The Rise of Islamic Schools in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to understand the nature and the growth of Islamic schools from the perspective of Muslim administrators, teachers, parents, and graduates. The burgeoning of Islamic schools in the United States is a recent phenomenon. The *In-depth Study of Islamic Schools* (1989)records a total of fifty Islamic schools in North America. Another data set in 1992 counted 165 Islamic schools of which 92 were full-time schools (Numan, 1992). However, Keyworth (2011) noted that there are approximately 235 full-time Islamic schools. Despite the efforts to understand Muslims and Islam, Americans in general know little about Islam and what may help or hinder the development of an Islamic religious identity. Accordingly, this research examines two questions: (a) what is the nature of an Islamic school today? and (b) how do graduates transition to a non-Islamic environment?
Keywords: Islamic schools, identity, Muslim-Americans, dialogue

Introduction

Muslims first came from Africa as slaves in the 17th century. Of this original group, many slaves were converted to Christianity. A century later, Muslims from other parts of the world came as traders, explorers and settlers (Esposito, 2006). In the 20th century they came from various parts of the Middle East, not to settle permanently but to earn enough money to return home to set up a bakery or grocery store and live in financial security. Then in the mid-20th century to the present, Muslims emigrated from Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, India, Somalia, and Turkey. Muslims, who have recently immigrated to the United States, are well educated professionals who came from different parts of the world and have adapted to American culture and norms. These American citizens are numbered among the best doctors, lawyers, and other experts in professional fields. They came seeking a new life in a country where freedom of speech and religion are indispensable to democracy (Salman, 2008). Their skin color varies according to their origins, but the one common feature among these peoples is their religion. They were and are *Muslims* who adhere to the tenets of Islam, a religion based on the Qur'an.

Muslims have become more visible in recent years and, like other immigrants, their stay on American soil made a great impact on American society. As minorities and immigrants, they faced challenges in spheres as education, integration and in the practice of religion. Language was a major handicap as the majority of Muslims spoke a dialect and were not fluent in English. Hence, they faced discrimination at work and in their neighborhoods as they struggled to become

assimilated into the American culture (Esposito, 2002). According to Esposito, "Muslims experienced a sense of marginalization, alienation and powerlessness, and some were marked as different [in the manner of dress]" (Esposito, 2002: 174).

Islam is also the fastest growing religion in the United States (Numan, 1992). Nevertheless, Muslim families have an increasing concern that their children will lose their religious entity in an environment where religion cannot be publicly practiced, namely in the public schools. This concern has compelled Muslims to open and operate their own schools. More and more Muslim families are sending their children to Islamic schools – schools with an Islamic environment where children play and pray together. The Islamic milieu protects them from exposure to sex, drugs, and inappropriate behavior while ensuring a Muslim identity (Siddiqui, 2011). Religious schools in general seek to preserve their core values through direct instruction and religious practices. For years Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant parents have withdrawn their children from public schools to preserve their religious identity and cultural norms.

According to Merry and Driessen (2005), the number of Islamic schools is increasing and accompanying this growth is the distrust of many Americans related to the purpose of these new private schools. In addition, in another study, Sirin, Ryce and Mir (2009) found that a comparison of teachers' expectations of academic ability of Muslim children differed from the expectations of teachers in Islamic schools. According to these authors, public school teachers viewed negatively the academic ability of Muslim students. The current growth of Islamic schools has fascinated many Americans which prompted an interest to research the need and growth of Islamic schools in the United States.

Theoretical Frame

To examine these questions, we were guided by two theories: William Cross' (1971) stages in identity development (Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, Internalization-Commitment) and Georgas' (2006) modernization theory which hypothesizes that an increase in economic level and industrialization in a society yields a rejection of traditional values and culture and a movement toward adoption of current values and individualization . In this study, we examined the phenomenon of the increasing number of Islamic schools in light of Muslims seeking their religious identity in a society that is a product of modernization.

Definitions

Islam is a monotheistic religion characterized by the acceptance of the doctrine of submission to God and to Muhammad as the chief and last prophet of God.

