guided by the following research questions (1) How do Sunni Muslim parents describe the influence of the Islamic culture on their children’s daily lives? (2) How would Sunni Muslim parents like to see these funds of knowledge addressed in a culturally responsive pedagogical model?

**Focused Literature Review**

Members of the Muslim community in Canada belong to different ethnic backgrounds, mostly from South Asian and Arab descent, and the majority follow the Sunni sect (Karim, 2002). This ethnic diversity has resulted in social variations in the understanding and practice among the Muslim population (Azmi, 2001). Muslim students in Canada face many challenges, such as pressures to assimilate, identity dilemmas, school drop out, feelings of alienation, and the predicament of Islamophobia (Collet, 2007; Khalema & Wannas-Jones, 2003; Zine, 2001, 2006). Based on a qualitative study of Muslim educational institutions in Southern Ontario, Azmi (2001) states that “there has been a fairly long history of Muslim community discontent with the public schools” (p. 261). Even though racism in Ontario schools is considered a serious obstacle to multicultural and anti-racist education (Dei & James, 2002; Richmond & Mendoza, 1990), some schools are exploring venues to help create more inclusive strategies to accommodate students of minorities. However, many Muslim parents in Canada enrol their children in alternative Islamic schools in order to safeguard their children’s Islamic identity and lifestyle (Parker-Jenkins, 1995; Zine, 2008). Nevertheless, Islamic schools in Ontario are private schools and are not funded by the government, and as a result, the majority of Muslim parents choose to send their children to receive education in public schools (Azmi, 2001; Nimer, 2002; Zine, 2008).

*Minority households and education.* Ethnographic and anthropological research on cultural differences and schooling experiences of various minority groups in Canada and the United States have shown that there is a clear tendency to rely on misconceptions, stereotypes, irrelevant generalization, and less empathetic assumptions when addressing minority households (Akhtar, 2007; Cross, 1996; Ladson-
Billings, 2005; Moll, et al., 1992; Weinstein, Curran, Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003; Stoicovy, 2002; Zine, 2001). These studies reported that the linking of home culture to pedagogy for minority households has been viewed as deficient environments for providing cognitive and social development opportunities for their children. Diversity within each cultural group was also neglected, and Eurocentric models of learning were regarded as superior to other cultural models and practices.

Similarly, various sociological and educational studies conducted among Muslim students, Muslim parents, and Muslim community leaders reported that Muslims living in the West have alienated Muslim households and failed to consider the dynamics and the influence of the Islamic culture at home when addressing challenges faced by Muslim students in public schools (Akhtar, 2007; Azmi, 2001; McCreery, Jones, & Holmes, 2007; Zine, 2001, 2008). Such neglect has created an assumption that Muslim households were not fully equipped to prepare students for the schooling experience. This assumption was further affirmed when there was a lack of Muslim parents’ involvement in their children’s education coupled with a withdrawal from some of public schools’ activities for religious reasons (Collet, 2007; Merry, 2005).

On the other hand, the role of culture in the lives of minority students has initiated a new wave of research by considering the importance of this often neglected aspect of the students’ daily experiences. As a result, integrating students’ cultural backgrounds into teaching as a pedagogical approach is now occupying a growing segment of the literature in social science and educational research. These studies have focused on specific cultural groups, such as Black students, Aboriginal students, Chinese students, Muslim students, and Native Hawaiian students (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Gay 2000, Ladson-Billings, 1992; Lee, Rosenfeld, Mendenhall, Rivers, & Tynes, 2004; Jordan, 1985; Nielsen, Nicol, & Owuor, 2008; Qin, 2006; Snow, 1997; Villegas, 1991; Zine 2001). Taken together, these studies have shown that students’ academic performance and social experiences are enhanced when they receive teaching that utilizes aspects of their home culture.
The role of parents. Over the last two decades, various qualitative sociological research on the home cultures of minority households in Canada and the United States has demonstrated that the role of parents, as representatives and reinforcing agents of funds of knowledge, is the most significant factor in shaping minority students’ identities and social experiences (Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008; Dworni, 2006; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005; Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005; Villegas, 1991; Zine, 2001). Assimilation into the mainstream culture is one of the major fears that minority parents face when living in the West. However, in response to this fear a growing body of literature on multicultural professional development for educators has called for establishing partnerships between schools and minority households with more attention given to the cultural narratives provided by the parents in order to obtain an authentic capture of the cultural experiences of these students (Lee, Spencer, et al., 2003; Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005; Weinstein, et al., 2003). González et al. (2005) reported that parents are usually willing to share their cultural heritages and experiences with teachers when they feel there is a genuine interest in learning more about their culture to later incorporate it into classrooms’ daily pedagogies.

