THE EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM GIRLS WITH CURRICULUM/SCHOOLING IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO, CANADA

by

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of nine *hijabi* and non-*hijabi* Muslim girls from diverse backgrounds with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in Ontario. The study uses individual interviews and a focus group discussion to delve into how Muslim girls understand their educational experiences. The participants were independent, thoughtful, and conscientious students who were evolving as individuals through their curriculum/schooling experiences. School was a forum where they questioned themselves, discovered their interests, and made sense of their multiple identities. The differences between a participant’s home and school life varied, and each girl had a unique manner in dealing with the various ideological and practical conflicts. As Muslim girls, they were confronted with certain challenges in school; however, this did not detract from the overall positive aspects of their public schooling experiences. My participants felt respected and validated as individuals in their schools and optimistic regarding their futures as Muslim Canadian females.
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Chapter 1:
Introduction

*Maliha:* I was talking to Mr. Anderson the other day … He was saying how media says all this stuff about Muslims and he said he searched up on it and he’s like, “It’s not how media and Americans portray it. It’s actually different. It’s about peace and unity,” … That made me feel good because I know there are people who do search up on it and they know that’s not what Islam is about. There is a complete different side of Islam than what is going on.

*Sabeen:* So for when we have Friday prayers [at public school] … I don’t go, but everyone goes, no matter how [religious] – I find for my grade everyone goes, no matter if you wear the *hijab* or not, or if you’re this or that. But some people think that only a certain type of people would go to pray. Either you’re the perfect Muslim or you’re not. I know people that are not doing the greatest things but they’ll go to pray. So they’re doing what they can.

Maliha and Sabeen were both Muslim girls in Grade 11 at different high schools in the Greater Toronto Area. Maliha wore the *hijab*, a decision she had made the summer between Grade 9 and 10, while Sabeen did not wear it. The girls had certain commonalities: they were from South Asian Muslim backgrounds, from middle-class families, and lived in suburbs of Toronto. Yet, their lives were also quite different when compared. Their religious beliefs, school life, friends, academic preferences, and future aspirations were a function of their personality, family values, social influences, physical location, and curriculum/schooling experiences. Despite the unique experience of each girl in public school, the concept of being a Muslim female permeated through all their experiences. They reflected on *hijab* as a marker of being a Muslim female, popular perceptions of Muslim women, portrayal of Muslims in the media, the intersection of religion and school life, family and social pressure to be a “good” Muslim girl, and being a Muslim in public school. Their issues were very similar, but how each girl responded to them reflected their individuality. Their experiences convey the active, independent and personal manner in which Muslim girls are navigating the public secondary school system. My
participants’ optimism for their futures as Canadian Muslim females and their drive to succeed are promising indicators of the experience of being a Muslim girl in Ontario schools.

I begin this chapter with a rationale for investigating the experiences of Muslim girls with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in Ontario. The rationale includes my personal experiences as a Muslim female, followed by background and contextual information on the topic. Next, I share the central and supporting research questions to frame my study within the field of student experience and Muslim education. I then outline the significance of this study and how it will contribute to research on the educational lives of Muslim girls, curriculum, teacher practice, and school policy. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an understanding of why research on the experiences of hijabi and non-hijabi Muslim girls, particularly in Ontario, Canada, is of increased importance, and how this study will serve to bridge the research gap and support efforts to improve the educational experiences of Muslim girls.

**Background**

This study looks at the experiences of Muslim girls with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in Ontario. My personal experiences as a Pakistani Muslim female, an immigrant, and a public school teacher drew me to this topic. I knew from the very beginning of my Master’s degree that my experiences would somehow make the basis for my graduate research.

I immigrated to Canada at the age of eight as a result of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The displacement I experienced as a result of the First Gulf War forced me to consider at an early age the meaning of identity, culture, religion, ethnicity, and citizenship. Moving back and forth between Canada and the Middle East for the many years that followed made me profoundly
conscious of these concepts. I often struggled to express who I was as a child, confused by my Pakistani cultural heritage, Middle Eastern upbringing, and Canadian immigrant status. Slicing through all of this was my Islamic identity, which shifted in meaning depending on my geographical and social context.

Being a Muslim female has always been a complicated experience for me. I remember as a young girl wearing the hijab for a summer between Grade 3 and 4 after being convinced by a new family friend. My decision to take it off was met with relief by my parents who felt that it had been a reaction to our recent dislocation. Growing up in Kuwait, I was exposed to all forms of veiling and often wondered about what this religious practice meant for a Muslim female’s identity and personal freedom. Was it oppressive or liberating? A function of personal choice or pressure to conform? My observations have shown me that it can be either, depending on the context and the female.

There are many other complexities the come with being a young Muslim female. I witnessed various issues over the years as a result of school in both Canada and the Middle East. Whether the topic was choice of dress, dating, going away for university, or picking a career, there were often structural and philosophical tensions between what the outside world offered and what was religiously and culturally appropriate. I found most families to be sympathetic of their daughter’s desires, but tied and loyal to religious and cultural norms. This always seemed to be more of an issue for Muslim girls than Muslim boys, who did not evoke the same level of protectiveness from their parents and were not burdened to the same degree with maintaining their family’s respectability in the larger Muslim community.

Years later I became a high school history teacher in the York Region school board. I now had the opportunity to experience many of these issues from the perspective of the educator.
This immersion in the everyday life of teenage students displayed how curriculum and the entire experience of schooling influenced my students. For my diverse students, religion and culture were intertwined with their daily experiences inside and outside the classroom. Their world was a function of the intersection between their home life and school life, and the related experiences played a significant role in shaping who they were becoming.

My experiences as a teacher and my conversations with Muslim students showed me that being Muslim in public school was much more interesting and inspiring than what was generally perceived. I felt more needed to be said about the current day experiences of Muslim girls. The stories I was viewing on TV, reading in the news, or hearing in the community did not encapsulate the experiences of the Muslim girls I had come across. I felt Muslim girls were conceptualized in popular thought as either hijabi – devout and traditional – or non-hijabi – anti-religious and rebellious. This could not be farther from the truth for the majority of Muslim females who fall somewhere in the middle or are often a fascinating and contradictory mix of values, though few girls would like to admit this.

I felt the voices of these girls were being drowned out by all the other voices in the media about Muslim women. This was a significant motivation to research Muslim girls in public schools. I felt more needed to be said about the current day experiences of real Muslim girls; girls who were both hijabi and non-hijabi, represented the cultural diversity in Islam, and were in the process of discovering themselves. I wanted to formally explore how they understood their educational experiences in relation to their Muslim identities. What were the opportunities and challenges of being a Muslim girl in public school? How were their schooling experiences influencing their world view? These were questions that I felt compelled to answer and what inspired my research.
Rationale

Why Muslim girls?

To understand the reasons for researching Muslim girls in Ontario public schools, the rationale will be framed within the larger framework of Muslim experience. The limited field of research in Canada on Muslims and the interrelation of U.S. and Canadian social and political contexts make it necessary to draw on both Canadian and U.S. research to provide a richer framework for understanding the experiences of Muslims girls.

