Supporting Muslim Students in Secular Public Schools

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Abstract

This article discusses the findings of a study examining the challenges and opportunities of supporting Muslim students in secular public schools. Education is explored as a multifaceted interplay between home and family life, community resources, school programs and policies, and classroom lessons to investigate the curricular experiences of Muslim students in North America. In particular, this study focuses on data gathered through interviews, informal conversations, and participant observations to draw a narrative case study of a female, Bangladeshi, Muslim student attending a comprehensive elementary and middle school. The study explores tensions and growth among this Muslim student, her parent, and members of her school community as she balances affiliation to family beliefs and practices, her ethnic community, her Muslim community within the diaspora, and her school community.

School systems are increasingly facing challenges associated with globalization, including shifting patterns of immigration and the overriding need for intercultural knowledge and understanding (Schlein, 2007; Smith, 1999) among individuals interacting in schools and communities. Dramatic growth in the Muslim population in recent years heightens the need for educators to ensure educational equity and access for Muslim students in North

America. In the context of the United States, 1,104,000 individuals describe themselves as belonging to an Islamic religious group (United States Census Bureau, 2008). In Canada, figures from the 2001 census indicate that 579,640 people self-identified as Muslim, representing 2% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2003). In addition, the 2006 census lists Pakistan, Iran, and India among the top 10 source countries for Canadian immigration (Statistics Canada, 2007).

These statistics exemplify how immigration has enriched Canadian and U.S. societies with an array of Muslim cultures and Islamic practices. Given this increasing diversity, it has become essential to understand difficulties Muslims may encounter in North America. In this article, we discuss the findings of a study examining some of the challenges of and opportunities for supporting Muslim students in secular public schools. We explore education as a multifaceted interplay between home and family life, community resources, school programs and policies, and classroom lessons to investigate the curricular experiences of Muslim students in North America. We focus on data gathered through interviews, informal conversations, and participant observations with students, parents, school administrators, and teachers to draw a narrative case study of a female, Bangladeshi, Muslim student attending a kindergarten through Grade-8 school in Toronto, Canada.[1] We explore tensions among this Muslim student, her parents, and members of her school community in the ongoing negotiation between balancing affiliation to family beliefs and practices, academic preparation within the Canadian context, and efforts by school staff to reach out to Muslim students, their families, and Muslim community members within the diaspora.

We highlight in this article issues related to educating Muslim students in secular public schools. A detailed analysis of the student's, her parents', and her teachers' and administrators' cultural experiences as embedded in their public school context provides a way to uncover potential explicit and tacit difficulties and advantages related to cultural understanding among Muslims, as well as between Muslims and members of other cultural and religious backgrounds. Although we do not assert this examination of an individual Muslim student's experiences in a specific school community context as a direct representation of all Muslim students' experiences, the resonating experiential details presented here offer educators insights into the challenges and difficulties teachers and administrators may encounter in the process of meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Moreover, increased religious and cultural understanding is especially important for schooling in culturally diverse societies, such as Canada and the United States. Research in this area informs educational equity policies, programs, and practices for Muslim students in ways that are meaningful to the students and their families. Furthermore, our inquiry exploring the experiences of Muslims from their own perspectives is critical for enhancing awareness of cultural bias and negative stereotyping among non-Muslims, which is critical in a post-9/11 world.

Research Objectives

The overarching goal of this narrative case study was to gain insight into a Muslim student's experiences in her school context through examination of experiential narrative

profiles of school community members in a public secular school. We examined culturally oriented aspects of schooling through the storied expressions of aMuslim student, her Muslim parent, and her school principal and vice principal. The following research objectives framed our study:

- To examine features of a Muslim student's religious and cultural experiences within her secular schooling in the diaspora.
- To identify challenges a Muslim parent may encounter in the integration of her children's religious and cultural upbringing with secular education.
- To demonstrate the efficacy and potential of a secular public school climate for contributing to a Muslim student's academic and cultural development.
- To highlight the potential of inquiring into Muslim students' narratives and those of their family members for informing teachers with firsthand accounts regarding their religious and cultural needs.

Theoretical Framework

We conducted our narrative inquiry into issues related to supporting Muslim students in public schooling within the diaspora following Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative research approach. The theoretical framework for our study is heavily based on Dewey's (1938) philosophy of the interconnectedness between experience and education, which provided us with a rationale for examining lived curricular experiences on a school and community landscape. We further used Schwab's (1969, 1973) concept of the practical in education to orient our work to the curricular commonplaces of teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu.