Ethnographic research has also revealed a clear centrality of the religion of Islam in the lives of Muslim households and specifically with practicing Muslim youth (Beshir & Beshir, 2000; Hodge & Nadir, 2008; McAuliffe, 2007; McCreery, et al., 2007; Merry, 2005). In addition, research on cultural awareness further suggests that educators and the Western society tend to neglect this centrality of the Islam in the lives of Muslim students. This tendency is attributed to the unfamiliarity with the Islamic culture, fear of terrorism influenced by the media, and a general refusal to see any religious paradigm given a public role in a secular society (Akhtar, 2007; Esposito, 1995; McCreery, et al., 2007).

Muslim students in public schools. For Muslim children, the experience of school entrance is complicated in the presence of negative presumptions about Muslims in the West (Esposito, 1995). Ethnographic research and case studies based on Muslim students’ narratives in North America incontestably show that Muslim students encounter identity dilemmas, pressures to assimilate into the
mainstream culture, persistent incidents of racism, feelings of alienation, predicaments of Islamophobia mostly created by biased media, low academic expectations, little or no reference to the Islamic heritage in the curriculum, and finally, the urge to drop out of school (Collet, 2007; Khalema & Wannas-Jones, 2005; Mastrilli & Sardo-Brown, 2002; Schmidt, 2004).

Recently, gender in the Islamic culture has also been receiving more attention in the public, social and political spheres (Akhtar, 2007). Muslim females have been surrounded by negative and distorted perceptions constructed through colonial images and symbols of oppression (Zine, 2001). For example, Rezai-Rashti (2005) reported on findings from focus group sessions that she conducted with 12 Muslim females, aged 16-18 years old, to talk about their experiences in public schools. The findings revealed that they experienced pressures to assimilate and struggled to construct their identity. Furthermore, she observed that teachers’ and administrators’ interaction with Muslim female students was mostly based on misconceptions and stereotypes. She asserts, “Muslim girls who wear the veil are automatically considered passive and oppressed and educators often seem to hold the views that these girls have been forced by their oppressive parents to wear the veil”. The young female participants also maintained that when conflicts were raised between them and their parents, teachers and counsellors attributed the conflicts to issues related to cultural difference as opposed to possible teenage identity differences or communication deficiencies.

Conceptual Framework

As indicated in the previous section, there is now a growing body of literature that calls for constant interactions between schools and minority households in order to become more responsive to the various cultural lifestyles.

Figure 1

Figure 1: Parents as transmitters of cultural funds of knowledge in a cultural responsive pedagogical model.
Figure 1 illustrates the lines of communications among three of the most important elements in the schooling experience of minority students into a type of culturally responsive pedagogical model—School, Student and Parents and their children. It also shows that household funds of knowledge play a significant role in the model. Religion, household relationships, kinship as related to extended family members, relationships with the larger community, and contribution of cultural institutions towards...
cultivating social identities are all considered funds of knowledge that have an impact on minority students’ everyday experiences (Gonzales & Moll, 2005; Moll, & Greenberg, 1990; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). On a linguistic level, Dworin (2006), in his discourse analysis on improving language skills in a bilingual class suggested that minority students’ funds of knowledge could be essential for schools to utilize and incorporate in order to make learning how to write more meaningful and applicable to students’ realities.

The most fundamental funds of knowledge in Muslim households are the Islamic culture, which is represented in a sphere surrounding the five elements that reflect the influence of the Islamic culture in the households. These elements are: 1) Household relationships (HR), which address the relationships and interactions among parents and their children, 2) Spirituality (S) as a set of beliefs and rituals, 3) Kinship (K) as related to extended family, who may also be living outside of Canada, 4) Relationship with the larger community (LC), and 5) Contributions of cultural institutions (CCI) towards cultivating social identities. Cultural institutions could be a mosque, a Sunday school for teaching another language, a community centre for members of a specific ethnic background, or a private daily school.

Because of the significant role of parents as transmitters of cultural funds of knowledge and important resources for learning about minority students’ daily lives, this study was concerned about how Muslim parents interpreted the influence of the Islamic culture on their children’s funds of knowledge as the latter shape the cultural experiences of Sunni Muslim children’s daily lives. It is also an important first attempt to give Muslim parents an opportunity to voice their perspectives and views on how to become culturally responsive to their children. These perspectives could be valuable feedback to educators in the domain of multicultural education.

**Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study research design. According to Stake (2006, p.6), multiple case studies should have a ‘quintain’, which is a concept, a category, or an idea that binds
the various cases together. Therefore, the quintain of this study was the influence of the Islamic culture on Muslim children’s daily lives. Using this approach suggests that each case should be described as part of the research process exploring how parents in these households described the influence of Islamic culture on their children’s daily lives.