Muslims represent a significant number of the minority population in North America, and Islam is one of the fastest growing faith groups. There is some discrepancy regarding the actual number of Muslims. As of 2010, there are approximately 2.6 million Muslims in the U.S., with this number expected to rise to 6.2 million by 2030 (Pew Research Center, 2011). The last census on religious groups in Canada in 2001 recorded the number of Muslims at 579,640, with the largest concentration residing in Ontario, numbering 352,530 (Statistics Canada, 2001b). However, the number of Muslims in Canada today is more likely closer to Pew Forum’s estimate of 960,000 as of 2010, which is 2.8% of the Canadian population, and is forecast to increase to 2.6 million by 2030, or 6.6% of the Canadian population (Pew Research Center, 2011).

These numbers indicate the formidable and growing presence of Muslims in North America. Concerns about Islamic extremism has motivated many groups to research this population, though Islamic extremism makes up an extremely small percentage of the Muslim population in North America. By and large, Muslims are living peacefully among their American and Canadian counterparts. However, differences in faith systems, religious rituals, and personal values do require a better understanding of the North American Muslim population.
The literature indicates that being Muslim in North America can be both rewarding and challenging. Those who have immigrated relocate for a variety of reasons, including economic security, improved educational standards, and greater individual freedom. A particular challenge is adapting to an environment that may not always be aligned with one’s personal values and cultural and religious norms (Moghissi, Rahnema & Goodman, 2009; Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008). Muslims are generally more “conservative” in their thoughts and actions than the Christian majority in North America, and at times they struggle with striking a balance between their religious values and those espoused and embraced in the Western context.

Political events, such as 9/11 and the Global War on Terror, continue to exacerbate these challenges. In the past 10 years, the Muslim population of North America has had to deal with increased visibility, religious stigmatization, and discrimination. Though this has had a more of pronounced effect on those residing in the U.S. (Abu El-Haj, 2006; Bigelow, 2008; Cristillo, 2008; Sirin & Fine, 2008), it is also a concern for many Canadian Muslims (Siddiqui, 2008; Zine, 2001). In addition, “clash of civilization” theories (Huntington, 1996) co-opted and projected by the media (Said, 1981), political pundits, priests, and mullahs, has further complicated the efforts of many Muslim individuals living in North America. While many have found successful ways to bridge their religious and secular worlds, others are still working through this confusing process.

The position of Muslim females is unique. On a global scale, Muslim women continue to fight against patriarchal regimes and misogynistic practices (Herz, 2004). Despite these challenges, significant strides have been made in several countries toward gaining equal rights (Siddiqui, 2008). Examples of the evolving role of Muslim women in the Middle East are displayed in the efforts of women protesting the cruelty of dictatorial regimes during the Arab
Spring. As Siddiqui (2008) explains, “Muslim women are neither as badly off as they come across in the Western media, nor do they enjoy the idealized projected lives that some Muslims would have us believe” (pp. 96–97). Conceptions about the “oppressed” Muslim female have permeated the psyche of the average North American and have coloured North American perceptions of Islam, Muslim women, and the societies surrounding them (Bigelow, 2008; Mir, 2006; Zine, 2008). A Muslim female, hijabi or non-hijabi, cannot escape these perceptions both inside and outside her religious community and must confront them to make sense of her life in the West.

Teenage Muslim girls residing in North America are in an intriguing position. As young adults living in a secular society, they must make countless decisions that define who they are socially, academically, culturally, and religiously. The entire experience of being a teenage high school student is defined by personal choice. What is particular to Muslim girls is that they must work privately within cultural and religious parameters and publically within a social and political context that is at times at odds with their religious values (Moghissi et al., 2009; Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008.) Moreover, the gaze of their Muslim and non-Muslim peers and adults creates a certain level of surveillance and expectation of how they “should” behave (Mir, 2006; Sarroub, 2005). Muslim girls have to contend with these views and decide how to manage them given the circumstances they are in.

Muslim girls that wear the hijab have an arguably more complicated position since they must contend with essentialist notions of the “obedient” and “silenced” Muslim female (Siddiqui, 2008). These notions are projected on them from both inside and outside their religious communities (Sarroub, 2005; Zine, 2008). This has not limited hijabi girls from living life on their own terms. More and more, we are seeing examples of hijabi girls in unexpected or
untraditional situations, such as playing basketball, dating platonically, and choosing high powered careers (Sirin & Fine, 2007; Mir, 2006). The emphasis on *hijabi* girls in educational research, particularly in the U.S., is a positive step as it has shed light on their experiences.

What is often forgotten are the voices of Muslim girls who do not wear the *hijab*, who represent approximately half of the Muslim female population in Canada (Canada’s Muslims, 2007). Girls who choose not to wear the *hijab* are often no less religious or conscious of their religion. *Non-hijabi* Muslim girls provide an interesting perspective on the experience of being a Muslim female. Though many of their experiences are similar to that of *hijabi* girls, many are not (Mir, 2006). Understanding their decision not to wear the *hijab* provides useful insight and depth into the varied experience of Muslim girls.

**Why secondary schools?**

Multiple studies indicate that public schools are a forum where Muslim girls, perhaps most directly, have to confront various social challenges as they carve out a space for themselves (Collet, 2007; Elnour & Bashir-Ali, 2003; Sarroub, 2005; Zine, 2008). For several reasons, secondary schools are a particularly meaningful space to measure this process. First, it is usually during high school that Muslim girls become *baligh*, a term used in Islam to refer to one’s coming of age, signified by reaching puberty. Once an individual is *baligh*, they are responsible and held accountable for observing religious practices. Though the exact age varies between Islamic sects, it is usually during their teenage years that Muslim girls are expected to actively observe their faith. This experience, countered with the mainstream behaviour of many female high school students, such as dating; experimenting with alcohol; friendships with boys; going to parties; and wearing shorts, skirts, and sleeveless tops, creates conflicts for Muslim girls who are taught that many of these social practices are un-Islamic (Collet, 2007; Elnour & Bashir-Ali, 2003).
It is also during this dynamic period of life that Muslim girls have an increased ability to think for themselves and to make important decisions about their personal and academic futures (Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008). This awareness brings to the forefront many unresolved issues relating to their beliefs and identity, as well as differences between the student’s worldviews and those of their parents. High school is the first time that Muslim girls are subjected to the tough decisions related to negotiating between their religious and secular worlds and when they have the agency to make their own choices.

**Why curriculum/schooling?**

How Muslim girls experience curriculum/schooling is exceedingly significant as this encapsulates the core of a student’s educational experience. Curriculum/schooling is defined here as (a) the content that is studied and the pedagogical tools, (b) teacher and student interactions, (c) the social interactions between students, (d) extracurricular activities, and (e) school culture and policy. Although curriculum is commonly referred to as what happens in the classroom and schooling is commonly referred to as everything that occurs in the educational institution, the conflation of curriculum and schooling, two terms that often appear individually, is to highlight the inextricable nature of one from the other. What occurs in the classroom influences a student’s overall schooling experience, and similarly, what occurs outside of the classroom influences a student’s curricular experience (Bigelow, 2008; Haw et al., 1998; Kassam, 2007; Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008). In this study, these two terms will often be used interchangeably; it is unfair to conceptually separate them without creating artificial parameters for defining each term. Only in examining both areas simultaneously can a deeper understanding be achieved of how Muslim girls experience their public school education.
Understanding the educational needs of Muslim girls.

