SCHOOLING AND IDENTITY: AMERICAN MUSLIM'S ATTITUDE TOWARD ISLAMIC SCHOOLING

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji sebuah sekolah Islam yang terletak di Barat Daya Amerika Serikat. Dengan mempertimbangkan bahwa sekolah Islam di AS hanya melayani tiga persen dari jumlah total siswa Muslim nasional, rumusan masalah pada penelitian ini adalah pertanyaan yang timbul berkaitan dengan sikap Muslim Amerika terhadap sekolah-sekolah Islam. Penelitian ini dilakukan terhadap tujuh orang partisipan yang dikategorikan ke dalam tiga kelompok, yaitu staf akademik, orang tua, dan siswa. Untuk mengumpulkan data dilakukan observasi di sekolah dan wawancara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan temuan bahwa sekolah Islam disikapi positif oleh semua partisipan. Sekolah ini dianggap sebagai tempat untuk mempersiapkan generasi muda Muslim yang siap berintegrasi ke dalam lingkungan yang lebih heterogen tanpa menjadi larut dan terbawa arus gelombang yang sedang berlangsung. Meskipun dianggap positif, masa depan pendidikan Islam masih dipertanyakan karena masalah keuangan yang tidak menjanjikan kelangsungan sekolah tersebut. Walaupun demikian, perlu dicatat bahwa jumlah Muslim di Amerika Serikat terus meningkat. Artinya, permintaan terhadap sekolah-sekolah Islam akan terus meningkat.

***Kata kunci**: sekolah islam, muslim, pendidikan*

ABSTRACT

This study examined an Islamic school located in the Southwestern United States. By considering that Islamic schools in US only cater three percents of the total Muslim students nationwide, questions arised with regards to the attitude of American Muslims toward Islamic schools. Seven participants, who were classified into three groups, namely academic staffs, parents, and students, were recruited. To collect data, observations in the school and interviews were conducted. The findings showed that Islamic school was perceived positively by all participants. This is a place to prepare young generation of Muslims to integrate in a more heterogeneous environment without being melted in the mainstream wave. Even though perceived positively, the future of Islamic education is still questionable due to the financial problems which jeopardize the continuity of such schools. However, it is worth noting that the number of Muslim in the United States keeps growing, which means that the demand for Islamic schools will increase respectively.

Keywords: islamic schools, muslim, education

INTRODUCTION

The arrival of Muslim immigrants in North America can be traced back to hundreds of years ago when the African Muslim explorers had arrived in the American shores long before Columbus landed and they were married to the Native Americans as well as introducing some arts and craft (Wiener, 1992 cited in Bukhari, Nyang, Ahmad, & Esposito, 2004). Wiener reported that based on linguistic analysis of the languages of Native Americans living in Mexico, there is also a possibility of cultural interaction between the native people of Mexico and the Muslims of northwest Africa. It was actually during the slavery period from 1619 to 1863 that led to the massive influx of Muslim immigrants (Hasan, 2000). During this period, there were more than ten millions of African slaves and around twenty to thirty percent of this number were Muslims who were originally from Islamic countries in the west coast of Africa (Hasan, *180*). Another evidence of the arrival of Muslims through slavery was that Muslim names were found on the slave record in the early 17th century (Yunus & Kone, 2004).

In addition to slavery, political conflicts also motivated Muslims who inhabited the Greater Syria under the rule of the Ottoman Empire (now the modern Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon) to migrate to the US

between 1875 and 1912. Their main reason was that they refused to fight against the Ottoman army and sought for a new homeland away from wars (Lovell, 1983; Smith, 2010; Yunus & Kone, 2004). After World War II, the influx of Muslims to the US still continued; however, in this period the immigrants Muslims did not only come from the Middle Eastern countries but also from countries in South Asia (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), Eastern Europe particularly Albania and Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union (Smith, 2010). Smith (2010) also highlighted several incidents triggering Muslim migration which included the exodus of Palestinians as a result of the establishment of Israel in 1948, revolution in Iran in 1979, civil wars in Somalia, Sudan, and Afghanistan. Apart from slavery and seeking refuge, another factor which encouraged Muslims to move to the US for good was to find better job opportunities and to pursue the education (Ansari, 2004). The last factor contributing to the increase of Muslim population in this country was the identity reconstruction (Ansari, 2004). At the early decades of the last century, a significant number of African-Americans started to identify themselves as Muslims. The reason underlying this phenomenon was that the African-Americans, as an underprivileged minority group being discriminated against and subjected to wrong and injustice by the White majority, saw Islam as a means for achieving self-betterment and dignity (Ansari, 2004). Ansary also reported that Hispanic community exhibited a similar trend due to the conversion of the Hispanic people to Islam. Although Ansari did not provide exact statistic data, he somehow claimed that the number of Hispanic people who converted to Islam was relatively high.