> A Muslim by definition is the one who testifies that Allah is the only God worthy of worship and that Muhammad is His slave and messenger. Therefore, the achievement of Islamic identity entails fulfilling this testimony's requirements and consequences (Alghorani, 2003: 17).
>
> Muslim identity in the West is a work in progress, a construction that has yet to be completed and is in a constant state of being and becoming (Moll, 2009: 169).

> Cultural identity is one's own sense of ethnicity. In the United States, which is a melting pot of many ethnicities and cultures, it is difficult for immigrants to adhere to the cultural practices of their countries of origin (accessed April 15, 2013 at: http://www.digitrends.com/crossingcultures/iden.htm)

An Islamic School is a religious school where the Qur'an is taught in the Arabic language and where Islamic principles and core values are instilled along with academic courses required by the state in which the school is situated (Sirin and Fine, 2008).

Significance

Since the majority of Muslim students attend public schools in the United States, it is vital that teachers have an understanding of Islam and Muslim history. Although Jewish students also attend public school, there is a deeper understanding of Jewish culture and history in general. The American public has taken a sympathetic posture toward Jews and Israel. Teachers in public schools also need to be sensitized to Muslim children and provide them with an equitable education. This study contributes to the research on Muslim students and their quest to be good American citizens and committed followers of Islam.

Background

Although we may look at the development of Islamic schools as somewhat of a new concept, we recognize that other religious denominations have faced similar dilemmas of religious identity over the last 200 years. Catholic schools were established to counteract anti-Catholic bigotry in the 19th century. Nativists feared that the influx of "Papists" from Ireland and Europe would supplant their Protestant affiliations (Buetow, 1988). Recognizing that young Catholics might seek safety in their assimilation into a secular milieu, Catholic parents and Catholic parishes anchored their faith in parish schools. Bishops in the United States mandated Catholic schooling for all Catholic children. The goal of Catholic education was and remains to educate the "whole" child – intellectually, spiritually, psychologically, and physically (Buetow, 1988).

According to Cross (1971), the foundation for a strong religious identity is laid during the early years of formal schooling. It is believed that once children have become immersed in the Catholic culture and have internalized the creed, they may be guided by the core beliefs of Catholicism throughout their lives. This emersion/immersion can only be achieved in an environment that is conducive to religious growth. Similarly, Muslims are conflicted with how to develop a religious identity. They are determined to provide quality education but they fear that "public schools represent moral permissiveness and lower academic achievement (Merry and Driessen, 2005: 426).

Since many are in the emerging stage of growth, Islamic schools in the United States face challenges such as financial support, state certification for teachers, enrollment and retention issues, and acceptance by the Muslim community itself. As they face their challenges, they seek for their children a strong Islamic identity, religious and moral education and a safe environment (Salman, 2008). The public school system cannot offer Muslims or any other group religious and moral education.

Seeking Identity as Muslims and Americans in the United States

In the process of acculturation, most immigrants resort to adopting the values and behaviors of the dominant culture while simultaneously preserving their own values and beliefs (Gibson, 2001). Phinney (2003) supports Gibson's concept indicating that acculturation and identity are the most important features of immigrant populations in their struggle to adapt to a new culture. Phiney also believed that cultural identity along with personal identity forms the foundation for acculturation thereby facilitating cultural transition.

Based on Ericson's (1994) conceptualization and belief identity theory that the interaction between context and the individual leads to the formation of identity, Cross (1991) developed the Black Racial Identity model. According to Cross, the early African Americans who were predominantly immigrants assimilated and acculturated into the American culture by going through stages like *encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization and internalization-commitment* (1991).

Smidt's (2004) study of Muslim identity formation in the West described the identity quest in this way:

> The existence, paradoxes and challenges of transnational Muslim identity formation in the West (Europe and the United States) …and the ongoing (complicated) construction of national identities as aspects that Muslims must constantly relate to and which affects the (localized) practice of (boundless)Islam. Such adaptations to the conditions of the present are not least fundamental due to the politicized status of Muslims in Western secular nation-states. This has both to do with the complicated re-entering of religion on the public square that these communities bring with them, and with their status as diasporas (Smidt, 2004: 42).

The increased number of Islamic schools in the United States has put religion and Islamic education before the eyes of the nation.