The majority of research that has been conducted on Muslim students or Muslim girls is based in the U.S. In Canada there is a growing body of research on the education of Muslim students (Alvi, 2009; Azmi, 2001; Collet, 2007; Diab, 2009; Kassam, 2007; Kincheloe, Stienberg, & Stonebanks, 2010; Siddiqui, 2006; McAndrew, Ipgrave, & Triki-Yamani, 2010; Memon, 2010; Moghissi et al., 2009; Niyozov, 2010; Zine, 2001; Zine, 2004; Zine 2008). These studies look at a variety of issues, including education of Muslim students in Canadian Islamic schools, education of Muslim students in public schools, teaching against Islamophobia, teacher voices, and Canadian Muslim identity.

There are remarkably few studies that focus primarily on Muslim girls in Ontario, an area with the largest concentration of Muslims in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2001b). Of all the current scholarship in Ontario, only a few studies focus specifically on Muslim girls (Alvi, 2009; Diab, 2009; Zine, 2008). Alvi (2009) and Diab (2009) explore the experiences of hijabi Muslim girls and Zine’s (2008) study explores the experiences of Muslim girls in Islamic school where hijab is part of the dress code. These studies are valuable in their emphasis on Muslim girls; however, their focus on hijabi girls or Islamic school leaves open the question of how non-hijabi Muslim girls are experiencing and understanding their public high school experiences.

In addition, the majority of studies on Muslim students or girls in the U.S. and Canada focus more on the psychology behind being a Muslim individual. Though most studies are set in public school, their central purpose is to understand the nature of a Muslim student’s dual identity, the identity negotiation process, and the influence of various factors on their identity (Ali & Reisen, 1999; Collet, 2007; Sarroub, 2005; Sarwar Sharif, 1996; Sirin & Fine, 2008). These studies are extremely valuable because they have helped us understand the psychology behind Muslim
students’ dual identities. They provide insight into the struggles Muslim students face as they try to feel accepted and be successful in both worlds. However, only a few studies have addressed or pointedly researched the interplay between curriculum and religious identity in Canada (Collet, 2007; Kassam, 2007; Niyozov, 2010; Zine, 2008). By placing curriculum and identity on equal platforms, these studies are more grounded in the education of these students and are potentially better positioned to inform curriculum, teaching practice, and educational policy.

Canada’s national multicultural policy, Ontario’s diversity, and the vibrant, growing Muslim population provide unique and meaningful circumstances in which to explore the experiences of Muslim girls. It is clear that more research is required on the curriculum/schooling experiences of hijabi and non-hijabi girls grounded in the Canadian context. The purpose of this study is to bridge this gap in research by focusing specifically on how these girls understand their experiences with curriculum/schooling in Ontario public schools.

**Major questions.**

To explore the experiences of Muslim girls, I designed questions that study the various aspects of their educational experiences. The following questions are framed to collectively highlight the interplay between the personal and the public lives of Muslim girls in reference to their public secondary education. My central and supporting questions are as follows:

**Central question:** How do Muslim girls understand their experiences with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in Ontario, Canada?
Supporting research questions:

1. How does curriculum/schooling influence Muslim girls’ conceptions and constructions of their religious, cultural, social, and gender identities?

2. How do external factors, such as parents, community, and religious upbringing influence the educational experiences of Muslim girls?

3. What role do the various academic and social interactions that take place in public school play in the lives of Muslim girls?

In order to explore these questions I used one-on-one semi-structured interviews with nine participants from two regions in the Greater Toronto Area and a focus group discussion combining both sets of participants. The research was conducted during a two-month period, February 2011 and March 2011. My analysis is based on the data I derived from these two qualitative research methods.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for several reasons. First, the majority of research on the education of Muslims looks holistically at the experiences of Muslim youth. It is clear that, though there are similarities between the educational experiences of Muslim boys and girls (Collet, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2008), it is necessary to isolate and research the particular experiences of Muslim girls. Muslim girls have to deal with a host of unique issues, such as the *hijab* and Islamic dress code, boundaries on social activities, and surveillance of behaviour by community members (Elnour & Bashir-Ali, 2003; Sarroub, 2005; Zine, 2008). This study is one of the few in Ontario that recognizes these differences, and thus seeks to specifically understand the experiences of Muslim girls in public schools.
Second, this study includes an extremely diverse sample of Muslim girls. My participants represent six different cultural backgrounds, attend seven different schools from two distinct municipalities, and are *hijabi* and non-*hijabi*. This sample group presents the opportunity to recognize the heterogeneity in Islam and understand the varied experiences of Muslim girls. It also works to breakdown the unnecessary pigeon holing of Muslim girls into stereotypical categories. Though this sample limits the ability to make overarching conclusions about one cohesive, homogenous group (e.g., *hijabi* girls or Somali Muslim girls), there is insight and knowledge that comes from having a diverse sample that cannot be attained otherwise.

Third, this research provides a meaningful opportunity for Muslim girls to reflect on and deconstruct their schooling experiences. My participants were eager to join the study and open to sharing their thoughts and feelings. It was clear that they wanted an opportunity to make sense of what it meant to be a Muslim female in public school. The act of engaging Muslim girls in research is as exciting as the outcome of the conversations. Putting Muslim girls’ voices at the forefront of this study highlights the importance of valuing and engaging diverse voices in educational research.

Fourth, this study includes both individual interviews and a focus group discussion to unpack the lived experiences of Muslim girls. While individual interviews provide fruitful opportunities for discussion between the researcher and participant, it is important for Muslim girls to engage in dialogue with one another to understand and explore their experiences collectively. This dialogue gives the participants’ the opportunity to see different perspectives, share frustrations, work through conflicts, and collectively explore controversial and provocative issues in a safe and respectful atmosphere.
Contribution of the Study

This study will contribute to improving the education of Muslim girls in Ontario public schools. Though the sample is limited to nine girls, I believe the religious, cultural, and geographical diversity present in the sample is extensive enough to have some humble implications. In conducting the research, I examined Muslim girls’ interactions with various groups, including teachers, Muslim and non-Muslim peers, family members, and religious communities, as well as their experiences with school policies, school culture, and curriculum. Thus, this research will yield implications for curriculum development, teachers, administrators, policy-makers, and parents. Specifically for educators, this research will contribute to their understanding of the successes, challenges, and areas for improvement related to the education of Muslim girls.

This study will also contribute to supporting Muslim girls in managing various religious issues and conflicts in reference to their schooling experiences. I believe this research can help the participants contextualize her experiences in a larger framework, motivate them to better understand Islamic issues, encourage them to vocalize their educational needs and requests for accommodations, and help them deconstruct and better understand various social and educational forces and influences in public schools. Finally, I hope this research fills certain gaps in the research on the education of Muslim girls and inspires further, more extensive research.