**Recruitment of participants.** The site that was chosen for recruiting participants was one of the main mosques that served the Sunni Muslim community in a large city in Eastern Ontario, Canada. In the middle of a residential area, this mosque participates in various programs open to the public where non-Muslims are invited to learn about the Islamic culture and have access to the prayer halls to observe the daily prayers. The selected mosque was not considered only a place of worship; it also offered various activities and services to Muslim families in the city throughout the week, such as Sunday Islamic School, lectures on various topics including lessons marriage and household relationships, funeral services, and library services. Attendees of this specific mosque represented Muslims from different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities, such as Arab, South Asian, East Asian, and Anglo Saxon. Mosques usually have separate prayer halls for males and females due to the Islamic tradition of trying to minimize mixing of the opposite genders in the same place, specifically during worship. A request to the mosque was made to allow site access for recruitment of participants to take place in the facility. “A call for participants” flyer was posted in the prayer halls for four weeks in both the males’ prayer hall and the females’ prayer hall. Three criteria were used to select participants. First, the parents needed to have at least one female child and one male child in the K-12 public school system. This criterion was decided on to ensure representing any variation in the influence of the Islamic culture on children of both genders. The second criterion was that both parents in each household needed to accept to be interviewed together in their home. This criterion was used to represent the variation of each gender’s interpretations and views about reality in their households. The third criterion was that the examined households were chosen to reflect diversity among Muslims in terms of ethnicity, education, length of
residence in Canada, and home spoken language. As a result of the recruitment process, five families met all the criteria. The families that were selected were originally from Pakistan, Tunisia, Egypt, Somalia, and one family of a Palestinian father and a Canadian mother.

**Instrumentation.** Two sources of data collection were used in this study; face-to-face interviews and observations. To support the data collected through interviews, each household was described using an observation checklist adapted from Creswell (2007). These observations occurred during the interviewing process. The checklist directed observations in a more systematic manner to ensure reliability and reflection of tangible evidence of the influence of the Islamic culture on different households. A biographical questionnaire was used to introduce the study to the participants and answer their questions. Open-ended interview questions were formulated to answer both research questions, and were developed based on the elements addressed in the conceptual framework. Each interview session lasted between 45 minutes to 60 minutes, and was digitally audio-taped. Then, each interview session was transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

**Validation.** Pilot testing of the interview schedule and observation checklist was conducted with a family and modifications were made to both data collection tools. Multicultural validity was also considered in this study. This type of validity refers to “our ability to capture the multiple cultural perspectives accurately, soundly, and appropriately” (Kirkhart, 1995, p. 2). Multicultural validity involved designing questions that were perceived as familiar to cultural groups. Therefore, the interview questions were drawn from the literature on Muslim households, yet not fully investigated or explored from the perspectives of parents who have children in Canadian public schools. Trustworthiness was also a feature of the validation process and entailed peer examination of the themes and initial analysis as they emerged. The participants were also given a chance to review the transcripts to ensure that the recordings were accurate, and to add, clarify, or remove any of the text. Describing the physical surroundings of each household (Merriam, 1998) also served as a way to provide more information.
about the physical context of the Muslim households. In addition, member checking was used (Creswell, 2009) where one participant was selected to review the preliminary findings and to provide feedback about whether these results corresponded to the data collected to answer the research questions.

Data analysis. A within-case and a cross-case analysis were used on the data based on an adaption of Stake (2006). Additionally, NVivo software was integrated to ensure that all data had been considered for analysis (Gibbs, 2002).

Findings

Eight themes emerged to help understand the daily influence of the Islamic culture in the participating households. Six themes responded to the first research question, and the last two themes responded to the second research question. Although biographical information was available for each of the families, it is not reported here. From a Pakistani cultural background, the first family was the Azeem family with two boys, Asad at five years old, and Omar at three and a half years old. The second family was the Sulaiman family in which the father was from a Palestinian origin and the mother was French Canadian. The family had three children, Amira (six years old), Sameer (Five years old), and Wardah (two years old). The third family was the Nabeel family originally from Tunisia. The family had four children, Mohammad (16 years old), Samaah (15 years old), Zayd (13 years old), and Nooh (two and a half years old). The fourth family was the Abdulkareem family from Somalia. The family had five children, Hamdi (20 years old), Taibah and Alia (19 years old), Taha (15 years old), and Adam (14 years old). Finally, the fifth family was the Jafaar family from Egypt. The family had three children, Nahlah (10 years old), Yomna (nine years old), and Shehab (eight years old).

Theme One: Spirituality and Rituals

Allah-Consciousness. When asked about the influence of the Islamic culture on the household’s spirituality and daily ritual, the participants addressed this area in two interconnected ways. First, they all addressed the role of faith and connection with God as a way to sustain their existence and conduct of
everyday life. It appeared that having a god-conscious attitude overarched the various funds of knowledge in the families’ daily lives. Second, participants signified the theme of spirituality and rituals mainly in offering rituals such as prayers, making supplications, reading Quran, and fasting. Rashad Abdul Kareem articulated this influence by saying:

When we came to Canada, we didn’t only bring our bodies, but we also brought our souls. Our souls need to be fed, and the food of our souls is our religion. I believe that religion provides you with moral support when you are down for example. Religion helps us hold our desires and emotions. Religion gives you assurance, and it provides us with that sense of peace of mind in every moment. This peace is needed at all times, and that’s why we are teaching our children the religion. We have to give something that we believe is valuable and important as we have been given by our ancestors and parents.