In addition, our investigation was informed by several literary strands on education. This investigation is set into a body of existing literature on multicultural education (Banks & McGee Banks, 2004), cultural relevance in education (Ladson-Billings, 1992), and cultural sensitivity (Cummins, 1996; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Our work further builds on existing research calling for students' accounts of schooling experiences as a valuable, but often overlooked, source for learning about and ameliorating school practices (Cook-Sather, 2002; Pekrul & Levin, 2007).

We also shaped our inquiry in consultation with research on the distinct and multifaceted tensions Muslims may face within their communities in Canada and the United States. We were informed by work highlighting the intertwining religious, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic variables of Muslims (Shah, 2006), studies illustrating features of Muslim religious identity formation in non-Muslim settings (Peek, 2005; Ramji, 2008), and research illuminating the poverty of English language school resources about Islam (Gilani-Williams, 2007). Our study was significantly guided by the limited, recent body of literature examining the experiences of Muslim youth from their own perspectives (Bullough, 2007; Pak, 2004; Zine, 2000, 2001) and on female Muslims' points of view (Sarroub, 2001; Timmerman, 2000; Zine, 2006).

Method

We examine school-based experiences among students, school administrators, and parents to explore challenges and opportunities associated with educating Muslim students in a secular public school. We conducted five 60-min interviews with A'ishah and her 30 seventh-grade classmates in groups of three or four during regular class periods over the course of 1 school year. In addition, we conducted one 60-min structured interview with two teachers and two administrators at the school. We also observed the students; their seventh-grade homeroom teacher, William; and several parents in class, around the school, and during field trips. Informal interviews with A'ishah, her classmates, and their homeroom teacher as school events unfolded were ongoing. We tape-recorded and transcribed structured interviews and wrote extensive field notes following all interview sessions and participant observations. Relevant themes were identified through a detailed analysis of interview transcriptions and field notes.

Data Analysis and Findings

Student, parent, teacher, and administrator experiences

We begin this section by introducing a Bangladeshi, Muslim student—A'ishah—and providing an examination of her experiences in her diverse urban school. We contextualize A'ishah's experiences with the efforts of her teachers and administrators to create an equitable learning environment in a school located in a neighborhood that is an historical starting point for recent immigrants within Toronto. A'ishah's school, although not typical of all Canadian schools in terms of the large number of recently immigrated students and the comparatively lower socioeconomic status of the surrounding neighborhood, is nevertheless similar to many local public schools (Toronto District School Board, 2005) in the diversity of their student population and their commitment to educational equity.

We illustrate the voice of Muslim students at the school here via the storied experiences of A'ishah, a second-generation Muslim Canadian of Bangladeshi heritage, who is in seventh grade at the school. We focus on A'ishah as a key participant in our inquiry and provide a detailed analysis of her experiences in this article for several reasons. We believe that A'ishah's stories are important because they resonate with the experiences of some of the female Muslim students featured in existing literature on gendered anti-Islamic sentiments (Rezai-Rashti, 1999) and the relation between the female Islamic practice of veiling and negative Muslim stereotyping (Ghazal Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Hoodfar, 1993; Todd, 1998; Zine, 2006). Moreover, A'ishah's thoughts and experiences at school often mirrored those of her female Muslim classmates, albeit in more detail, because she was a talkative and enthusiastic participant. We were also able to secure A'ishah's mother as a research participant, thereby providing us with an opportunity to conduct a multifaceted deliberation over A'ishah's stories in association with the narratives of her parent and her teachers and administrators at school.

As a narrative case study, we set out to examine particular situations and interactions to inform others via nuanced, rich experiential insights (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, pp. 49–50). Although we recognize that A'ishah's experiences may not be representative of those

of other Muslim or Bangladeshi students, we illustrate within this article the value of examining one student's experiences in the diaspora to gain insight into experiences that others may share, as well as for learning about the potential complexities of experiences immigrant and minority students—in this case, a Bangladeshi, Muslim student—may encounter.

A student and her family's experiences

A'ishah is the eldest daughter in a family of six children, with siblings ranging in age from 2 to 10, four of whom also attended the same school. She lives with her mother and siblings in a public housing complex near the school, where many of her peers also live. Her father, although referred to in conversations with us, did not live with the family.