Overview of the Chapters

This thesis is comprised of seven chapters. Chapter 1: Introduction provides context for the study. Chapter 2: Literature Review ties together several fields of educational research, including theories on student experience, curriculum, multicultural education, and education of Muslim students. Studies in the education of Muslim students are organized into different types
of experience – religious, social, and curricular – that in turn align with the data analysis chapters. Chapter 3: Research Methodology outlines the basis for choosing a qualitative, grounded theory research methodology and reflects on the entire research process.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 make up the data analysis segment of the research. In these three chapters I discuss how Muslim girls aim to reconcile Islamic and secular values in and related to public secondary schooling. I found that the best method to explore this idea was by dividing the analysis into significant experiential areas. The key areas are (a) Chapter 4: Religious Beliefs and Schooling Realities, (b) Chapter 5: Social Interactions and Schooling, and (c) Chapter 6: Curriculum Experiences: Present Impact and Future Aspirations. In each chapter I use the data to explore how the participants worked through the intersections and interrelationships between their religious and academic lives.

In Chapter 7: Conclusions and Future Prospects I summarize the conclusions of my research. I respond to the central and supporting research questions, share the significant contributions of my research to the education of Muslim girls, and highlight the implications of my study.
Chapter 2:
Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to draw together various fields of research to frame the study of Muslim girls in public high schools, highlight areas in the field that require further research, and indicate how this study humbly aims to fill certain research gaps. In this literature review, I show that, though some meaningful research has been conducted on Muslim students, there is a dearth of research in Ontario on Muslims girls. More research is required in Ontario that looks at the public school experiences of Muslim girls, both hijabi and non-hijabi, through the lens of curriculum/schooling. I believe that research that focuses on both the religious and the curricular/schooling experiences of Muslim girls is best positioned to inform educational policy and teacher practice. The approach of placing religious identity of a diverse group and curriculum/schooling on equal pedestals can also have educational implications for other diverse youth. By consciously choosing to loosely draw together various theories and bodies of literature, I hope to broaden interpretation of the data and provide a fresh perspective on the education of Muslim girls.

In this chapter, I synthesize significant theories and research relating to the central question: How do Muslim girls understand their experiences with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in Ontario, Canada? I begin by contextualizing my research within theories and concepts on curriculum/schooling, student experiences in school, immigrant and minority students, and inclusive and multicultural education. Following this, I explore the findings of relevant qualitative and quantitative studies of Muslim youth and girls in the U.S. and Canada. I conclude this chapter by locating my research in the field and identifying how it will contribute to more knowledge of the curricular/schooling experiences of Muslim girls.
Curriculum/Schooling

It is necessary to deconstruct the concept of curriculum to explore Muslim girls’ experiences in public secondary school. Though curriculum is a ubiquitous term, it is arguably the most tangible aspect of what occurs in school. In the field of education, curriculum is developed, reformed, questioned, and critiqued. With such a wealth of literature dedicated to curriculum, it is necessary to first define the term. This is not such an easy feat given the extensive amount of literature on the topic. A review of several key researchers produces various definitions, some that overlap and others that do not. Furthermore, these definitions can be divided into various categories, such as considerations of what curriculum contains and what its purpose should be. For some, curriculum is an educational process that produces personal growth and self-actualization for students who engage with it (Dewey, 1897); for others, curriculum is the final product of a well-planned program (Tyler, 1949). Eisner (2002) defines curriculum as, “A series of planned events that are meant to have educational consequences for one or more students” (p. 45). These events include the “intended” curriculum – what is planned – and the “operational” curriculum – what transpires through interactions between the teacher and the students (Eisner, 2002, p. 45). I use Eisner’s delineation of curriculum as a clear and straightforward working definition for this thesis.

Regardless of variations in the definition, it is generally agreed that curriculum is by no means neutral, passive or value-free (Pinar, 1995, p. 244). This is an important point to consider when researching students’ experiences with curriculum. The values of Muslim girls can be reflected in, and at times conflict with, public school curriculum, which is value-laden. This awareness provides the opportunity to delve into what thoughts and feelings are evoked in Muslim girls by the values expressed through the curriculum.
Numerous theorists have explored the concept of curriculum as a political and economic force. They have provided insightful and provocative analyses of concepts such as social reproduction, hegemony, ideology, and power relations in the educational sphere, particularly on how they play out in the classroom (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1983; Freire, 1970). Though some of the literature tends to be overly deterministic about what happens in schools, the literature does highlight serious concerns regarding the marginalization of certain racial, cultural, and social groups in education. It is important to be aware of such factors when researching a minority group such as Muslim girls.

Opportunities for empowerment are also discussed in this field, primarily by critical pedagogues who perceive a teacher’s role as integral to achieving social justice both inside and outside of school. Ideas of teachers as public intellectuals (Giroux, 1988) who have the ability to stimulate and liberate the minds of their students (Freire, 1970) display the inextricable and integral relationship between curricular content and pedagogy. Giroux (1988) argues that as teachers it is our job, “To work to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to become citizens who have the knowledge and courage to struggle in order to make despair unconvincing and hope practical” (p. 128). An important point when studying how curriculum is experienced by Muslim girls is recognizing that it is the teacher who facilitates the learning.

**Student Experiences in Public Secondary School**

The study of Muslim girls in public schools must be situated within the larger discussion of student experience. In the last 20 years, studies centering on student experiences in elementary and secondary school have increased (Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007, p. 1). This increase points to a greater awareness and understanding that, “What matters in schools is centered on students, their daily actions and interactions, and the ways they make sense of their lives” (Thiessen &
Cook-Sather, 2007, p. 6). Dewey’s focus on students’ educational experiences has led to numerous studies that consider how students, “Navigate and negotiate the dynamic and multi-dimensional demands of their classrooms and school lives” (Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007, p. 5). A shift away from “banking education,” where students are treated as empty vessels and teachers are considered the primary disseminators of knowledge (Freire, 1970), has led to a greater focus on the active and integral role students play in defining their educational experiences. This sets the stage for placing students at the centre of educational research.

Curriculum, teacher practice, and educational policies do not occur in a vacuum. In reality, students receive, engage with, and actively create their curriculum/schooling experiences. Studies that stem from this belief are concerned with topics such as (a) student social and academic interactions, (b) the intersection between students’ school life and home life, and (c) how students understand their schooling experiences (Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007, p. 5). My study looks at these very aspects of the educational experiences of Muslim girls. Advancements in education can be made by researching these issues, including understanding how students from diverse backgrounds are influenced by what occurs inside and outside of the classroom, discovering how students interpret their classroom experiences, and learning how to improve student learning, teacher practice, and educational policies and programs (Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007, p. 6). By focusing on the experiences of Muslim girls, my research conveys to the reader the importance of hearing Muslim girls’ voices to understand how to continue to improve our public education system.

**Immigrant and Minority Students in Public School**

A study on Muslim girls must include some discussion of immigration and minority experience. The 2001 census classified 257,375 of the 352,525 Muslims residing in Ontario as
immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2001c). Of the 352,525 Muslims in Ontario, 176,220 immigrated between 1991 and 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2001c). Of my nine participants, five girls immigrated to Canada (four of them when they were children and one recently) and four were first generation Canadians. This makes it necessary to locate my study in the context of immigrant youth and understand the various external and internal forces that influence their experience. A combination of Ogbu and Simons’ (1998) cultural-ecological theory and Fuerverger and Richards’ (2007) research on immigrant and refugee youth provides useful literature on the topic.