**Daily Prayers, and Reading and Memorizing Quran.** All participants in the study addressed the importance of offering the five daily prayers. Diana, the mother of the Sulaiman family said, “Five times a day is just good enough for constant reflection on why we’re here and be thankful. I don’t want my kids to miss out on the prayer”. In the Abdul Kareem family, the Fajr (dawn) prayer was seen as a daily protection from evil. Rashad asserted, “I used to take my sons with me to pray Fajr at the mosque. They used to be lazy because it’s early, and they used to complain. I told them, you’re protected the whole day. This is what the hadeeth (saying of Prophet Mohammad) says. Now they wake me up to go pray”. Reading Quran was also an important spiritual experience to most of the families in the study, and therefore, it was an action that was frequently observed. Diana Sulaiman believed that the Quran was the direct source to learn about the religion. Shukri Abdul Kareem regularly dedicate two to three hours every Saturday where she sits with her children to read and memorize the Quran together; interpret **Hadeeths** (sayings and actions of Prophet Mohammad), and also studies the biographies of other prophets like Ibrahim, Moses, and Jesus.

**Du’a’ (Supplication.** Du’a’ (supplication to God) was another significant daily activity that some families addressed. According to the Islamic teachings, supplication could be in the form of verbally praising God and asking him for fulfillment of material needs or blessings in this life and for the
hereafter. The Abdul Karim family used supplication as a form of family support where they asked God to support a family member, heal the sick, or help someone find a job. The reliance on God and the belief that all matters go according to God’s will were clearly present in the families.

*The Virtues of Fasting.* Since the month of Ramadan is one of the five pillars in Islam, all participants expressed that fasting was an important spiritual experience that they encouraged their children to do at a young age, even though it is not mandatory until they reach puberty. As Ramadan follows a lunar calendar, the month could fall in the summer. Therefore, some of the participants mentioned that they were training their younger children to fast for half a day from food and drinks, or they could fast the whole day from food, but not drinks. Fasting was specified for reasons other than a form of obedience to God’s commands. First, it brought the community together because Muslims usually break their fast in groups. Secondly, it was believed by the participants that Ramadan helped to develop a sense of empathy with the hungry, and it also made people appreciate provisions. Mehreen Azeem mentioned, “I teach my son that we have to respect food. We need to respect the things we have. We do this to take care of things, so that Allah doesn’t become angry at us and take away everything we have”.

**Theme Two: Household Relationships**

*Collective Attitude and the Value of Respect.* Participants expressed that they generally preferred doing things together as opposed to engaging in actions individually. All of the families mentioned that they tried to pray together when all immediate family members were present. The Sulaiman family and the Jafaar family read the Quran together on a daily basis. The Abdul Kareem family also made sure to read the Quran together every Saturday. All participants also expressed their preference for breaking the fast together as a family or with community members. Age was an important element that determined the type of communications among family members. Grandparents and parents deserved the highest level of respect and honour, and children were expected to request permissions or at least seek advice.
from their parents regarding most issues in their daily lives. Respect was also a virtue that was expected to be addressed when dealing with parents and elders of the community. Faheem Azeem linked respecting parents to *Allah*’s pleasure, and he mentioned that he continuously teaches his son by saying, “*Allah* will be pleased with you if you please your parents. Have you ever seen me speak to my dad in a bad tone? I don’t want *Allah* to be mad at me”.

**The Role of Mothers.** The adults of the participating households made informed decisions that the mothers remain at home to take care of the children so as to help them develop strong cultural identities. All the mothers attempted some form of higher education; for example, two of them held bachelor degrees, and one of them was recently licensed to practice medicine in Ontario. Four key points emerged to signify the role of mothers in the households. First, all parents agreed that the mother’s presence was essential in transferring the Islamic culture and making sure it was understood, practiced, and appreciated. Second, some of the interviewed parents were specific about the role of the mother in the constant screening of their children’s behaviour and friendship choices, and also their role in providing reminders of their responsibilities as Muslims. Thirdly, some of the parents viewed the mothers’ devotion to take care of the household, as opposed to working full time outside of home, as an opportunity to act as a role model to the children. Finally, even though the children in the participating households were from various age groups, all of the parents agreed that their children had stronger relationships with their mothers when it came to communications and seeking advice.

**Theme Three: Relationship with Extended Family Members**

**Cultural Transfer and Sustainability.** One of the issues that emerged from the data when talking about relationships with extended family members was *Silat Al Rahm*. This Arabic term refers to the blood connection among family members, which dictates that treating kinship with respect is required and linked to prosperity in this life and the hereafter. Rashad Abdul Kareem mentioned, “We are taught to draw closely to our family members. We have to stand by each other, and this is something my
religion taught me”. Rashad’s mother-in-law lived with the Abdul Kareem family, and the family saw her presence as an opportunity to strengthen the connection with her, and offer her support as she was over 70 years old. Shukri’s sister was also visiting the family for three months, and this was also seen as a chance to draw the children closer to their aunt. Faheem’s parents were also visiting their son, and their visit usually lasted for more than three months. He saw his parents’ presence as an important factor in creating a cultural environment in which they were able to reinforce certain practices, such as offering daily prayers, reading Quran, watching Islamic programs on the television and on the internet.