The current American Muslim demographics shows that American Muslims primarily consist of three groups, namely the Arabs (32%), African American (29%), and South Asians (28.9%) (Yunus & Kone, 2004). Beyond the big three groups, Muslim population is also made up by various ethnic groups, such as Southeast Asians, Turks, and Iranians (Yunus & Kone, 2004). Moreover, Yunus and Kone (2004) pointed out that there are almost six millions of Muslims of all ages and gender living in the US. "Of these, only 3,953,651 or about 69 percent were born as naturalized citizens. Of the rest, a total 1,321,011 or 23 percent were legal immigrants. Of the rest were foreign students and those on professional and business visas" (p. 314). The table 1 below depicts the top ten concentrations of the Muslim population in the US.

Islamic Schools in the US

Ashraf (1985) indicated that the acquisition of knowledge is perceived as a fundamental issue in Islam since its goals is to cater people's needs for spiritual and intellectual development (First World Conference on Muslim Education, cited in Ashraf, 1985). Aligned with this goal, the main expectation of Muslim parents in US towards Islamic education is first to equip young generation of Muslims with profound knowledge that will allow them to find personal and professional success; second to focus on learning the Quran and the *sunnah*, Arabic, Islamic practice and prayer, and other aspects of Islamic faith and law (*sharia*) relevant to life in the society; third to impart the education in an Islamic environment aiming at developing Islamic characters (Ansari 2004, Hasan 2000, Smith 2010), and finally to avoid children from drug abuse, premarital sex, and violence (Smith 2010). Because of these aspects, Islamic schools are perceived by the Muslim community as the most appropriate schools for Muslim children in the US (Hasan, 2000; Smith, 2010).

American Muslim parents are likely to avoid public schools because they do not want their children to be exposed to un-Islamic ways, for example wearing short clothes during physical education class (for girls), to

Table 1 Top ten concentrations of Muslim population in the US

State	Population
New York	579, 152
Illinois	381, 155
California	310, 538
Pennsylvania	281, 455
Michigan	272, 380
Massachusetts	272, 273
Maryland	251, 185
Texas	211, 031
New Jersey	208, 210
Georgia	121,031

have coeducational physical education, or to be given sexual information that parents think is not appropriate for them to hear (Smith, 2010).

O'Neill (2010) suggested that public schools should address the need of the Muslim students by providing prayer room, accommodating modest Muslim head-coverings within school dress codes, and offering *halal* food choices, and even considering requests for recognition of Muslim holidays. Parents are also concerned with some negative stereotypes (Ansari, 2004) that the Muslim children have to deal with in public schools.

In addition, the need for Muslims to strengthen their identity through their children's religious education becomes a strong rationale to choose an Islamic school. This is especially true for recent Muslim immigrants from countries where Islamic ways of life are encouraged while secularism is rejected (O' Neill, 2010).

The efforts to integrate religious messages basically derive from the needs to maintain and strengthen religious identity which is generallly true for those who perceive themselves religiously minority; however, public schools have failed to acknowledge the needs of the religiously minority students which caused parents to turn to religiously based-school for their children education (Lerner, 2005; O'Neill, 2010; Shapiro, 2005). This phenomenon also occurs within Jewish community. According to Shapiro (2005), although public school is a good setting to bring together students from diverse backgrounds to cultivate their knowledge, public schools could not cater this diversity. Because of this, she was more inclined to a Jewish school and her preference was absolutely not intended to promote elitist, separatist, and religiously fundamentalist education. Instead, it was purely derived from her needs to construct her daughter's identity and to articulate her spiritual commitment. "I want my daughter's heart and soul to be shaped and nurtured by a Yiddiskeyt (Jewishness) that would ensure her allegiance to a Jewish identity […] through which my daughter can construct her identity and articulate her ethical and spiritual commitment" (Shapiro, 2005, p. 252).

Even though Islamic schools are favored by the Muslim community, the number of Muslim students who enrolled in Islamic schools is still low. Only 3% of the total of Muslims in the US are reported to choose Islamic schools. In fact, the majority of Muslim parents send their children to public schools even though public schools are not able to cater the Muslim students' needs related to their religious practices. In addition to this, the number of Islamic schools in US is still very limited, only around 250 schools nationwide, and most programs do not extend beyond 8th grade (Smith, 2010). Furthermore, since all Islamic schools are private schools, the tuition fee is high because the schools must be financially independent and are not entitled to the federal government funding. In addition, due to the dependence on the donation from

the community as the primary financial source, many of these schools suffer from financial difficulties which further lead to other problems such as underpaid teachers and lack of facilities (Smith, 2010). Although the number of Islamic schools is low, the trend to open new schools is increasing; likewise, the trend to choose an Islamic school over a public one is also rising (O'Neill, 2010).