Ogbu and Simons’ (1998) cultural-ecological theory on voluntary and involuntary minorities in the U.S. provides a working model for understanding the educational successes and challenges of immigrants. They define voluntary immigrant minorities are those individuals who have immigrated willfully. Based on years of research, Ogbu and Simons (1998) explain that the experiences of voluntary minorities are generally quite different from involuntary minorities. Ogbu and Simons (1998) argue that these individuals do not experience prolonged difficulty in academic achievement for several reasons. First, “a positive dual frame of reference” provides them with a positive view of life in the U.S. in comparison to life in their country of origin (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 170). This stays true for children of immigrants who hear stories from their parents of what life was like back home (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 170). Second, the “folk theory of making it,” the belief that hard work and dedication will pay off in academic and economic success, is a source of hope and inspiration (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, pp. 170–172). Finally, role models within the minority immigrant community who are acculturated and have achieved academic and economic success are a concrete motivating force for this group (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 173). Ogbu and Simons’ (1998) model provides a framework to understand
why some immigrant minority groups are academically successful, such as Asian Americans, while others, such as Latino Americans and Black Americans, struggle with school. It also broadens the experience of the individual immigrant to display how they are a function of various forces within their communities. This model speaks to the lives of my participants, who would all be classified as voluntary minorities. It provides a useful conceptualization to understand how Muslim girls perceive life in Canada and the various forces that motivate their educational achievements.

Feuerverger and Richards’ (2007) study on recent immigrant and refugee youth in Toronto high schools provides an intimate look at the particular experiences of local immigrant youth. They describe the experience of being an immigrant youth as a, “Process of creating and re-creating multiple social identities, negotiations, and aspirations for the future in the school and in the wider society” (Feuerverger & Richards, 2007, p. 556). Their findings indicate that immigrant students’ experience of being an outsider can be placed along a continuum of feelings from viewing his or her status as an outsider as a negative force in their life to viewing their position as a positive, regenerative force (Feuerverger & Richards, 2007, p. 560). Thus, being an outsider could be viewed negatively, as a constant struggle to try to fit in and a tension between identities, or positively, as a chance for a better future and pride in one’s cultural heritage (Feuerverger & Richards, 2007, pp. 560–561). Though only one participant in my study was a recent enough immigrant for such a continuum to be directly applicable, Feuerverger and Richards’ (2007) study conveys the intriguing experience of being an immigrant and how various factors influence how an immigrant youth perceives their life in a new country. Both Ogbu and Simons (1998) and Feuerverger and Richards (2007) provide concepts that are
relevant to understanding how external forces and internal emotions influence the personal experiences of immigrant and first generation Muslim girls.

**Inclusive and Multicultural Education**

Multicultural educationists work within the domain of curriculum/schooling to conceptualize how education can meet the needs of diverse students, such as Muslim girls, and authentically mirror and engage with the diversity present in the school system. Whether it is developing a multicultural education framework for an entire school (Banks, 2001a), elaborating on the traits a multicultural educator should exhibit (Gay, 2002), considering how multicultural education can be an opportunity for fostering a social justice consciousness (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997), or theorizing on multiple centres of knowledge (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000), the literature emphasizes the injustice of sidestepping certain groups, the value in multicultural education, and methods through which curriculum can achieve critical social consciousness in students and teachers.

How schools can establish and sustain genuine multicultural environments that provide equal educational opportunities for all students is the focus of Banks’ (2001b) work. He shares the five key elements that a school needs to ensure such a multicultural environment: (a) content integration, (b) the knowledge construction process, (c) prejudice reduction, (d) an equity pedagogy, and (e) an empowering school culture and social structure (Banks, 2001b, para. 2). Banks (2001b) best describes the interrelation of these five components,

To implement multicultural education effectively, teachers and administrators must attend to each of the five dimensions of multicultural education described above. They should use content from diverse groups when teaching concepts and skills, help students to understand how knowledge in the various disciplines is constructed, help students to develop positive intergroup attitudes and behaviors, and modify their teaching strategies so that students from different racial, cultural,
and social-class groups will experience equal educational opportunities. The total
environment and culture of the school must also be transformed so that students
from diverse ethnic and cultural groups will experience equal status in the culture
and life of the school. (para. 6)

Banks (2001b) argues that these efforts and attitude are the most powerful ways teachers and
administrators can serve the needs of their student population. These five elements provide a
useful conceptualization of what an inclusive school in Ontario could look like.

Gay (2002) focuses on the concept of culturally responsive teaching. This theory
addresses how teachers can work with the particular needs of the diverse students in their
classrooms. She defines culturally responsive teaching as, “Using the cultural characteristics,
experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more
effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). This concept is based on research that indicates that students
learn more effectively when curriculum is situated within their lived experience (Gay, 2002,
p. 106). Gay (2002) argues that teachers’ knowledge of different cultures must go beyond a basic
awareness and respect for different cultures. To be truly effective in teaching diverse students,
they must learn about the particularities of each group present in their classroom so that they can
different types of curriculum present in the classroom can serve as opportunities to teach critical
multiculturalism. These curricula are (a) the formal curriculum – the official curriculum from the
board of education; (b) the symbolic curriculum – the images and artifacts in the classroom and
around the school; and (c) the societal curriculum – concepts and ideas about diverse groups in
the media (Gay, 2002, p. 109). A culturally responsive teacher will find ways to tailor, evolve,
 improve, and expand on all these types of curriculum to meet the needs of their diverse students.
Though Gay’s (2002) analysis is based on extensive research of underachieving African-
American, Asian, Latino, and Indigenous students (p. 106), this paradigm is also relevant to
educating students from other backgrounds who may or may not have academic challenges. Her theory speaks to the value of inclusion, engagement, respect, awareness, and critical thinking when it comes to educating Muslim girls.

Studies on Muslim Youth: U.S. and Canada

My study of Muslim girls is part of a larger field of research on the education of Muslim students. Though previously conducted studies have helped contextualize my research, the paucity of research on Muslim girls in public schools in Ontario indicates an urgent need for such a study. In examining the literature on Muslim students, I found the most intuitive way to organize the research was by the various types of experiences they have inside and outside school. Starting with the most personal experiences and moving outwards to the most public, the structure is (a) religion and identity, (b) social integration and schooling, (c) curriculum and teacher voices. Grouping the literature in this manner highlights key themes present in the study of Muslim students and loosely mirrors the overall structure of my findings (Chapters 4, 5, and 6), which are organized by religious, social, and curricular experiences inside and outside school. It is essential to note that such divisions are not mutually exclusive, as each group of experiences – religious, social, and curricular – is inextricably linked to the next. Moreover, religion and gender crosscut all these categories. The issues present in the aforementioned categories provide a framework and a need to pursue further research on the educational experiences of Muslim girls with curriculum/schooling in Ontario public schools.

Religion and identity.

A significant body of research on Muslim students focuses on the experience of negotiating their various identities. These discussions are often framed by concepts such as bifurcated identities (Sarwar Sharif, 1997), hyphenated identities (Sirin & Fine, 2008), or
negotiating identities (Collet, 2007). Studies centred on religion and identity often focus on the emotional and psychological experience of being a Muslim. These studies have provided important data and findings on the psyche of Muslim students and have set the stage for more research on the intersection of religious identity and schooling for Muslim girls.