Sense of Security. Some of the families believed that strong relationships with extended family members could provide a sense of identity security. According to Rashad Abdul Kareem, the extended family was considered an educational source about the history of Somali people and the struggles they had to face. Rashad viewed this type of education as a way to educate his children on their identity and provide them with a historical background that they could securely rely on when facing stereotypes. Ahmed Sulaiman also viewed keeping strong ties with extended family as a way to provide his children with an opportunity to observe the Islamic culture and how it is practiced by his ancestors. In this regard, he mentioned, “At the end, they’ll grow up and they will be asked, what are you? they can’t say I’m nothing. They have to know their roots, and they have to have something to fall on”.

Theme Four: Relationship with the Larger Society

Responsibility towards the Larger Society. All the participants expressed a sense of responsibility towards the larger society. Some of the families talked about their involvement within the Muslim community, and some addressed the type of relationships they had with the non-Muslim community. The majority of the families linked their actions to following a collective cultural system that is Allah-conscious and hereafter-driven. There was also a clear vision for the future when addressing actions linked to serving the community. For example, as Salma explained, “according to our Islamic culture, we learned that the best among us is the one who serves people the most. We try to stress this point
when we talk to our kids. The kids get surprised sometimes when I do something for nothing in return. I tell them I did it for the sake of Allah. The action is not wasted; it’s actually an investment for later”.

The Jafaar children volunteered for seven events within a six months period. Four of these events were not related to the Muslim community, and three events were organized for the Muslim community.

Diana also talked about how her family always tried to establish a sense of empathy towards the needy and the disadvantaged. Diana and Ahmed mentioned that they use the satellite television to show their children programs from different countries to reflect on issues of poverty and oppression that were taking place around the world. Adnaan Nabeel believed that his work for the Muslim community could have a long term effect on cultivating his children’s identity by belonging to a strong community. Adnan elaborated by saying:

Our time is divided amongst many things. We make sure to designate some time for building our community. We make sure to designate time to take care of our relatives. That leaves less time to spend with our kids. However, we tend to focus on the development of our kids’ manners and faith. It’s important that our kids grow up seeing their father working for the community and trying to help out creating services for Muslims. We don’t get funded for many things, so we have to work hard to build a community centre, or a mosque where our kids could practice their religion and the teachings of Islam.

_The Islamic culture in the Public Sphere._ When parents spoke about some of their experiences in the public spheres, such as schools, work, and the neighbourhood, a special focus was placed on the issue of observing Islamic traditions as a factor in the type of relationships the families had with the larger community. Some parents talked about instances where they felt comfortable about their Islamic identity and their ability to follow the Islamic traditions, while others discussed instances where they felt that their ability to observe and cherish the Islamic traditions were challenged. Mehreen talked about an incident where her son was invited to a birthday party for one of his classmates. The mother of Asaad’s friend contacted Mehreen and asked her about any family dietary restrictions. Mehreen appreciated the gesture and expressed how this made her and Asaad feel comfortable. The Jafaar and the Sulaiman
families also mentioned that it was very important for them to maintain pleasant relationships with their neighbours as this was one of the Islamic teachings that Muslims should adhere to.

On the other hand, most of the parents were apprehensive to situations where they feared that practices or norms of the Islamic culture might be violated even if the violation was unintentional. Salma and Omar Jafaar talked about their frustrating communications with the administration of their children’s elementary school when they requested time and space for prayer. They reported that the vice-principal was not responsive to their need, and she also devalued their request by telling the children “not today, you could pray tomorrow”. As a result, the children missed the noon prayer for two days, which was highly unacceptable for the Jafaar family. Salma also mentioned that her children were about to forgo their need to pray in school because they did not feel comfortable with the situation. This became a serious concern for both parents because prayer was one important daily aspect that they never wanted their children to abandon.

Theme Five: Contributions of Cultural Institutions

*Cultivation of Cultural Identity.* All of the parents reported that it was important for their families’ cultural development and awareness to be connected to cultural institutions, such as the mosque and weekend schools. Asaad Azeem went to a weekend school to learn how to read Quran in Arabic and also to learn Islamic studies. His mother, Mehreen, observed how he was able to quickly learn the Arabic language and the rules of reading Quran. She also mentioned that the school helped him improve his self esteem because he felt he was capable of learning something that the community and his household applauded and respected. Wardah and Sulaiman, the children of the Jafaar family, and the children of the Nabeel family went to a weekend school that taught Arabic language and Islamic studies. As the three daughters of the Abdul Kareem family were in university age, they started to join advanced series of classes and lectures designed for youth to teach them the Islamic traditions through more contemporary approaches. Rashad considered these classes as important ways to connect his daughters
with the Islamic culture, and he believed that paying fees for such classes was as important as paying for their university tuitions.