Interacting with A'ishah demonstrated to us some of her struggles to fit in with her classmates while also dealing with pressure from her mother to behave and dress in a manner that she believed to be appropriate for a young Muslim girl. The first day we entered the research class, A'ishah asked us what we thought of the brown-rimmed spectacles she was wearing. Although we reassured her that we thought they were nice, she told us she thought "they sucked." She then mentioned that she hoped to buy a pink pair soon, but that she thought her mother would disapprove of "flashy" colors. Later in the school year, we also witnessed evidence of A'ishah's difficulties in adapting to the *hijab* as a regular practice as we watched her adjust and readjust the pink hijab she had recently begun wearing. Two of her classmates regularly wore a hijab, although they complained to us about it, and a number of other students in the school also veiled themselves. However, A'ishah seemed highly self-conscious about wearing a hijab, especially outside the school community. We recorded the following observation in our field notes after returning to school from a class field trip:

> A'ishah has got a hijab, but she drapes it over her shoulders, she puts it on, takes it off, she plays with it, and then puts it on her head. She does all these different things with it, everything but keep it where it belongs.

During ongoing informal interviews with A'ishah, we asked about her opinion of the hijab. She explained to us, "My mother tells me that I should wear the hijab. I don't have a preference to wear it. I should wear it because of God." She emphasized her mother as the primary reason for undertaking veiling practices rather than religious commitment.

At the same time, A'ishah appeared to be at odds within herself when it came to the interests of North American female teenagers, including fashion, cosmetics, and the idolization of celebrities. After school one day, A'ishah noticed an average-looking blonde woman walking by the school yard and exclaimed to us that she thought she was really beautiful. A few minutes later, A'ishah took off her hijab and put it on Candace Schlein's head to "dress you up and make you look pretty." A'ishah often commented on the jewelry that we wore, asking us if she could try on our "bling." She complimented Candace Schlein several times for not wearing too much makeup, saying that it was "just right." Walking past neighborhood clothing shops during a field trip, A'ishah pointed out a storefront to us with a display of cropped tops and mini skirts, and related the following:

I don't know who wears that. I can never wear that. Especially the t-shirt that had a Playboy Bunny sign on it and it was like a really, really short t-shirt. I can never wear something like that. I don't really understand why anyone would wear that. I could wear a short skirt, but with a long top, or I could wear a tank top, but with long pants or a long skirt. My parents wouldn't let me, but I couldn't wear that stuff. I don't really understand why women would dress like that. Like why would they want to even?

It is like (singer/actress) Britney Spears, I don't understand what is wrong with her. Why would she dress like that? Why does she act like that? She used to be really good, but now she is dressing like that. Hilary Duff (singer/actress) is really nice, and I really, really like her and, you know, she doesn't dress like that. Well, you know, I would like to dress like that.

A'ishah reacted somewhat disapprovingly toward women who dress provocatively but also seemed to want to wear the same types of clothes that she saw other girls her age and female celebrities wearing. We recognized the dichotomy in A'ishah's comments and pursued the topic further with her:

Candace Schlein: What about when you are older and you could make decisions about how to dress?

A'ishah: I can never dress like those other girls with short tops and skirts. Even what I am wearing now, I can't do that when I am older. I have to be covered from head to toe.

Listening to A'ishah's stories of culture and identity on a Canadian school landscape allowed us the opportunity to see that although A'ishah may express a desire to dress or behave like her non-Muslim friends, she understands the cultural and familial expectations for her as a Muslim girl. Although A'ishah is preparing herself for her future manner of dress with a duality, whereby she might wear sleeveless tops while condemning others for dressing similarly, she also shows an awareness of and a commitment to her beliefs by her resignation to become outwardly less like her non-Muslim peers in terms of manner of dress as she matures. However, A'ishah also displayed other aspects of her experience as a Muslim in a secular school. Toward the end of the school year, we accompanied A'ishah's homeroom class on a full-day field trip to a local amusement park. A'ishah's mother rushed into the school as the class was about to depart to bring her daughter's signed consent form and a lunch for A'ishah. Elaine Chan saw Mrs. Khan show A'ishah some food before putting it into a bag and handing it to her daughter. A'ishah refused the lunch and, in the end, A'ishah's mother gave her daughter's lunch toWilliam to carry.