Sirin and Fine’s (2008) mixed methods research on Muslim youth in New York City extrapolates how American-Muslim youth navigate their hyphenated identities. Sirin and Fine (2008) anchor their empirical study in the conceptual work of W. E. B. Dubois (1970). By employing the metaphor of “the double self” (Dubois, 1982, as cited in Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 194), they consider how Muslim youth respond and make sense of their dual identities. The study provides detailed qualitative and quantitative data through surveys, interviews, and identity maps that flesh out the rich and complex experiences of their participants.

The study also shares the life histories of six participants, four hijabi girls and three boys. These stories provide a window into the experience of “living on the hyphen” (Sirin & Fine, 2008). In these conversations, the participants share their thoughts on identity, culture, school, friendships, politics, citizenship, media, and parents. For example, 14-year-old Aisha describes the pain of losing friends in school after deciding to wear the hijab (Sirin & Fine, 2008, pp. 26–27). Finding new Muslim friends who believe in the same values is important to her; however, this does not limit her interactions with non-Muslim peers. Taliya, a Muslim girl who grew up in Florida, explains her reasoning behind choosing a career in medicine, “Perhaps because it is the most challenging and I tend to stick to the most challenging options, for some reason because it gives me satisfaction that I’ve done the choices the hard way” (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 154). Though such examples delve from time to time into the schooling experiences of the participants, on the whole, the study’s focus is on the internal identity construction and
negotiation process and the various forces and experiences that shape their hyphenated identities. School is just one space where the identity negotiation process occurs. This is a topic I feel needs further exploration. Also, Sirin and Fine’s (2008) research is based in the U.S. and thus heavily focuses on the impact of U.S. politics on Muslim identity. Though my research recognizes that U.S. foreign and domestic policy toward Muslims plays a role in the experiences of Muslim girls in Ontario, Canada, I believe it is important to research the unique experience of being a Muslim in Ontario based on the difference in social and political context.

Collet’s (2007) research also focuses on identity negotiation. His study of thirty-three Somali Muslim individuals who had graduated from Toronto public high schools sets out to understand how they negotiate and re-negotiate their Somali Muslim national identities as a function of attending secular public schools. Half of his participants immigrated to Canada between the ages of 7 and 12 and the other half immigrated as teenagers or in their early twenties (Collet, 2007, p. 132). In the interviews, all the participants perceive themselves as nationally Somali and express the inextricable link between Islam and Somali culture (Collet, 2007, p. 139). They explain that religion is essential to who they are and how they conduct themselves in society, and thus observing religious rituals is crucial in defining their sense of self (Collet, 2007).

Collet (2007) explores their process of identity negotiation by discussing religious accommodations in school and the participants’ views on participating in physical education classes and sex education. In regards to religious accommodations, some of the participants are very bold and clear about what they were willing to compromise, while others were more hesitant. One Toronto school graduate indicates she is anxious about asking her teacher to leave class to pray (Collet, 2007, p. 142). Fearful of annoying or disrupting the class, she often waits until the very end of class, all the while feeling nervous about missing her prayers (Collet, 2007, p. 142).
However, not all girls feel the same sense of disconcertion. Eighteen-year-old Awarle states proudly, “If the school system wouldn’t allow me to practice it (my religion), I would never go to school” (Collet, 2007, p. 142). These statements display the divergence between Somali students on the degree to which religion should be incorporated into school life and their approach to observing it. As for sex education, though many understand that learning about the topic is important in the North American context, they contrast the “Canadian view” of sex to their Islamic view on premarital sex (Collet, 2007, p. 148).

Perhaps the most significant contribution of Collet’s (2007) work is the his identification of how highly subjective and personal the negotiation is between their religious and secular worlds. Furthermore, Collet (2007) argues that these students were agents in their socialization process. As Collet (2007) concludes, “Far from falling ‘victim’ to a secular–religious divide, the respondents featured here were very much actors and co-creators in their identification process” (p. 150). Collet’s (2007) research is a powerful step forward in understanding the experiences of Muslim students in public school. However, his focus on such a particular sub-group of urban Somali Muslim immigrants raises questions about how other Muslim students are making sense of their schooling experiences. Moreover, though Collet’s study analyzes some aspects of their educational experience, the larger focus of his study is immigration and the construction and negotiation of national and religious identity. Schooling is just one aspect of his participants’ immigration experience. I believe more work needs to focus specifically on schooling experiences in order to deconstruct the interplay between religious identity and curriculum/schooling. This must be done in reference to a wide array of factors anchored in the educational context.
Sarroub’s (2005) 26-month ethnography looks into the lives of six immigrant hijabi Yemeni Muslim girls, the “hijabat,” from religiously conservative families. Her study is a poignant in-depth look at the intersection of conservative Islamic values and life in public school. What is particular about Sarroub’s participants is their highly restrictive and at times oppressive home atmospheres, which disrupt their personal aspirations and educational lives. Sarroub (2005) explores how striving to achieve cultural and academic success influences the behaviour of these girls (p. 7). Like Collet’s (2007) Somali participants, the Yemeni girls in Sarroub’s (2005) study try to observe religious conduct during the school day. However, the difference is that their school administration actively strives to accommodate religious practices such as Friday prayers and religious dress. In fact, the teachers and administration at the high school are perhaps, in Sarroub’s (2005) opinion, too accommodating. For example, the teachers and administration are willing to go to great lengths to accommodate the various limitations on what the hijabi girls are allowed to do (Sarroub, 2005, p. 107). As a result, the Yemeni girls end up isolated from the rest of the student body, deepening the divide between their home and school lives.

Another difference between Collet’s (2007) findings and Sarroub’s (2005) findings is that, while the Somali girls seemed in control of their negotiation process, the Yemeni girls had minimal control over the management of their religious and secular identities. Sarroub (2005) observes, “In addition to family concerns about school and its potential negative influence, the hijabat lived under the constant watch of Yemeni boys” (p. 35). One Yemini boy even goes as far as to write a pamphlet on how Yemeni girls should behave (Sarroub, 2005, p. 36). Sarroub’s (2005) Yemeni girls face a high degree of pressure to conform to accepted religious practices.
The *hijabat* share their aspirations of pursuing post-secondary education with Sarroub (2005) early on in the study. Unfortunately, as the years progress, several of the girls are pressured to marry male cousins from Yemen, stifling the possibility of pursuing an academic profession (Sarroub, 2005, p. 114). In these circumstances, teachers feel helpless to alter the course of their lives. As one teacher summarizes, “Their grades are slipping, the morale slips, the enthusiasm slips, they know even if they get a diploma, they’re not going anywhere with that diploma because they’re not going to college … whatever the husband says goes” (Sarroub, 2005, p. 115). Here the teachers are more in tune with their Muslim students’ hopes and desires than some of the parents. Although the fates of Sarroub’s (2005) *hijabat* are not representative of all Muslim girls, the desire to be successful in both spheres is a theme that runs through the lives of many girls (Collet, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Zine, 2008). In the case of the Yemeni girls, the teachers are not always perceived to be in conflict with them, but rather are often on their side. In truth, it is the family and community members that impede the *hijabats*’ desires to follow their dreams, whereas school, particularly the classroom, is a safe haven. Sarroub’s (2005) study raises interesting questions about the lives of Muslim girls. However, her participants are all Yemeni immigrants from extremely conservative backgrounds. Though her findings are extremely important and contribute to research on Muslim females, they focus on Muslim girls who have very little control over their personal actions, lives, and futures. My study aims to explore the experiences of a wide variety of Muslim girls and thus is not tied to the experiences of one religious and cultural community. I think this design will provide some breadth about the experience of being a Muslim girl.