Sachs (1998) reported in the New York Times that Muslims Schools provide a sanctuary for achieving one's identity – one's Muslim identity. The reporter interviewed the founder of an Islamic school who stated that "To survive, you have to know who you are" (Sachs, 1998: 1). The literature on Islamic schools indicates that maintaining one's identity as a follower of Islam is first and foremost the central reason for the establishment of Islamic schools throughout America. According to Sirin and Fine (2008), religious schools contribute to the development of one's religious identity. The authors clearly discuss the identity crises that young Muslims are currently experiencing. Their study recorded the responses of over 200first and second generation immigrant *Muslim-Americans*. They found that most of the respondents lived "on the hyphen," struggling to retain their religious culture in a secular society. The term Muslim-American, according to Sirin and Fine, came into existence after September 11, 2001. Prior to the terrorists' attacks on the USA, the same young people referred to themselves as Pakistani-American or Indian-American, or Iranian-American.

Building a Strong Islamic Foundation

In addition to establishing one's identity as a Muslim, parents send their children to Islamic school to build a strong Islamic foundation. According to Georgas' (2006) modernization theory, religious and cultural identities tend to dissipate in an environment of liberalism and secularism. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2004), culture is the software of the mind. It programs individuals to act, think, and live by certain principles and customs. Muslims, who strongly believe in the ways of Islam, are adamant in passing on their beliefs and culture to their children. Haddad, Smith and Moore (2006) summarize the aspiration of Muslim women in United States today:

While emotional ties to ethnic and cultural identities are generally respected, many affirm that their dual orientation is to be both Muslim and American, with the understanding that these identities are mutually supportive rather than exclusive (Haddad, Smith and Moore, 2006: 17)

Building a strong Islamic foundation may provide a certain freedom to do what one is expected to do in terms of behavior according to religious laws. For example, according to the religious laws of the Catholic Church, abortion is not allowed, is not an option, and is considered a sin against God and humanity. Placed in a situation where a woman or girl is faced with the dilemma of taking the life of her unborn child or not, her conscience is her guide. If her conscience has been formed on strong Catholic principles, she knows intuitively that she should not abort her fetus. These principles are similar in the Islamic religion as well in Islam.

A Safe Environment Conducive to Religious and Academic Growth

For those Muslim parents who send their children to public schools in the United States, the concern lies mainly with the environment. Are the schools safe and conducive to academic growth? They desire high standards of academic achievement similar to the education they attained which contributed to their professional success and economic prosperity (Haddad, Smith and Moore, 2006). The same authors indicate that public schools in large cities have serious drug and gang problems that interfere with a good education for all students:

The American Muslim community as a whole recognizes the heavy responsibility it carries for making sure its children are well-educated. Those who are professionally successful want to guarantee that their children are able to maintain their standards of economic achievement, while those in the lower economic classes want to take advantage of America's promise of education for all. (Haddad, Smith and Moore: 129)

Muslims parents face the dilemma of sending their children to some public schools where their religious values and quest for high academic standards are compromised by an atmosphere of liberalism in sex, drugs, bullying, etc. or sending their children to Islamic schools where a good religious foundation is formed but where teachers may not be adequately prepared for teaching academic subjects.

Methodology

The participants in this study represented both recent immigrants and second and third generation émigrés. We researchers selected two Islamic schools in which to conduct their interviews. One school in North Carolina was established in 1990 with grades pre-kindergarten through grade 8. The second school is located in Pennsylvania and has completed its first year of full-time instruction. It houses children from pre-kindergarten to grade 3. School #1 is situated in a geographical with a strong population of Muslim families. It has a history of academic success with an enrollment of about 500 students. School #2 is located in an area where there are few Muslim families but they are determined to sustain their school. The curricula of both schools focus on the memorization of the Qur'an and the study of the Arabic language. Both schools implement the state standards in the instruction of secular subjects and administer standardized tests.

Administrators invited teachers and parents to participate in the interview sessions that took place at the schools. A total of 25 individuals were interviewed by the three researchers.