Adnaan considered these types of schools of particular importance because they represented essential tools to make Muslim children become attached to their culture and roots. Adnaan was confident that the children of the Muslim community would appreciate these schools at one point in the future, and illustrated his point in this way:

One day we prayed together, and after the prayer, Samaah said “alhamdullelah alhamdullelah” (Praise is due to God, Praise is due to God). I asked her what happened. She said “today my mom’s friends came over and they were talking about Islamic matters in Arabic, and then they read Quran together. I was able to understand everything. If it weren’t for the Saturday and the Quran school, I wouldn’t have been able to understand anything.

It also appears from this illustration that being able to understand the conversation in the Arabic language was providing Samaah with a sense of belonging, which she attributed to her attendance in cultural institutions.

**Theme Six: Relevance of the Arabic Language**

*The Importance of Arabic Language to Islamic Culture.* Even though the Arabic language was not the first language in three of the participating households (the Azeem’s, the Sulaiman’s, and the Abdul Kareem’s), the Arabic language was of particular importance to all the families as a tool to cultivate and sustain the Islamic culture in their households. There was a clear connection between understanding the Arabic language and the ability to comprehend the religion of Islam. As mentioned earlier, all the children in the participating families acquired further development of the Arabic language. As Ahmed explained:

I’m an Arab, but even if I were from any other ethnicity, I would still want to learn Arabic, and I would make the same emphasis to my kids to learn Arabic. It’s almost a pre-requisite for learning the religion. I want them to learn the religion directly from its sources. I read the translation and I don’t think it encompasses everything. I don’t blame them because an Arabic word can have so many meanings, and the translation captures only one meaning. Sometimes, the translation is not even accurate, and the meaning might be lost.
The Jafaar and the Nabeel families displayed frames on the walls that had Arabic calligraphy of verses from the Quran. The Nabeel household also had the names of their children engraved in Arabic writing on metal pieces that were displayed on the wall as a representation of Tunisian traditional art. The frequent use of Arabic phrases was clearly observed during all of the interview sessions. The phrases were mainly linked to Allah, such as masha’ Allah (God has willed it), and subha Allah (glory to God). Some Arabic phrases were associated with actions as well, such as the examples that Diana provided including the phrase bismiillah (in the name of God), which was expected to be said at the start of any action. Another example of the frequent use of Arabic phrases was alhamdu lillah (praise be to God), which was also expected to be said at the end of actions, such as eating.

Theme Seven: Parent’s Involvement in their Children’s Education

Styles of Teacher-Parent Communications. In terms of the parents’ perception about the teachers’ role in the schooling experience of their children, several findings were reported. First, three families, the Azeem’s, the Nabeel’s, and the Jafaar’s, believed that there was, and should be, a reciprocal type of communication between the teachers and the parents of minority students. Mehreen Azeem tried to keep communication channels open with her son’s teacher by updating her about Asaad’s life, family’s norms and values, and cultural holidays. As for Adnaan Nabeel, he kept close communications with his children’s teachers by visiting the school, calling the teachers, and engaging in informal discussions with the teachers about various issues such as bullying and class attendance. Salma Jafaar reported that she always kept an open dialogue with the teachers and administrators of her children’s school. She introduced herself to Nahalah’s science teacher, and he asked if she would be willing to allow the class visit a lab in the university. At the time of the interview, Salma was preparing for the visit and both her daughter and herself were excited about the event. A second finding emerged in the Sulaiman family where Diana and Ahmed believed that the process was less reciprocal since the
teachers were always overwhelmed with academic and administrative tasks. Therefore, they expected teachers to be less engaged in acquiring cultural information about their students.

The third finding was noted in the Abdul Kareem family where Rashad expressed that it was the duty of the teachers to inquire about students’ cultures and faiths. He explained that some cultures, including the Somali culture, might delegate the responsibility of education to teachers. He implied that teachers in these cultures are highly respected and parents’ involvement could be a sign of intrusion and disrespect. He added by saying:

In my culture for example, the teacher is expected to take care of teaching, not the parents. Here it is different. Minority parents here are expected to be more involved in their children’s education. On the other hand, if the school notices that the parents are not being part of their children’s education, they should communicate with them for the sake of the students. Some parents in our community lack education and that’s why they don’t want to participate in communications with the school, and on the other side, teaches perceive this lack of involvement as a sign of lack of interest. The children are the ones that fall in the crack.

**Theme Eight: Suggestions about Cultural Responsive Pedagogical Models**

The suggestions provided by the participants for developing culturally responsive pedagogical models can be categorized into four areas. First, the parents tackled the issue of cultural responsiveness as a concept that stems from schools’ consciousness of the essence of multiculturalism in Canada. Most parents recommended that teachers and school administration reflect a sense of interest in learning about the students’ cultural backgrounds and a sense of respect for the students’ ways of living and cultural heritages. The parents wanted the teachers to care about their children not only as students, but also as people who belong to a culture that is rich in philosophy and history. Accordingly, the parents suggested that schools and teacher education programs should focus more on creating opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers to learn about the core values and beliefs of various cultures, specifically those that have religion as a fundamental element.