At the amusement park later that day, A'ishah came up to Candace Schlein in tears and claimed that she did not have any food to eat or any money to buy lunch. Candace Schlein agreed to lend A'ishah $5 to buy lunch. As A'ishah joined her classmates in line at a food kiosk and chose pizza and french fries, Candace Schlein wondered whether A'ishah's mother would approve of A'ishah's food selection and whether it was her place to question

such matters. When Candace Schlein later mentioned this to Elaine Chan, she informed Candace Schlein that A'ishah had a lunch, and that William was carrying it for her because she had refused to accept it when her mother had offered it to her. We asked A'ishah about this the next day, and she told us that it was "weird food and it smelled funny." It seemed that A'ishah was embarrassed by the food her mother had provided and had resorted to deception to eat the same foods as her non-Muslim peers.

We also saw indication of the conflict A'ishah experienced between home and school when we worked with A'ishah and her classmates on autobiographical projects for their class yearbook. Each student wrote an essay about his or her ethnic and cultural background and brought childhood and family photos for their yearbook entries. The subject of cultures and families arose naturally among the students while working on this activity over the course of several weeks. We shared stories related to our cultural backgrounds and our families with the students, and they related their cultural and familial narratives to us.

We knew that A'ishah's family originated from Bangladesh; however, our conversation during the yearbook activity marked the first time that she expanded on her views of her home culture. During a conversation with a group of classmates about the languages that they speak, A'ishah admitted to watching movies and listening to music in her first language, Bengali. When we asked her whether she likes to speak in her home language, however, shrugged it off: "Whatever. Yeah." A'ishah's mother had informed us that her daughter was taking Arabic in school, but A'ishah neglected to discuss or write about her Arabic studies in international languages[2] class during yearbook activities. One day, when we passed A'ishah in the school hallway on her way to Arabic language class, she complained about having to study Arabic simply because she was Muslim. She stated that she preferred to study Italian and did not feel a connection to the Arabic language, as it was not a means of communication that she used at home or with friends. She told us how her mother wanted her to learn Arabic because she viewed Arabic proficiency as a means of enhancing A'ishah's access to the teachings of the Koran.

A'ishah seemed to have difficulty reconciling her affinity for an idealized form of North American culture with her growing identification with her culture and religion. This also extended to her perspective on her family. She stated to us in an interview, "My family is really lame and I have no stories. Nothing is interesting, and I am from here. I want to be Italian. Not just Italian, I want to be American and I want to go to Italy." Her homeroom teacher told us during an informal interview following class one day that A'ishah had a very interesting family background. He related how she came from a highly respected family in her native country, where her father had been a famous poet and her grandfather had been a noted political figure. We told A'ishah that we had heard that her family was famous in Bangladesh, and she responded with a large grin. She happily told us about a family trip to Bangladesh several years earlier to visit relatives. She said, "It was weird, funny, and nice. Everybody knew my father wherever we went. They were shouting out his name as we walked. Strangers! Even at the airport!" Although she was excited to tell us about the warm reception her family received from the general public in Bangladesh, A'ishah refused to discuss further details about her visit to her family's home country. A'ishah stories present a complicated mixture of pride and embarrassment regarding her

culture, religion, and family's country of origin. At the same time, she seemed to both idealize and reject aspects of European and North American culture. We wondered about the influences that had contributed to these ideas because her classmates also came from various cultural backgrounds and were newcomers or second-generation Canadians from China, Vietnam, Jamaica, Romania, Pakistan, and Ethiopia. The majority of A'ishah's classmates belonged to visible minority groups, most spoke languages other than English at home, and many regularly ate ethnic foods. In fact, there were only three Caucasian students in her class, including one recent immigrant from Romania and two third-generation Canadians of European heritage. This demographic reflected the diversity within the school and the surrounding neighborhood community. We had assumed that participation in such a diverse school community, where students and their families seemed to be encouraged to share their cultures and languages, would contribute to a sense of pride in their home cultures and languages and a desire to share this knowledge with their peers and teachers.

Nevertheless, A'ishah's stories outline her struggles with balancing affiliation to her family's Muslim beliefs and practices and her desire to be accepted by and conform to the standards of her Canadian, non-Muslim peers. The other two Muslim girls in A'ishah's class discussed similar perspectives, but they did not carry out defiant actions or loud, public expressions of cultural rejection. We wondered whether A'ishah's experiences within her secular public school, as well as those of her female Muslim friends, were defined by stages in adolescence or by their stances as female Muslims, and we looked to A'ishah's mother for insight into the challenges of supporting Muslim students in a secular public school.