Significance of the Study

Although Islamic education has been of interest among many scholars since 1980s, these scholars only focused on Islamic education issue in the Middle-East, Africa, South Asia, and South-East Asia contexts (such as Abdulhadi, 2001; Ahmed, 1998; Al-Hefdhy, 1994; Elnashar, 1982; Lukens Bull, 1997; Milville, 2008; Mushtaq, 2010). Since the number of Muslims in US is growing, it is necessary to do a research about Islamic schools in the US context. Unfortunately, research examining this topic is still scarcely found. In response to this, this study aims at filling the void in the literature of Islamic education in the American context.

Purpose of the Study

1. To examine the concept of Islamic school, how an Islamic school disseminated Islamic values and religious identity to the students.
2. To find out the factors which influence parents' decision to choose an Islamic school.
3. To unravel students'attitudes toward an Islamic school.

Research Questions

This study was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. How are Islamic values transmitted and manifested through teaching and learning activities and beyond the classrooms?
2. What motivate parents to choose an Islamic school and to what extent do parents believe that such school is relevant for their children's religious identity?
3. What are the students' attitude toward their school in relation with their schooling experience and religious identity?

METHOD

Location of Observation

The location for the observation was an Islamic school located in a southwestern state in the US. This school, Southwest Islamic School, only offered classes for kindergarten and first to eight grades. The school was located adjacent to a mosque and occupied a small two-story white building which used to be an apartment complex. The school was also in the same area with a *halal* supermarket and a *halal* restaurant.

Participants

Participants were recruited by using non-probability purposive sampling; that is, I already had a purpose in mind on what specific potential participants I was looking for. To maintain the confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to all participants and the location of the study. All participants lived in a southwestern state in the US. The participants were classified into three groups, namely academic staffs, parents, and students. The academic personnelwas selected to represent the voice of the school, specifically to elaborate the vision and mission of the school.

The participants who fell into the first category were a female school principal of Southwest Islamic school and a male teacher in the same school. Both of the participants had been living in the US for a significant number of years. The school principal, Noor, was an immigrant from Palestine who held a Bachelor degree in Education and had been serving as the school principal for several years. The teacher, Ahmed, was originally from Egypt and held a Master Degree in English Teaching from a university in US. He was primarily in charge of Language Arts class.

Under the parents category, there were two female participants who agreed to take part in the study. The first was Sarah, an Algerian immigrant, who worked as a kindergarten teacher in Southwest Islamic School. She moved to the US to follow her husband who continued his study in this

country 13 years ago. They finally decided to live permanently in America. The second participant, Aisha, was an Indian descent and had been living in US for more than 25 years. Just like Sarah, Aisha was also a kindergarten teacher in the same school.

For the last category, students, three students of Southwest Islamic School were recruited. They were Hassan, Maryam, and Fatima. Hassan was the son of Sarah while Maryam and Fatima were the daughters of Aisha. Hasan and Sarah were in their seventh grade while Fatima was in grade six. All of these students were born in the US and speak English as their primary means of communication both at home and in school.

Data Collection

The data were collected qualitatively in two ways: (1) observation and (2) interview. Once a week for three weeks I observed the school and each observation took about three hours. The first observation was in the morning, before the students arrived, to see how the school was preparing to start for the day. The second observation took place before noon until afternoon to find out the schools' activites during the day. The last observation was started in the afternoon until the classes were dismissed to unravel what was going on at the end of the day. There were three classes observed; the first was Islamic Study for fifth grade students, Language Arts (writing) for sixth grade, and Language Arts (writing) for seventh and eighth grades (a combined class). The reason for selecting these classes was to examine whether there was a different approach in teaching common subjects and Islamic subjects.

The interviews were administered to all participants. With the participants' consents, all of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The questions for the academic staff of Southwest Islamic School were adapted from Kringas and Lewins (1980) comprising three issues, namely the nature of Islamic education, the role of Islamic school, and Islamic school in relation to the wider American society. Interviews with the academic staffs took about one hour for each participant. The interview questions for parents were also adapted from Kringas and Lewins (1980). Parents were interviewed individually for about one hour per participant. The questions for the children were adapted from Nahidian (2001) which includes family and personal background, Islamic schooling, Islamic knowledge and values, and living in American society. For the students, the interview was conducted in group instead of individually to avoid the feeling of uneasiness and to encourage more active participation among students in a discussion-like setting. The interview lasted for slightly more than one hour. All parents approved their children's involvements in this study.