Zine’s (2008) study of Muslim youth in Islamic Canadian schools takes a critical look at public schools. Her sample includes nine teachers, thirteen parents, eighteen female students, and
five male students. Of her eighteen female participants, all but one wore the hijab and two wore
the niqab (face veil). Like Moghissi et al. (2009), Collet (2007), and Sarroub (2005), Zine (2008)
highlights the challenges these students faced in public schools. However, since all her
participants are in Islamic school, either by their own or their parents’ choice, their views on
public school are generally critical and negative. Zine’s (2008) interviews with her female
participants juxtapose their experiences in private Islamic school with public school. For
example, many of the girls felt that public schools were not open to embodied differences, and
thus observing religious dress and conduct were an anxiety-ridden and negative experience
(Zine, 2008, pp. 98–99). In comparison, Islamic schools are perceived as safe havens where the
girls can avoid such conflicts. Her participants’ critique of public schools mirrors the findings of
her 2001 study of seven Muslim students in public school.

Zine’s (2008) research provides useful data about the perceptions and politics of veiling,
embodied religious practices, and gendered religious identities. However, her research is based
on four Islamic schools in the Greater Toronto Area and almost all her participants are hijabi
students. While some scholars argue that Islamic school is the only space where Muslim students
can authentically observe their religious identities (Azmi, 2001; Haw et al., 1998; Zine, 2008),
other scholars have shared more hopeful accounts of Muslim students in public schools (Collet,
2007; Diab, 2009; Niyozov, 2010; Sirin & Fine, 2008). In fact, Diab’s (2009) study on hijabi
Muslim girls in Windsor, Ontario, highlights the positive outlook her participants had on their
public school education. She concludes, “The girls in my study further give evidence that it is
possible to be a ‘good’ Muslim and experience a positive education in Canada” (Diab, 2009,
p. 88). Though Zine’s (2008) participants’ experiences are important to the field of research on
Muslim girls, they do not answer questions about how Muslim girls, hijabi and non-hijabi, who choose to attend public school understand their curriculum/schooling experiences.

A few studies convey that the impact of personal Islamic values on Muslim girls’ academic aspirations is another point of contact between their religious and academic worlds (Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008). An intriguing study conducted by Ali and Reisen (1999) examines gender role identity among Muslim girls in the U.S. The study is primarily based on the Bem Sex Role Inventory, which measures stereotypical male and female attributes (Ali & Reisen, 1999, p. 1). In addition, the girls responded to a Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, a survey of religious feelings (Ali & Reisen, 1999, p. 1). In the past, research conducted using this system has identified that culture can play a significant role in one’s conception of their gender identity (Ali & Reisen, 1999, p. 2). Based on the ninety-six girls who were involved in the study, the results display that the greater length of time a girl has spent in the West corresponds to her affiliation with stereotypical “male” attributes, such as a sense of “instrumentality” (Ali & Reisen, 1999, p. 5). Based on the survey, the longer a Muslim girl lives in U.S., the less she identifies with mainstream female character traits. However, the study also shows that girls who identify closely with their culture embody a larger amount of stereotypical “female” attributes (Ali & Reisen, 1999, p. 5). They analyze that Islamic values praise traditional female roles and thus girls who are deeply connected to their culture are more likely to identity with stereotypical “female” attributes. Based on these findings, girls who have recently immigrated or have strong ties to their religion and culture, such as those in Collet’s (2007), Hanson’s (2009), or Alvi’s (2009) studies, would theoretically have higher femininity scores. Whether this is actually the case is difficult to assess. Nonetheless, considering the degree to which exposure to Western contexts and attachment to religious ideals affects gender role identity may provide a deeper
understanding of how such a correlation affects the academic aspirations of Muslim girls. I explore the relationship between religious values and academic and professional aspirations in my research.

**Social integration and schooling.**

The literature on social integration predominantly focuses on immigration, civic integration, and social behaviour inside and outside school. Studies explore how immigration, culture, and religion influence social integration and behaviour and the degree to which Muslims feel a sense of belonging in North American societies.

Moghissi et al.’s (2009) research on Afghan, Irani, Pakistani, and Palestinian diasporas in Canada frames the study by considering the following three factors: (a) the social conditions of the individual in the country they originated from, (b) the social conditions of the individual in the country they reside in, and (c) the social and political trends in the country of residence (p. 18). This is one of the most recent comprehensive studies of Muslim communities in Canada. Moghissi et al. (2009) compile information about these issues through questionnaires, oral interviews, and focus group discussions. A separate youth questionnaire was created for unmarried individuals aged 15 to 22 (Moghissi et al., 2009, p. 21). Through these methods, the researchers glean pertinent information about a variety of issues, including family relations, maintaining original culture, religious identity, and contending with discrimination. The extensive study displays the heterogeneity present in Islam, the impact of immigration on diaspora communities, experiences of discrimination and racism, and challenges of balancing two cultures. The study also focuses on the evolving relationship between parents and their children as a result of immigration. Though there are struggles as children try to integrate into a new society, ultimately the experiences bring immigrant Muslim families closer (Moghissi et al.,
Moghissi et al.’s (2009) study effectively outlines larger issues experienced by immigrant Muslim communities. The researchers touch briefly on school when discussing instances of discrimination, but this is framed in the context of social integration in society at large. The study creates an overarching framework in which to research more specific issues and experiences related to Muslim youth in public schools.

Another study of social integration is Cristillo’s (2008) research on the connection between religiosity and civic belonging in Muslim youth attending New York City public high schools. Her study explores how school climate in New York City public schools affects the religiosity, self-esteem, and social integration of Muslim youth. What is unique about her research is that she chooses to compare the experiences of Muslim and non-Muslim students through surveys, focus group discussions, and ethnography. Her survey of over 633 high school students gives some insight into the key issues related to social integration and civic identity.

Cristillo (2008) finds that Muslim youth genuinely like their schools. Even though 17% of her Muslim participants, the majority of which were Arab and South Asian, reported instances of bigotry, 85% said they felt safe in their schools (Cristillo, 2008, p. 6). As for their opinion of school, all the students in the focus group shared that they liked their schools and would not want to switch (Cristillo, 2008, p. 6). In the focus group discussions, Muslim girls shared that they had less choice on how they spent their free time because of cultural boundaries on dress code and gender appropriate behaviour (Cristillo, 2008, p. 7). The major findings of Cristillo’s (2008) study indicate that religion is extremely important to Muslim students, and that the majority like their schools despite certain challenges related to their Islamic identity. As for life outside of school, Muslim students have a low level of trust in political institutions and the media, but relatively high trust in public schools and the legal system (Cristillo, 2008, p. 11). Muslim
students also displayed positive attitudes toward civic and political participation (Cristillo, 2008, p. 12). Cristillo’s (2008) study focuses on religiosity related to a Muslim student’s experience of being a citizen. Her research indicates certain challenges experienced by Muslim youth, such as religious doubting as a function of 9/11, instances of discrimination, and lack of trust in political institutions as a result of racism and discrimination. Despite these challenges, her participants still display healthy forms of social integration. Cristillo’s (2008) research creates a space for exploring the interrelationship between life inside and outside of school. My research takes this a step further by exploring the religious and curricular experiences, in addition to social experiences, of Muslim girls inside and outside school.