A Muslim parent's experiences
We met A'ishah's mother, Mrs. Khan, throughout the year via her frequent visits to the school. With five children enrolled at the school, Mrs. Khan often ran down the street from home to accompany A'ishah's younger siblings to and from school and to bring her children snacks, forgotten homework, athletic clothes for gym class, signed consent forms for extracurricular activities, or to speak with teachers about her children's academic progress. We maintained ongoing communication with Mrs. Khan during these meetings and also arranged an interview to learn more about her thoughts on being a Muslim parent in North America and about supporting her children in a Canadian school context. We hoped to gain insight into A'isha's experiences and broaden our capacities to interpret some of the cultural and curricular narratives of Muslim students in the diaspora.

When we asked Mrs. Khan to tell us about her experiences of teaching her children about her home culture, she began by saying, "I don't know how much [A'ishah] knows about culture in Bangladesh, but she knows she's Muslim." Mrs. Khan showed faith that her daughter has embraced the cultural and religious lessons that her family has instilled in her. At the same time, Mrs. Khan told us how she is disappointed with A'isha's constant requests for money to purchase clothing and cosmetics or to see movies with her friends. As the eldest daughter of six children, Mrs. Khan told us how she believed it would be more appropriate for A'ishah to help her with household chores and care for her younger siblings or to focus on her studies. Mrs. Khan stated that such actions would be more in

line with the beliefs and practices with which she herself grew up in Bangladesh and that she associates with being a young Muslim woman.

Mrs. Khan explained to us how she believes that her ability to raise her children in a Muslim manner is negatively impacted by her physical separation from extended family in Bangladesh. She commented how, in Bangladesh, her family would have helped to create a nurturing Muslim environment for her children, and provided exemplars of Muslim practices and behaviors for her children to model. Mrs. Khan also related that she feels she has limited access to resources for her family from the local Muslim community and stated that there is even less support in her neighborhood for her Bangladeshi culture due to the small community of others from Bangladesh. She told us that she was proud to have had the opportunity to bring her children to Bangladesh for a visit but regretted that the family could not afford to make such trips more frequently.

Many of Mrs. Khan's challenges are specifically associated with her immigration to and settlement in a new country. These difficulties involve communicating in a new language and interacting on her family's behalf within a school system and a network of social services with which she is not well acquainted. Mrs. Khan is also a single mother with six children between the ages of 2 and 12, living in public housing while receiving social assistance. Because Mrs. Khan does not work outside the home and the children's father is not a part of their day-today family life, there is little money to support A'ishah's extracurricular activities and interests. Mrs. Khan, nonetheless, attempts to fulfill her children's requests. She related to us how she creatively found opportunities at school and in the community to support her work of raising her children, including English lessons for herself, the school's Parenting and Literacy Center for her preschool children, hockey classes for her sons, and special education support for two of her children.

More important, Mrs. Khan has formed a close bond with A'ishah's former third-grade teacher, Mrs. Lewis, whom she refers to as A'ishah's "mother at school." Mrs. Lewis was formerly a facilitator in a home for new refugees and is experienced with aiding newcomers in acculturating to Canadian society. Mrs. Khan discussed learning much about life and education in Canada from Mrs. Lewis over dinners that she hosted in her home. Mrs. Khan was also appreciative of Mrs. Lewis's attempts to educate her students about various cultures. She referred to a newspaper clipping Mrs. Lewis had posted outside her classroom door in support of a new school board initiative to promote East Asian cultures at an upcoming school festival.

Mrs. Khan's regular presence at the school to oversee her children's activities and her frequent communication with the school staff paint a picture of a woman who has many duties in raising her children. Nonetheless, educating her children about being Muslim remains a high priority. This was substantiated by the fact that, although Mrs. Khan is laden with family responsibilities, she agreed to participate in our study as a means of disseminating her thoughts on Muslim education for her children. She further spoke about her participation as a medium through which to influence A'ishah.

A'ishah's stories reveal her struggles to find the balance of being Muslim and Canadian from a student perspective. Her storied experiences illustrate how a Muslim girl may feel dissonant from her non-Muslim friends as she reaches adolescence, due to perceived heightened differences in their manner of dress and other aspects related to appearance

and expectations for behavior. A'ishah's mother confirmed to us that A'ishah knew a fair amount about Islam, Muslim practices, expectations of her parents for her as a Muslim girl, and even about her Bangladeshi heritage. However, A'ishah's comments and behaviors at school revealed that she sometimes felt conflicted about these expectations.