Data Coding and Data Analysis

The data from the interviews and school observations were coded using thematic coding method to find the recurring themes and patterns. In the encoding process, I followed Boyatzis' five steps to code the data, namely "labelling, defining the theme, describing the indicator when a theme occurs, describing the qualifications to identify the theme, and providing examples to eliminate any confusion when looking for a theme" (1998, p. 31). I started the data analysis with the analysis of classroom and school observation notes and site documents (the school's handbook and syllabus). The data analyses were geared to answer the research questions presented in the finding and discussion section. Any interesting findings were also corroborated with the previous studies in Islamic education and/or in other religiously based-school research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The School

It was cold and windy the day I started my observation as fall season had almost ended and winter was approaching. Although fall in southwest, the desert reigon, was not as cold as in the East Coast, but the temperature reached below ten degree centigrade. When I opened the gate at 7.30 a.m., the school's small courtyard (about 15mx15m) with two

basketball poles welcomed me. There were four benches on the south side of the court. Later on, after my second observation, I found out that these benches were the favorite place for students to eat their lunch. I came to see Noor, the principal, in her office to report that I was already in the school but the secretary informed me Noor was absent that day due to health problem. She directed me to the vice principal office and introduced me to him. He then informed me about the morning assembly at 7.45 a.m. which would be started very shortly in the courtyard. I followed him, proceeded to the courtyard where all students were gathered and ready to take part in this morning ritual. At 7.45 a.m. sharp, the morning assembly was started with a short prayer in Arabic and translation in English led by the vice principal. After that, he delivered a short speech which was mostly about how to achieve academic excellence. The final part of his speech was to announce the upcoming tests and school events. At 8 a.m., the morning assembly finished and all students went to their class.

All teachers in this school were Muslim; almost all of them were born and raised in the Middle Eastern countries and Africa. Therefore, their first language was a language other than English. Only one teacher was born in the US and was raised in a Spanish speaking environment. She was not born Muslim but later converted to Islam when she turned adult. Just like public schools, Southwest Islamic School conducted teaching and learning activities five days a week, Monday to Friday, from 7.45 a.m. to 2.50 p.m. All subjects taught in this school were also the same as those taught in public schools because Southwest Islamic School followed the standard curriculum from the school district. The difference was that the school offered Islamic subjects, namely *Quran*, Islamic studies, and Arabic, whereas subjects like Home Economics and Arts were absent. According to the principal when the next time I met her, those subjects were not offered because the school had no funding to pay teachers to teach the subjects and there was no space/room anymore in the building to carry out Home Economics and Arts classes. As I have mentioned previously, the school only offered programs from kindergarten and grade 1 to 8 due to the limitation of resources and facilities. After the students finished grade 8, they had to continue to another school.

Another evidence of the poor facility was that, unlike in public schools where students could have lunch at the cafeteria, all students in Southwest Islamic school were responsible to bring their lunch and snack because the school had no cafeteria and dining hall. During my first day of observation, I found out about "Pizza Day". On that particular day, students were allowed not to bring lunch from home. Instead, they could have pizza with the school organizing the purchase. The students were required to pay the pizza directly to the school secretary and picked up their pizza from her desk. The money received from pizza sale was collected to improve the school's facilities.

After the morning assembly, I mentioned to the vice principal that I would observe two classes, Islamic Study and Language Arts. He showed me where the classroom for Islamic Study was and accompanied me to the class, and then introduced me to the subject teacher, a male teacher in his late fifties who was originally from the Middle East. Upon leaving for his office, the vice principal gave me the school handbook to get more information about the school. I chose to sit at the back of the room and started to observe. The classroom was very small, around 2.5m x 7m. The students sat in an individual set of table and chair. The top of the table could be opened for students to store their books and personal belongings inside it. Students did not keep their belongings in the lockers because the school did not provide such facilities due to spatial issue. Because of that, it was common to see that the students, not only in this class but also other classes, put their bags on the floor, right under their table or at the rack at the back of the classroom. This classroom had a built-in cupboard at the back of the class, a standing fan, world map, and some posters in English about good manners, science, parts of speech and math. There were

also some Arabic calligraphies hanging on the wall. Similar features could also be found in other classrooms where I observed.

There were 10 students present (5 girls and 5 boys) in the Islamic study class. The weather was so cold that most of the students in this class wore their winter jacket in the classroom even though it was not winter yet. Apparently, there was no heater in the building or probably the heater did not work since the temperature inside the classroom was very low. I also saw a standing fan inside each classroom. Therefore, I assume that the AC did not work properly either during hot days. I could not imagine how hot the temperature in the classroom would be if the AC did not work during warm/hot days. Even though the condition inside the classroom was not comfortable, the students did not mind and seemed actively engaged in the learning activity. On that day, the class discussed a *surah*/a chapter from the Quran, namely *Al-Mursalat* (The Emissary). The student took turn to read aloud one *ayat/*verse of that *surah* in Arabic and the English translation afterwards. After one *ayat* and its translation were read aloud, the teacher initiated the discussion. Judging from the high turn-taking during the discussion, it was obvious that the students enjoyed the discussion. I had a chance to see and read the textbook used for this class which was written in English and published by an American publisher. The content of the book was adapted with the context of Muslims in America; that is, the examples and explanations in the books were related to the American multicultural context. I also noticed that the students addressed their teacher by using 'teacher' as an address terms instead of Mr. X for example "Teacher Hameed" instead of "Mister Hamid". I found the same practice when I observed other classes. Therefore, I assumed this practice was influenced by the teachers' address term cultural rules back home.