The second area addressed establishing alliances between schools and the parents or the community. The parents viewed themselves and the Muslim community as important resources that the
schools and the teachers could utilize to learn more about the Islamic culture. This could be done through guest speakers who could provide students with living examples of how Muslims live and what they believe in. The third area focused on the suggestion of incorporating aspects of the Islamic culture into the curriculum, such as class discussions and projects. The parents claimed that these ideas are an attempt to make the curriculum more familiar to Muslim students’ daily lives. It would also allow their children to feel that their cultural variation is something they could share instead of hiding or assimilating. The fourth area addressed ways to accommodate manifestations of cultural norms and obligations, especially those that pertain to the religion of Islam, such as prayers, fasting, and religious holidays. They also suggested incorporating the Arabic language into daily classroom pedagogies as a means to support the process of cultivating their children’s cultural identity. The parents indicated that this would show their children that their language is valid, and that the school is willing to help them develop a crucial element in their cultural identity.

Discussion

The Centrality of Religion. This research study provided a detailed description of how religion is lived in Muslim households on a daily basis through the voices of Muslim parents. By doing so, Islam was not presented in this study as a static set of rituals and worship activities, but as a dynamic feature that informed and rationalized many aspects of Muslims’ manifestation of the Islamic culture in a Western society. The clear consciousness of God (Allah), as exemplified in the daily prayers, reading the Quran, supplications, and fasting, was an important aspect in the continuity of the Islamic culture in these households. It appeared that the Arabic language was an essential tool to preserve the Islamic culture in all the participating families. They viewed the Arabic language as a way to understand the Quran, and ultimately to understand what Allah has commanded Muslims. It was also viewed as a way to sustain relationships with extended family members. All Muslim children in this study allocated time to learn the Arabic language and to read and memorize the Quran.
The consciousness of Allah influenced Muslims’ connection with not only this life but also with the after-life. The parents believed that this life was a passage that could determine the kind of life one would have in the next life. The more Allah conscious an individual can be, the better the passage becomes. Yet, to experience the passage successfully, participants reported that they had to exert efforts to sustain this consciousness through, for example, practicing goodness towards oneself and towards the society through praying, offering supplications, and benefiting the community. Allah-consciousness could also be increased by avoiding what Sunni Muslims believe is prohibited according to the religion of Islam, such as drinking alcohol and dating. In addition, the parents implied they are expected to reduce attachment to this life since it is only the passage to the hereafter and not the ultimate goal. Reducing this attachment is done through doing things for the sake of Allah as much as possible and not for worldly rewards and materialistic achievements.

It is perhaps important for educators to understand that spiritually and god-consciousness are central to Muslim students. This centrality could be translated into daily rituals such as offering prayers, which were essential to all the participating families in this study. The centrality of the religion also shapes and influences how Muslim students perceive life, experience reality, and articulate definitions. For example, volunteering and working for charitable causes were seen as ways to follow one of Prophet Muhammad’s teachings which dictate that the best of people are the ones who serve people the most. Fear, on the other hand, was in some cases linked to losing Allah’s pleasure and deserving retribution not only in this life, but also in the next life. Such long term thinking and contemplation that were beyond this life’s reality guided the households’ rationale for their practices.

Cultural Paradigm. It was evident that the participants regarded family relationships and relationships with the community as fundamental in their daily lives. This important aspect signified a collective attitude in which family members practiced interdependence on each other in sustaining their cultural identity and providing moral and emotional support. Power dynamics also played an important
role in these households where parents represented authority and children were expected to show respect to their parents and follow their parents’ guidance and advice. Growing up in a society that appreciates individuality, these values might not be completely recognized or sometimes appreciated. In her interviews with Muslim females, Rezai-Rashti (2005) talked about how some teachers and counsellors advised Muslim females to leave their houses and abandon their cultures when there were conflicts between these females and their parents revolving around issues of permissions and cultural norms. Rezai-Rashti suggested that this not only represented a stereotypical perspective about the Islamic culture as oppressive, but it also contributed to the lack of understanding the power dynamics in Muslim households and the complexity of the process of negotiating multiple identities where the Islamic culture shapes the cultural identity of the parents.