We puzzled over her apparent preference for some form of a North American ideal for women, given the multicultural climate of her school and community. A'ishah had Muslim school friends who experienced similar practices and parental expectations. As well, many of A'ishah's female classmates come from other cultural backgrounds, lived in traditional households, dressed relatively conservatively, and did not wear cosmetics. We wondered, then, why A'ishah responded negatively to related aspects of her religious and ethnic background when her school environment seemed supportive of cultural diversity and included peers whose families lived by similar practices and values.We considered that perhaps exposure to media or other youth outside of her school may have contributed to A'ishah's conflicted identity development as a North American girl—a notion that was explored in Zine's (2001) study of the role of dress as a way of negotiating relationships between female Muslim students and non-Muslim peers.

We also deliberated over tensions between A'ishah and her mother with respect to behavioral expectations, particularly in terms of the extent of A'ishah's contributions in the family home. Some of the storied tensions between A'ishah and Mrs. Khan may indicate differences due to a generational gap between a mother and a daughter, along with cultural differences stemming from the different countries and cultures in which both women spent their childhoods. As a second-generation Canadian, we considered that A'ishah may also be striving to gain independence from her mother by engaging in activities and behaviors common among her non-Muslim friends.

At the same time, we explored how schooling in the host country may help to alleviate some of these tensions immigrant and minority students may encounter as they attempt to balance affiliation to their home and ethnic cultures with their public, school cultures. In the next section, we describe ways teachers and administrators at A'ishah's school worked to implement well-intended measures to include students from all backgrounds into the curriculum. In the following, we illustrate the concerted efforts the administrators at A'ishah's school made to accommodate the needs of Muslim students.

Teachers' and administrators' experiences supporting Muslim students
We discuss here school administrators' experiences with integrating school policies, programs, and practices toward cultural diversity with the cultural needs of Muslim students within a Canadian school context. We deliberate over intricacies involved with the continuous negotiation of adolescent Muslim identities within secular education. Although the research school is part of a secular public school system, teachers and administrators have undertaken a variety of initiatives to provide cultural support to theirMuslim student population. The school principal, Jackie Steadman, listed for us in an interview some of the measures that she has taken to create an inclusive schooling environment for Muslim students:

> We have included Arabic language classes among the international language class options that are offered to our students as part of their regular school curriculum. Recently, we have had to limit our international language program to six language options, but we decided that it was important to keep Arabic in the curriculum. OurMuslim students come from various countries and speak different languages, but at least we could offer them the study of their language of prayer. We have also introduced Islamic worship services at the school on Friday afternoons. It is exciting because we have leaders from the Islamic community organizing this. Many of our students, including our Muslim students, have dietary preferences, and so we allow our students to eat their lunch at home. We offer Halal choices in the school lunch program as well.

Marlene Wilson, the vice principal, told us that families often bring home-cooked foods to school events so that students are able to choose from Halal or non-Halal items. Marlene also told us about how Muslim religious practices are taken into consideration in planning physical education classes. She explained how some Muslim parents had raised concerns about the swimming lessons that were part of the physical education curriculum. Many parents of Islamic background were concerned that the activity involved boys and girls interacting in swimwear, which was thought to be immodest. Jackie and Marlene negotiated with the swimming pool staff to allow students to swim in t-shirts and pants. The ongoing communication between parents and school administrators resulted in a resolution to the situation such that students were able to participate in the program.

Both Jackie and Marlene related their willingness to consider parents' perspectives on curricular matters and to consult with parents about differences in perspective pertaining to curriculum activities. An example of this ongoing negotiation arose during our time at the school around the topic of the health education curriculum. A nurse from a local clinic approached the school and volunteered to provide eighth-grade students with a lesson on family life education. Jackie needed to make a prompt decision to take advantage of the busy nurse's immediate availability. She discussed the lesson with the nurse and ascertained that, although the nurse did not intend to discuss sexually explicit material, she was interested in providing the students with frank information about adolescent health issues. Jackie decided not to accept the nurse's offer to provide this class because she realized the potential sensitivity of the curricular material and was uncertain of the response of some of the Muslim parents toward family life classes for their children. This incident exemplifies an occasion when Jackie and Marlene shaped the curriculum in consideration of the needs of their Muslim students.

The stories presented here highlight the pertinence of cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity in the work of school administrators' with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This issue also became apparent on another occasion when some of the Muslim parents complained to Jackie about a library book dealing with same-sex parents. Although the book was not sexual in nature, some of the Muslim parents felt the book was inappropriate for Muslim youth because it condoned homosexual relationships.