The next class I observed was Language Arts for six graders. There were only four students in this class who were in the middle of learning English adverbs when I came in. The teacher was a middle-aged female who identified herself as Mexican American Muslim. She would write a sentence taken from a short story bookon a blackboard; then, the students must identify if there were any adverbs in that sentence. They wrote their answers with a non-permanent marker in their small-square whiteboard. Every time they had finished with one sentence, the students erased the small board and copied the new sentence which the teacher wrote on the blackboard. Although the exercise was monotonous, students were eager to be the first person to answer the question whenever the teacher asked them to show where the adverb was. Students seemed to like the competition and the teacher used it to make them do more excercises. After the class finished, the teacher shared her experience teaching Language and Arts, specifically the challenge to find teaching materials and books that were appropriate for Muslim students. One time she assigned the students to read the Harry Potter series 1 to 3. Much to her surprise, some parents who were newly-arrived immigrants from Muslim countries, expressed their disapproval of the book choice because Harry Potter contained magic and sorcerer topics which, according to these parents, were not in line with Islam. Although the teacher disagreed, she did not want to upset the parents and decided to replace Harry Potter with other books. After this incident, she was very careful in choosing the topic for the reading task. Because she was also responsible for school libary, she would choose books whose topics were conservative enough and would also ask for the principal and other teachers' suggestions. She also became more aware of the diversity in the school even though every one was unified by the same religion.

The conservative atmosphere was apparent since the first time I set my foot on this school. I noticed all female teachers and non-academic staffs wore modest clothes and cover their hair with head scarves. As a Muslim myself, I was not surprised to see this because what they did was to adhere firmly to Islamic rules and to be the role model for the students. After I received the handbook of the school from the vice principal, I further learned

that the school had also seriously stipulated the dress code for its students with the following rules:

- Girls Uniform: white scarf and white socks with one of the following: (1) blue jumpers with white blouse, (2) blue pants with long white or matching blouse. No miniskirts, no street clothes permitted.
- Boy's uniform: white shirts with blue slacks. No shorts, no street clothes are permitted.
- All students: white socks and closed shoes only. No sandals or colorful shoes.
- Grooming guidelines: Uniforms and scarves must be clean. Hair must be clean and combed. No make-up, nail polish or perfume allowed

However, some teachers mentioned about the unwritten rules about wearing headscarf for female students. Younger students (kindergarten students, first to third graders) were allowed not to cover their hair; however, when the students reached grade four, they were encouraged to wear it. Once they started to move to the fifth grade, they were required to cover their hair.

Another thing that I noted was that the majority of the students wereof Middle-Eastern or African descents. According tothe principal, two third of the students were the second generation of immigrants whose parents grew up in US but never went to an Islamic school because there was no Islamic school when they were young. The motivation to send their children to this school was that they did not want their children to be like them: illiterate in liturgic Arabic. Only few students came from newly-arrived immigrant families. According to her, these new comers, who mostly came from Muslim countries, were generally less lenient than the parents who have been in America for a significant period of time. These newly-arrived immigrant parents were eager to maintain their children's religious identity as they were worried if their children would be carried away with their new life in America.

For my second observation, I came back to the school before noon a week after I had done my first observation. This time, I had a chance to observe Language Arts class for grade seven and eight (a combined class) taught by Ahmed. There were approximately eight students attending the class. The activity for that day was writing a composition while the theme of the writing was Internet. To introduce the students with an organized writing, the teacher shared the strategies how to write effectively, from brainstorming ideas, drafting, choosing a title, and composing. I noted something interesting when the teacher, during the explanation of brainstorming ideas, asked the students the purpose of using internet to generate students' opinion. I expected their answers would be ranging from games, entertainment, and the likes. Yes, it was true some of the students did say that; however, some of them provided answers which were related to Islam, for example: to find online Quran, *hadith*, prayer time. This finding indicated that Islamic messages were manifested in students' daily activity; even when they brainstormed ideas for writing, the examples which came up were discourses related to religion. When I commented on this to Ahmed after the class was over, he stated that the manifestation and integration of Islam were applied in every aspect of activities in this school. This was called "Islamisation of the education" and when students' behavior or attitude were the reflection of Islam, Ahmed believed that the school had successfully islamisized the education.

> "In our classroom we should have Islamisation of education. So instead of referring to like in a math classroom, instead of saying one song plus one song equals to two songs, we said one rakaat plus one rakaat that's two rakaat. So we can implement Islamic aspects in everything." (Ahmed)

After the class was over, there was a break which was followed by a noon prayer congregation conducted in mosque. All students in all grades, except the kindergarten who left the school exactly at noon, proceeded to mosque. According to Ahmed, although children were not yet required to pray five times a day (dawn, noon, afternoon, evening,

and night), they have been acquainted with the religious practice since they were young. Thus, when they grew up, they would be used to praying regularly. Moreover, they would find it an inseparable part of their lives in the future. Also, the school wanted to emphasize the importance of praying in congregation in mosque. According to Ahmed, praying in congregation in a mosque would train the students to be on time as they have to be ready when the prayer time came. Then, praying in congregation would make them meet people and this would later on widen their friendship and networking.