It is also important to understand how ethnic implications could influence the families’ involvement in the Islamic culture. For example, as Ontario became one of the top destinations for Somali refugees after the 1991 upheaval in Somalia, many Somali women suddenly became the heads of their households since most refugees were females and children (Israelite, Herman, Alim, Mohamed, & Khan, 1999). In the Abdul Kareem family, Shukri moved to Canada three years before her husband was able to join her. Shukri was also pregnant with their twin daughters Taiba and Alia, and she gave birth during the first year of her arrival to Canada. The dramatic social, economic, and cultural change that Shukri lived through was similar to what most Somali families encountered upon arrival to Canada. The resilience that Shukri exhibited in her attempts to sustain her family’s cultural continuity and ethnic social norms is perhaps something that needs to be examined as a fundamental fund of knowledge for Somali students specifically. The Sulaiman family was another example of how ethnic background shaped their experience as members of the Islamic culture. As Ahmed was a Palestinian Muslim, his family had a more developed understanding of the experiences of people living in political and social unrest. The family’s awareness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as one of the most heated conflicts in
the Middle East, allowed them to have a more profound knowledge about the concepts of struggle,
hunger, and appreciation for the community. These concepts were also linked to issues that pertained to
the religion of Islam, such as living this life as a passage for the next life, and the obligation to help the
needy and the hungry.

Identity Negotiation and Cultural Continuity. It appeared that as the parents were trying to
preserve their children’s Islamic culture, these families were engaging in a similar process of identity
negotiation described by Berns-McGown (1999) and Zine (2001) in Canadian contexts. The authors
reported that Muslims’ daily lives function on interchangeable and continually intersecting schemes of
isolation, interaction, and accommodation while experiencing a sense of ambivalence throughout this
dynamic process. The findings of this study also reflected this tendency. With regards to the isolation
strategy, it can be argued that this term might have a negative implication attached to it. Instead, for the
purpose of this study, the findings suggested that these Sunni Muslim families were practicing
perseverance in order to preserve their cultural identity. Perseverance was translated into sending their
children to cultural institutions and creating provisions to sustain the Islamic culture in their households,
such as reading Quran at home together, learning the Arabic language, and organizing gatherings for
Islamic knowledge.

With regards to the interaction strategy, all the families made a conscious decision to send their
children to public schools and not Islamic schools. Some of the parents engaged in activities that
involved individuals and groups of various cultures. For example, Salma volunteered to organize a trip
for science demonstrations at a university laboratory. She was also involved in providing knowledge
about the Islamic culture to health practitioners. Mehreen also accepted an invitation to speak at her
son’s class about Eid and how it is celebrated.

With regards to the accommodation strategy, some parents had open dialogues with teachers and
school administrations as to how to accommodate the influence of the Islamic culture in their children’s
daily lives, such as the need to pray and celebrate Islamic holidays. The example of Diana as she suggested offering a program that taught the Arabic language was another attempt to work with educators in order to accommodate Muslim students. These efforts indicate, that these families believed there was a space within the schools regulations and social contexts in which the desire to accommodate Muslim students was possible and could be achieved. As well, there was also evidence to support the sense of ambivalence that some parents and their children experienced while in the process of negotiating their identity. For example, Salma Jafaar reported that her daughter Nahlah was apprehensive about wearing the hijab because she wanted to fit in with her group.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

One of the limitations of this study was the issue of representation. The findings and conclusions were limited to the data collected from five Sunni Muslim households with children enrolled in public schools. The data gathered could have had a different scope and focus if the participants were following other sects of the religion of Islam, or if each household had a different ethnicity than the ethnic backgrounds of the interviewed parents. Also, it was important to interview a Somali family due to the large Somali community in this Eastern Ontario city. Most of the Somali families who were interested in participating in study did not meet all the criteria, specifically the criteria of having both parents present during the interview. This issue was addressed with some members of the Somali community and they expressed that generally Somali families in Canada are experiencing high divorce and separation rates. Some of the Somali families are also struggling to reunite with their family members like their husbands and wives. Therefore, the Abdul Kareem family in this study might not be representative of the demographical profile within the social fabric of the Somali community in this Eastern Ontario, and possibly other cities in Canada.

To continue the effort of linking culture to pedagogy, one future research question that emerged from this study is “What are public schools’ best practices of integrating Muslim students in culturally
responsive pedagogical models?” This would involve case studies designed to explore best practices of a sample of schools that systematically integrate Muslim students. Content analysis of school policies, classroom assignments, and communication letters sent to parents might be data sources used to answer this research question. The study could also involve interviewing teachers and administrators to examine their perceptions on the concept of cultural responsiveness and the strategies they use to integrate Muslim students in the classroom.

Furthermore, the findings of this study also revealed that Muslim students in elementary public schools might not be accommodated to practice their Islamic culture the way that Muslim students in public high schools do. Future researchers could conduct an exploratory case study that aims to shed light on how Muslim children in elementary schools experience being Muslims in a public environment. In addition, another research question that emerged from this study is “How do Muslim children in elementary public schools negotiate their multiple identities?” Collecting data from focus groups that include Muslim children in elementary public schools could reveal information about the dynamics of the daily experiences that these children go through in their schools and how they intersect with their lives in their homes. This type of information could contribute to the literature and provide a better understanding of the multiple identities and complex experiences that these children encounter in an age where a sense of identity might not be completely formulated.
References