This incident highlights the inherent difficulties of accommodating for multiple perspectives about appropriate school curriculum when attempting to accommodate for

different cultural practices and beliefs in a secular public school. In the process of accommodating for the perspectives of some of the Muslim parents, there was a concern that the points of view of other groups, such as those who support gay or lesbian lifestyles, may become excluded or ostracized. Teachers and administrators considered removing the book from the library but, in the end, decided instead to place the book on a less-prominent shelf as a means of acknowledging the voices of parents advocating for its inclusion. This resolution, although not ideal, was an attempt to accommodate differing perspectives and to protect an equitable schooling environment for all students.

The school also organizes an annual "Multicultural Night" to celebrate cultures represented by students in the school. Multicultural Night has been met with positive and negative reactions from individual cultural groups. Jackie stated her belief in the effectiveness of the event in an interview:

> Multicultural Night is a really big event, where each of the International Language classes puts on some kind of cultural display, mostly singing or dance. This year, it was a tremendous success. It brings out the whole community.

Although many students and their families attend this cultural celebration each year, during our time at the school, some members of the Muslim community did not seem to share the same level of enthusiasm for the event for various reasons. At a School Council[3] meeting, a few parents and community members were promoting the upcoming Multicultural Night as a celebration with singing and dancing. Some of the Muslim parents at the meeting responded by questioning the propriety of the event. They asked about whether Multicultural Night was actually a party and expressed their concerns about attending or allowing their children to attend a school party. The school community development worker negotiated this obstacle with the parents at the meeting, explaining in detail how the singing and dancing during Multicultural Night was actually a cultural learning opportunity rather than a social gathering. As a result, the Muslim parents attending the meeting realized their potential misinterpretation, and some advocated their support of Multicultural Night. Although advertisement about the event may have led to confusion regarding the educational purposes of Multicultural Night and the potential disapproval of the event among Muslim families, the following excerpt from our field notes revealed another possible reason for the low attendance rate of Muslim community members at the event that year:

> Multicultural Night began with a speech by the principal, Jackie Steadman. She stated that the purpose for this evening was to show appreciation for all the students. She said that all the students, parents, and teachers need to learn to be tolerant and respectful of everyone, regardless of lifestyle and background. . . . Jackie returned to the podium to tell everybody that students from the Arabic program would not be performing as they were at home celebrating Eid.

The purpose of Multicultural Night is to enhance the school's sense of community by embracing multiple cultures; however, this program might have been seen as insensitive

to the needs of its Muslim students and their families. The event had inadvertently been scheduled for the same night that Muslim students would be celebrating Eid with their families, and they were, therefore, unavailable to attend Multicultural Night. After conversations about the incident with parents and staff, the principal acknowledged the need for the school to reach out more strongly to the Muslim community. She explained how the scheduling oversight for Multicultural Night was unfortunate and had contributed to some Muslim students feeling like outsiders in their school. Moreover, she commented that the school community missed out on an opportunity to enjoy presentations representing members of the Arabic language class and to learn from the Muslim students about Eid celebrations.

Tensions also surfaced in relation to the Muslim prayer time that takes place in the school library on Friday afternoons. Although most of the teachers supported this opportunity for spiritual connection for their Muslim students, some complained about the disruption to their lessons that this entailed. There was also criticism regarding the mess and commotion that students often created in the washrooms while conducting the ritualistic washing of their hands and feet prior to their worship services. Furthermore, the school librarian became frustrated by the misbehavior of some students during this spiritual activity. He commented that because many students failed to display an appropriately quiet and committed attitude during prayer time, it was obvious that they were taking advantage of the spiritual services as an opportunity to miss class. As a result of the complaints, the librarian attempted to have the Friday prayers. After communication and negotiation with Muslim parents and supporting members of the school community, the Friday prayer program was secured along with new measures and rules to monitor students' behaviors pertaining to their preparation for and participation in the services.

The school principal acknowledged that there were opportunities and challenges to incorporating Muslim students into the school and proudly informed us that she recently hired the first full-time Muslim teacher into the school. She spoke about the significance of the Arabic language teacher and a few other Muslim educators who were employed part-time at the school. She explained her belief that by including Muslim teachers, the school was providing Muslim students with academic and religious role models. She also related to us the potential for other staff to learn from a Muslim-Canadian cultural perspective. In this way, Jackie saw the school's first full-time Muslim teacher as a step toward resolving the need for further resources in the school to teach students and staff about Muslim culture while making the school more inclusive for its Muslim population. Both Jackie and Marlene expressed hope that the new teacher might be interested in creating a separate Muslim festival to highlight and educate members of the school community about Muslim culture.