The week after, I did my observation in the afternoon because I wanted to see how the school ended the day. Just like in the morning assembly, the dismissal assembly was led by the principal or the vice principal (during the time when the principal was absent). That day, the principal led the dismissal assembly which was started at 2.50 pm. All students, but the kindergarten students, were gathered again in the courtyard. This activity began with the pricipal reciting a short prayer and reading aloud the English translation. After that, she disseminated some announcements from the class teachers about the homeworks, assignments, or class projects that parents must assist. Finally at 3 p.m. the dismissal assembly was done and all students left the schools with their parents who waited patiently on the school benches or inside the mosque. The school did not have a school bus; therefore, all parents must make sure that they could pick up their children or at least make an arrangement for carpooling with other parents if they could not pick up their children.

Reflecting on my observation notes, there was one phenomenon that stood out among others and deeply fascinated me. Unlike in public schools where the use of language other than English was strictly limited if not annihilated, this school provided a very accommodating atmosphere for multilingual practice to thrive. Most of the teachers here were bilingual speakers of Arabic and English where Arabic was their first language. In contrast, the majority of students' first language was English. One of the students whom I interviewed, Hassan, told me that for a student to be able to speak Arabic would be helpful to build close rapports with the teachers and to minimize miscommunication.

> "Since most of the teachers here from Saudi Arabia or something, that would be easy if we can speak Arabic with them. To understand them better." (Hassan)

In the Teacher Room, teachers would also speak with each other in Arabic during the break. Another thing I witnessed was that all teachers spoke accented English and they did not feel inferior to have accent. Because of this phenomenon, students were used to hearing varieties of English and subconsciously accepted this practice.

This mesmerized me for the fact that this state is known for its strict English Only Policy within the school domain (public schools). In public schools, students whose home language is not English must be clustered in special classes for Non-Native Speakers and took additional English classes. This makes those students fall behind their monolingual English speakers because they take much of their time in English classes and, as a consequence, they have less time to learn other subjects. On the contrary, in Southwest Islamic School, the newly-arrived immigrant students (almost all were refugees from Somalia) did not have to go through the same process as their peers in public schools. They were immersed with other American born classmates. This practice did not make them academically inferior while at the same time accelerated their English proficiency without losing their mother tongue's proficiency. For American born students, they have a chance to meet other students whose heritage language was the same and conversed with it even though they were not fluent since their first language was English. All in all, being bilingual or multilingual was perceived as an

 tage instead of a liability in this Islamic school.

From my observation, it was also obvious that the school desperately needed financial support. The financial problem which the school experienced was worsened by the

economic crisis five years ago. This crisis had directly affected the enrollment of new students and continuing students in this school. According to Noor, the number of students enrolled in the academic year of 2010/2011 had plummeted because many parents were no longer able to pay the tuition fee because of the mass layoff nationwide. In 2009/2010 academic year, there were 200 students registered while in the following year the number shrank to approximately 100. Also due to the economic recession, the state government was forced to cut down the financial aid usually disbursed through School Choice Trust Program. In the past, this program helped ninety students to pay the tuition. However, in 2011, the program could only fund twenty five students.

So far, the school has been run with the help from the Muslim community through direct donation (i.e. with the help of the mosque disseminating the information about fund raising) or indirect one such as joining the state government's program called "Best Student Fund". Through this program, Muslim taxpayers were encouraged to donate their money to the school. In return, their donation would be considered as a tax credit at the end of the financial year which they could use to increase their tax return. Although the school had done their best to generate money from donation, they still did not receive sufficient funding to improve the school facilities. The absence of decent sports facilities, cafeteria, spacious classroom, computer lab, heating system, and insufficient collection of books at the school library were only few of the problems that the school faced. Another serious problem was that the school did not have enough money to send its teachers for professional development training. Even worse than that, the school had just let go some of their teachers because the school could not pay them anymore.

The students were well aware of the fact that the school could not provide better facilities for them. Hassan, one of the student participants, criticized the school library's collections that mostly were outdated.