Table 1: Description of Participants

Description	Age and gender
Administrators (3)	30 – 40 female
Teachers (10)	25 – 40 female
Parents (8)	35 – 50 female
College students (6)	18 – 25 male and female

Source: Authors

Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and was tape recorded. Tapes were transcribed and analyzed for themes (Creswell, 2007).The following interview questions were asked of each respondent:

1. How are the Islamic culture and religious beliefs preserved in the school?
2. What are the perceived needs for an Islamic school? How do you understand the importance of an Islamic school for you and your family?
3. Do Muslim parents assist in the transfer of the Islamic culture in their homes? How do you reinforce culture at home?
4. Are there challenges in transition from an Islamic school to a non-Islamic environment (school/work)?
5. What are your hopes for the ongoing direction of the school?

Findings

Muslims in America who are largely immigrants go through phases of identity development. These Muslims have migrated from different parts of the world and make attempts to adapt to American culture. Several themes emerged from the data: (1) Islamic identity within the American culture, (2) Perceived needs - character building and being immersed in Islamic practices, (3) Preservation of Islamic religion and the Arabic language, and (4) Dialogue with non-Muslims.

Islamic Identity within American Culture

Interviewees responded to the question *How are the Islamic culture and religious beliefs preserved in the school*, by differentiating between ethnic culture and beliefs. Respondents were consistent in stating that the school was responsible for assisting students in deepening of their Islamic faith. Because Muslims come from different ethnic backgrounds, cultural practices differ.

Due to respondents' awareness of cultural variations, they stated that the goal of the Islamic schools is to preserve religious beliefs and Islamic practices. One former student indicated: "When I grow up I want my kids to go to an Islamic school – it kept me close to my religion and I learned more about it. It is important to go to the Islamic school; you can't learn the morals on your own."

Administrator 1 expressed: "We want our children to be good, moral humans beyond anything else. Islam is our tool to get our children toward becoming adults with values."

There was consistency among the responses of the interviewees that Islamic schools serve to teach Qur'an, the Arabic language, and the morals and practices of the Islamic faith.

A parent indicated: "My daughter is interviewing people and participating in the society with a very good strong faith so that when people ask her something specific about religion or about herself she is always ready to say what the Islamic perspective is."

Administrator 2 commented: "We need to be attentive not just to religion but to where we live, how we act, with whom we interact, how we develop mutual respect."

A student responded by stressing that: "Our generation is trying to understand our parents' background, the Arabic language, and the customs of Islam. I want my daughter to know Arabic."

The participants unanimously reported that they wished to be identified as Muslims and as Americans. One student summarized the theme by stating: My religion helped me balance being an American and a Muslim at the same time – you can be both, you don't have to choose.

The findings of the research suggest that most respondents appeared to be in Cross's (1971) last phase of their identity development - *internalized or committed phase.*

Perceived Needs: Character Building and Immersion in Islamic Practices

The second question asked respondents to reflect on perceived needs for Islamic schools. Administrator 1 indicated "To keep your part in this society, you need character. To preserve your character, you need to know who you are and how you can contribute to society."

Administrator 2 replied by stating that: "For the parents it is believed that they experience less stress because the school takes care of educational, social and spiritual needs of the students.

Families feel that the school climate is an extension of the family."

As Muslims we grow, and teachers are Muslims - they act as role models, and children see practices in action. We have special teachers to teach Qur'an and one for Arabic language.

Administrator 2 added that: "I hope we prepare them to learn and keep the religious values but also prepare them to respect what they believe."

In response to importance of character building, one parent expressed her belief that character building was occurring in Islamic schools "through character education from an Islamic perspective."It became obvious to the researchers that parents as well as school staff members recognize that the Islamic school provides a climate for character building and religious development. These perceived needs were endorsed by all of the respondents.

Preservation of Islamic Religion and the Arabic Language

When asked if Muslim parents assist in the transfer of Islamic religion in their homes, there were divergent opinions. For example, administrator 1 noted, "I feel that it is OK at least for our generation to send kids to public school but the next generation should consider sending their kids to Islamic school." Some respondents agreed that at the present time some Muslim parents accept the responsibility of educating their children in the Islamic religion; however, a teacher noted: I am teaching our kids things about our religion that our parents never had time to teach us. I teach religion and mannerisms on a daily basis. I do not emphasize culture – it is the religion.