Discussion

A'ishah's stories emphasize the importance of validating home cultures within the school curriculum, whereas her mother's narratives illustrate the nuances of raising children on a landscape of immigration and settlement from the perspective of a Muslim parent. Their experiences demonstrate the difficult balance that school staff need to achieve between

Muslim values and non-Muslim influences. Our research further draws attention to attempts made by teachers and administrators at the school to address issues of equity and access to opportunities in a school system where beliefs and practices common in a Muslim family may not be in line with those generally espoused in secular public schools or within non-Muslim societies. Examination of the student, parent, teacher, and administrator stories highlight the challenges, benefits, and complexities of moving from theory to practice to support the diverse backgrounds of students and their families through school curriculum and practices. Attending to A'ishah's, Mrs. Khan's, Jackie Steadman's, and Marlene Wilson's stories highlight how such work might occur through an accounting of particular contextual factors and ongoing and respectful communication to find appropriate solutions.

Understanding how school life is experienced by members of the Muslim school community offers insight into the particularities of the needs and interests of Muslims from their own viewpoints, and the challenges school teachers and administrators may encounter as they design and implement policies and practices to meet the curricular and social needs of their students. The stories examined here emphasize the need to draw on knowledge gained through the experiences of individuals to inform the work of school communities in their interactions with their minority background students. In this way, we lend a richness of insight into ways of supporting Muslim and, indeed, all immigrant and minority students in secular public schools.

Conclusion

A global increase in cultural diversity intensifies the need for further research into immigrant and minority students' and families' experiences of schooling (Chan, 2007). Stories presented here illustrate, as an example, how much work still needs to be done to include Muslim students into school curricula and to educate people from all cultural backgrounds about Islamic beliefs and Muslim practices. Addressing these issues has become crucial as local school communities and, indeed, school communities worldwide, change due to widespread immigration and mobility.

Given that Muslim communities are often portrayed via the media through negative stereotypes that are difficult to counter without positive and accurate information (Sharif, 2001), the need for further knowledge about the experiences of Muslim students in school contexts is increasingly important. As a narrative case study, this work brings to light various perspectives on educating Muslim pupils in public, non-Muslim schools. As such, we address the dearth of experiential research focusing on the education of Muslim students in the diaspora. This investigation provides a glimpse of the intricacies of education in the diaspora by informing us about some of the needs and interests of Muslim students in a non-Muslim school system via the use of their own voiced expressions and those of family members. In this way, we also highlight the use of students' stories as important resources for theoretical research in education and curriculum practice.

Although we concentrated on the needs of Muslim students in this study via the experiential examination of one female Muslim student, what we learned highlights some of the overarching social and curricular factors that are involved in educating students of

diverse backgrounds within a public school system. Challenges of working to meet the curricular needs of students ofMuslim background shed light on challenges of meeting the needs of students of other ethnic backgrounds because they reveal ways in which individuals of different cultural backgrounds may interpret curricular and school practices differently than mainstream teachers and administrators may intend.

We also underline existing opportunities for students and teachers to create an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding among cultural groups and for learning about the values, beliefs, and practices of individuals from diverse backgrounds in an increasingly interconnected global community. Despite studies that support the inclusion of culture in school curricula, there is little research focusing on the lived experiences of students from minority culture backgrounds. As an examination of "multicultural education in action," this article contributes to research on educating Muslim students in the diaspora, multiculturalism, ethnic identity, and the educational experiences of students, emphasizing the positive and challenging experiences that students of religious, cultural, and ethnic minority backgrounds, their families, and their teachers and school administrators may come across in the process of schooling.

Notes

1. All names and places in this article are pseudonyms.
2. Students at Bay Street School choose from international language classes in Cantonese or Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Swahili/Black History, or Spanish that are integrated into their regular school day. The choice of international languages offered reflects the significant ethnic and language groups in the school: Chinese, Vietnamese, Middle Eastern, Jamaican and Caribbean Black, Somali, and Western European communities.
3. School Councils were established by the provincial government and local school boards to facilitate the process of parents and teachers working together (Education Improvement Commission, 1998).

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