> "Well, like sometimes the books are really old and then you don't know what they're doing in high school. You might be missing out. Yeah. Like yeah we have good academic books but they're usually old books." (Hassan)

Then, Hassan and his two peers, Maryam and Fatima, also expressed their need to have better sport facilities such as a bigger courtyard or a gym. In addition to that, they expected the school would offer some classes, such as Arts or Home Economics, which were absent in this school because of no human resources, no supporting facilities, the school's priority to Islamic subjects. For these students, these classes were as important as other subjects. They really wished to learn how to play an instrument or to draw in the Arts class or to practice cooking, sewing, and so forth in Home Economics. In contrast, parents did not seem to mind at all. One of the parents, Sarah, said that arts could be inserted in other classes:

> "The kids draw a lot but they don't say it's art class. They know how to draw a character you know a dog for example of farm animal whatever but we don't have to say that it is an art class.. For music we do have a lot of nasheed you know. The kids will sing a song but this is included in Language and Arts class or Arabic class." (Sarah)

For parents, the most important was that the school had fulfilled its duties to deliver an Islamic education. To know that their children were able to read and write Arabic, understand their religion, and show good manner and behavior was more important than a string of facilites which they perceived simply just non-crucial supporting tools.

> "No, I don't care about the facilities. You know what, if you have a lot of facilities but your kid is not safe, it has a lot of bad things, what's the point? Even you know, our, our school is not a big school, big rooms but you know we still have a lot of parents sending their children here because they know their kids are in good hands. I don't say that in public school they're not in good hands. They do but they don't feel safe.

> From the news that we heard, you know, what we see, if you hear about it, they have a lot of problems because they have a high number of students." (Sarah)

When I asked the parents as well as the principal whether lack of facilities would hinder students' academic achievement, they strongly disagreed. According to the principal, the school had many alumnae who successfully graduated from prominent higher education institutions in the US. Furthermore, the current students also exhibited excellent academic performance, for example surpassing the average passing grade in standard tests, winning the third position in a science competition organized by the state for several times. One of the parents, Sarah, added that some alumnae, who continued to a nearby public high school, academically outperformed their peers.

> "Smart kids can survive anywhere. If they don't smart enough, they have to work hard and here the school really helps them because the school is not large unlike public schools." (Sarah)

Here, Sarah pointed out an important quality of the school: "the school is not large, unlike public schools". Because the school did not have a large student population, teachers could optimally pay attention to the learning progress of each student. When a student encountered an academic or even non-academic difficulty, teachers would notice right away and discuss the problem with the parents.

A similar situationcan be seen in Shapiro's study (2005). The Jewish school where her daughter attended had only 190 students. Compared to a public school, this number was strikingly small; as a result, teachers found less difficulty to focus on the students' needs. In this school, Shapiro's daughter perceived the school as a nurturing, caring, and loving place. According to Shapiro, these feelings which usually existed only at home, somehow, could also be present in schools. Likewise, parents also saw Southwest Islamic School as a supporting, encouraging and nurturing place.

> "We have small space but we have small groups. So the kids get full attention from teachers. In public school, they have a lot of things but the number of students is also high so they don't get enough attention. We know each other. We are like family. For example, someone is sick we will write a card and send it to him. We care about it." (Sarah)

Parents and teachers' relationships were also close too. Teachers knew the parents of each student by heart, not only knew their names but also their background. Noor indicated that parents played an important part in the students' success because parents had responsibilities to ensure the students' educational attainment. At home, parents were responsible to accompany and assist their children when they studied. Moreover, parents were also in charge of introducing and maintaining Islamic values because according to Noor Islamic education began at home. Therefore, the school must build and maintain a good rapport with the parents in order to collaborate for the success of the students.

Parents

The findings from the interviews indicated that parents perceived Islamic education an important aspect for their children's lives as it would help their children to build a strong identity as a Muslim and to embrace their religious identity, that is, Islamic belief was the primary ingredient of their self-concept. "Although Muslims are not foreign in America, they do possess a distinct cultural identity which can get lost in the mainstream sea" (Shaikley, 2006, p. 47). Therefore, parents of Southwest Islamic school hoped that frequent exposure to Islamic values in the homogenous environment (i.e. Islamic school) would help their children to strengthen their identity. In addition, they believed that the identity construction was best built when the children were still at a young age. At this age, children had not been very much exposed to the external environment. Thus, parents would not find it challenging to be involved in the identity construction of the children.

> "I want my child to learn Quran. I want my child to know about his religion. [...] once your kid was still young, you can feed them easily all them knowledge that you have." (Sarah)

> "When they go here they know their identity especially when they're still young. When they have strong Islamic personality, they can go, they know who they are, you know. That's why we bring our children here." (Sister Aisha)

Strengthening the students' identity as a Muslim was also a strategy to make them well-prepared when they had to move to a more heterogeneous environment such as public schools. Parents strongly believed that the solid identity foundation cultivated in this school along with the Islamic home environment had been beneficial in dealing with the external pressures which might jeopardize their religious identity. According to Aisha, her Islamic home environment and Islamic educational foundation her son received in Southwest Islamic School had enabled him tosolidify his Muslim identity which protected him from being carried away by the peer pressure in high school. Similarly, Sarah pointed out the positive influence of the school in maintaining the students' identity even after the students left the school. She encouraged me to interview the alumnae who successfully manifested their Islamic identity in a public high school where they now went by establishing a Muslim student club and organizing Islamic events.