Two teachers indicated the need to teach the Arabic language: "Our generation is trying to understand our parents' background, the Arabic language and the customs of Islam. I want my daughter to know Arabic…memorizing the Qur'an is important to us."The above statement is representative of comments made by most of the respondents. The study of the Arabic language is essential to the correct reading of the Qur'an. Therefore, administrators and teachers are diligent in offering a curriculum that includes the study of the Qur'an in the Arabic language.

Dialogue with Non-Muslims

When asked about the challenges of transitioning to public schools, teachers, alumni, parents, and administrators felt very strongly about the need to be in dialogue with non-Muslims. Contrary to the belief of many Americans, Muslims are eager to dialogue with non-Muslims. Several quotes confirm the above statement.

A parent stated: "It is always good to see our kids with their Catholic friends. They know how to behave. They have [formed] friendship[s] with one another."

A student responded by saying: "I hope that we don't exist in a bubble – but reach out to other students and [perform] community based work. I think that is out of protection, not of belonging, that we try to draw a small wall around ourselves. I hope we don't exist in that way." Administrator 1 replied: "I would like to invite students and teachers from non-Islamic schools

to have an open forum where students, alumni, principal and teachers can share the schools' successes and pool all resources together."

The respondents generally agreed that the Islamic school was preparing students for academic success. They also believed that there is a need to facilitate more interaction and dialogue with non-Muslims as they prepare students to transition to non-Muslim schools and environments.

As one teacher succinctly stated: "Children don't know how to dialogue with non-Muslims. They are sound academically but they are not knowledgeable about *who* they are…The goal of the teachers is to help children to be able to conduct dialogue. This dialogue is going on [has been initiated]… we need to know who we are and be able to dialogue with other people…" It may be that the willingness of Muslims to dialogue with those of different denominations may dispel the fear that Islamic schools breed terrorism.

Discussion and Conclusions

Muslim Americans seem to be very similar to the African Americans, both groups came from collectivistic societies and both groups were immigrants. Like the African Americans, many Muslim Americans initially imbibed the values and beliefs of the dominant white culture with very little resistance since they felt a strong need to be accepted by the dominant culture. This stage may be described as the *pre-encounter-stage* (Cross, 1971).

Gradually, Muslim Americans began to realize they were not fully accepted by the dominant culture and hence felt rejected and isolated. This dismissal in turn stirred a strong desire to develop their own identity and thus they became *immersed* (Cross, 1971). They soon began to reach out to their Muslim community and began to build Mosques and Islamic schools.

As the bond between Muslim Americans strengthened and the community became tightly knit, they began to define themselves as Muslim Americans and sought connections and relationships with the members of the dominant culture. They began to *internalize*, and invited people of other faith and beliefs to their place of worship and to their Islamic schools and expressed a need for open dialogue and communication. Finally, Muslim Americans *emerged* (as a group which was proud of its own culture, values and ideals and committed to its growth and development in the dominant culture. They appear to be *internalized and committed* (Cross, 1971).

As those interviewed in this study have seen the gradual transformation of accepting their own beliefs in the dominant culture of Christianity, they acknowledge that now is the time to work on the development of dialogical skills. The participants express the need to understand other denominations that include Judaism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Muslim students who participated in this study were especially concerned about the need to be understood as Americans who practice Islam, just as Christians or Jews are American citizens who happen to profess different beliefs. The young adults who participated in the study revealed a great passion for interfaith community building and dialogue. They appear to be open to the wisdom of other faiths while remaining faithful to the Islamic tradition.

Dialogue does not require people to relinquish or alter their beliefs before entering into it; on the contrary, genuine dialogue demands that each young adult will bring to it the fullness of themselves and the tradition in which they stand. As they grow in mutual understanding they will be able to share more and more of what they bring to the other. Inevitably, dialogue will impact young adults who are engaged. They will be affected and changed by this process, for it is a mutual sharing.

The purpose of this study was to understand the growth of Islamic schools in the United States. Islamic schools provide Muslims with an environment that supports the growth of Islamic identity and beliefs. Additionally, interviews with parents and graduates of Islamic schools revealed a desire to be both rooted in their faith traditions as well as have opportunities to dialogue with persons of other faith traditions. This ongoing dialogue prepares students to be both expressive and receptive of other beliefs in non-Islamic schools and work places.

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