> "If they don't have the background from our school, they will not have it over there. You see because we nurtured them every time and this is who they are." (Sarah)

The role of the school as a place to strengthen the identity of the students is also acknowledged by one of the teachers, Ahmed who stated that the school aimed at educating children how to adapt but not to melt.

> "The idea here is that we want them to adapt but not melt in the sense that the Islamic school will help the characters of the Muslims especially the young ones to *you know* living in the environment where they can get strong enough."(Ahmed)

The statement above implicitly brought up the issue of assimilation which according to the teacher was not at all correlated with the total blending to the new environment by sacrificing their identity. According to Hutchinson and Smith (cited in Coronel-Molina, 1999), the phenomenon of integrating but not melting was common. In a similar vein, Coronel-Molina (1999) stated that instead of melting, an individual would expand their identity "beyond the sphere of my ancient cultural roots, while still maintaining my ties to those roots" (p. 3).

> "Our students, they are American too but they have their religion. They are second generation. What about the third generation? The fourth? Who's going to take care of them if they don't go to the masjid? If they don't go to the Islamic school? They will lose you know the continuity." (Sarah)

> "It's okay for them to interact with anybody as long as, you know, you don't follow, you know, what other children are doing that's not Islamic way, like making boyfriend-girlfriend or something." (Aisha)

The role of the school as a secure place to strengthen the identity was also reported by Juma (2010) who found that Muslim preschool and Jewish preschool were the preferred type of schooling for Muslim and Jewish communities for the identity maintenance of the young generation of Muslims and Jews respectively. In a similar vein, Shapiro (2005) believed that Jewish education had shaped her daughter's identity and that this identity was manifested continuously not only in the school but other domains. Jewish life was present not only at home or synagogue but every day and everywhere. Therefore, it is unsurprising that these Muslim parents were proud that their children had Islamic values.

Students

The interviews with the students had unraveled two major reasons why they preferred to study in an Islamic school, namely pragmatic and identity related ones. The first, pragmatic, was a reason that has an immediate and tangible benefit for them. Hassan, Maryam, and Fatima expected that they could intensively learn *Quran* and Islamic knowledge. Therefore, their parents would not need to spend extra money to pay for a tutor to teach them how to learn *Quran* or to pay for a *Quran* class in a mosque. Also, in this school they had a chance to intensively learn Arabic which is the language of the *Quran*. Thus, learning Arabic would help them to read and understand *Quran* better. In regards to Islamic knowledge, they strongly believed that going to an Islamic school would strengthen their Islamic knowledge rather than just relying on their parents to pass it on to them because the school had a serious atmosphere to study than that at home; as a consequence, they were encouraged to make efforts to learn about Islam.

The second theme, identity-related, led them to acknowledge their Muslim identity. This aspect also contributed to their belief that their needs as a Muslim would be barely met by public schools. Furthermore, they perceived their school as a training center to build and strengthen their Muslim identity before being sent to a heterogeneous environment, i.e. public high schools and colleges. In Southwest Islamic School, they did not have any hesitation to express their Muslim identity, such as wearing headscarf (for girls), modest clothes for both boys and girls, or praying in the mosque when the prayer time comes, and so forth. They admitted that they needed time to build their self confidence to maintain such practice for the fact that they were quite different from their peers in public schools.

> "My mom wants me to go to Islamic school so that I can learn about Islam and Quran so that in high school I can perfectly be fine and know what t (Hassan)

Nevertheless, these students were a little bit worried about the challenges they would face when they moved to a public school. They expressed their concern regarding drug-abuse cases, shootings, and other problems associated with public schoolings. Another potential problem was the difficulty to get along with other students because they were not enrolled in the same school since grade one. However, they could maintain their optimism by stating that over time they would be just fine because most of the students would probably know them better.

> "Like you know people will make fun of you for the first couple of months and after that they just don't care about you. They'll just talk to you just like a regular person." (Hassan)

They assured me that they were not at all worried about being transferred to a public school because of their Muslim identity; in fact, as they were confident to be a Muslim: "To say it loud, to say it proud" (Fatima).

CONCLUSION

This study found that Islamic school is perceived by all participants as the best placed to build and strengthen the identity of young generation of Muslims. This is a place to prepare the young generation of Muslims to integrate in a more heterogeneous environment without getting carried away by the mainstream wave. Even though perceived positively, the future of Islamic education is still questionable due to the financial problems which jeopardize the continuity of such schools. However, it is worth noting that the number of Muslim in the United States keeps growing which means that the demand for Islamic schools will increase respectively.

This study also revealed one important finding that should be taken into consideration to improve the quality of Islamic schools. The growing number of Islamic schools should be anticipated by the Department of Education in order to ensure the quality of education by setting up the rules for the accreditation of Islamic school. This study will also shed light on the issues of minority education and acknowledge the needs of the minority group to articulate their identity in the educational sphere.

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