The aim of Alvi’s (2008) qualitative study is to focus solely on the social experiences of hijabi girls in public. Her sample group is seven Muslim girls attending public school in Ottawa. She builds on the work of Zine (2001) and approaches the issue through the anti-racist framework of Rezai-Rashti (1994) and Dei (1997). Through interpretive research, Alvi (2008) identifies the issues plaguing these Muslim girls as they strive to balance their religious beliefs and school life. Sabina, a student at a school with a large Muslim population, describes her involvement in school activities despite the perceived limitations of her hijab (Alvi, 2008, p. 55). She notes that she is often the only hijabi girl in school to be involved in various school clubs or sports (Alvi, 2008, p. 55). Though Sabina reflects on the perceptions of how a hijabi Muslim girl should behave, she is also an example of the possibilities open to a hijabi Muslim girl if she is confident enough and supported by her family and the schooling environment. In general, all the girls expressed some feelings of alienation and recommended that schools make a concerted effort to design social events that took into account the values of their minority students. Some of Alvi’s (2008) participants mirrored the feelings of Zine’s (2008) participants, explaining that
their unwillingness to compromise their Islamic identities rendered them outcasts. Other participants were more optimistic about their schooling experiences, feeling more like “agents” (Collet, 2007) than victims. The focus on public school in Canada is a promising step forward; however, the focus on only hijabi girls highlights the missing voices of non-hijabi girls.

One of the most significant studies of Muslim females is Mir’s (2006) study of American-Muslim undergraduate women. Her research is based on ethnographic fieldwork at two American universities, Georgetown and George Washington, with twenty-six participants. Her sample includes women from diverse national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. For example, some are converts, some American citizens, some immigrants, and some of mixed ethnicities. By analyzing the experiences of these women through the lens of social practices, such as drinking, wearing the hijab, and dating, she conveys how, “Muslim women’s identity work is constrained by gazes, Muslim and non-Muslim” (Mir, 2006, p. 288). As result of the various expectations, limitations, stereotypes, and stigma, “they construct third spaces of religious, ethnic/cultural, American, and gender identities” (Mir, 2006, p. 291). Her study conceptualized the complexity of what Muslim females are doing on a daily basis in secular educational institutions. While some feel pressured to join in with the social practices of the majority, others resist these social pressures. This entire process puts them on the margins of college social life (Mir, 2006, p. 290).

Mir’s (2006) work highlights the significance of social interactions in the education experience for Muslim females. Decisions regarding social practices and interactions, such as to drink or not to drink, or to date or not to date, influence how a Muslim female experiences higher education. Naturally, Muslim girls in high school do not have the same level of freedom as Mir’s (2006) college students. Living at home or being in high school often shifts decisions about or
experiences related to dating, dressing, drinking, and attending parties. Researching Muslim girls’ high school social experiences within the framework of curriculum/schooling will provide insight into how girls negotiate between what they want to do, their religious boundaries, and their parents’ views.

**Curriculum and teacher voices.**

Very few studies specifically explore the curriculum and classroom experiences of Muslim students. Even fewer studies engage the voices of teachers of Muslim students. This section explores a few significant studies of curriculum and teachers. Specific conflicts with aspects of North American curriculum, specifically sex education, are highlighted in Orgocka’s (2004) research, while Niyozov (2010) and Kassam (2007) share the voices of teachers on the education of Muslim students.

Challenges with sex education curriculum are referred to in both Orgocka’s (2004) and Collet’s (2007) research. Orgocka’s (2004) discussion with over thirty Muslim mothers and daughters in Illinois examines their feelings about and opinions on sexuality and sex education. While some of the Muslim mothers discuss sex with their daughters in the context of what is Islamically appropriate, the majority of the mothers do not engage in such dialogue (Orgocka, 2004, p. 260). Their thoughts on sex education were similarly dichotomized. The Muslim mothers and daughters feel that there are aspects of the course content they find unsettling and insensitive (Orgocka, 2004, p. 263). For example, one girl indicates, “Maybe sex education should take into account that not everyone sitting there and watching the videos cares … I think it was mostly geared toward Americans, maybe the Christian point of view” (Orgocka, 2004, p. 263). Thus, though many girls do not have an issue with learning about the material per se, some feel that the method in which the information is conveyed ignores the cultural and religious
backgrounds of the various students in the class. Orgocka’s (2004) research highlights conflicts between Islamic and public school values. How does this translate into other forms of curriculum? I am interested in understanding what the experiences of Muslim girls are with other forms of public school curriculum.

Niyozov (2010) sets out to explore the role of teachers in the educational lives of Muslim students. His is one of the only studies that gives voice to teachers of Muslim students, a “missing voice” in the education of Muslim students (Niyozov, 2010). Niyozov (2010) addresses four key perceptions of non-Muslim teachers in public schools: (a) teachers are racist against Muslim students, (b) teachers ignore Islamic culture and history, (c) teachers are not emotionally and intellectually equipped to teach Muslim students, and (d) teachers are insensitive to the religious requirements of their Muslim students. His research is a response to these claims. Interviews with six high school teachers working in schools with large Muslim populations display an encouraging portrait of how non-Muslim teachers perceive, interact with, and teach their Muslim students. The teachers are worldly, cultured, aware, sensitive, and thoughtful. They recognize the differences present in their classroom and have their own methods of addressing the needs of their diverse students. Whether it is designing lessons that include diverse voices in an intelligent and relevant manner (Niyozov, 2010, p. 10) or deconstructing their own biases and preconceived notions (Niyozov, 2010, pp. 6–7), these teachers are a far stretch from ignorant and racist teachers described or profiled in other studies. Though the teachers acknowledge that these other types of teachers still exist (Niyozov, 2010, p. 8), they feel that, for the most part, teachers are making the effort to understand their student population and tailor their curriculum and teaching style to be authentic to the needs of their students. This study opens up a space to further explore the role of teachers in educating Muslim students.
Kassam’s (2007) paper is based on a personal account of a curricular event in her Ontario public high school English class involving a Muslim girl. During a unit on postcolonial literature, Aliya, a hijabi girl, shares a personal poem about discrimination, based on the bus driver asking to see her ID on a school bus. She writes, “Why can’t I walk down the road as joyful as others? … Who am I in your eyes? A girl, a student, a Canadian? No, my only identity is ‘Hijabi girl’?” (Kassam, 2007, p. 357). The poem causes a strong reaction among her peers, who feel that she has misconstrued the actions of the bus driver. The poem opens up a forum for discussion on race, culture, and identity. Kassam (2007) reflects that, “themes of post 9/11 North American media find themselves lodged in Aliya’s consciousness and resonate in her experience” (p. 358). Kassam uses the classroom to deconstruct these feelings and ideas with her students.

Kassam (2007) emphasizes the importance of a multicultural education in helping students like Aliya wrestle with their complex and ambivalent identities. Aliya struggles with feeling a sense of belonging while maintaining her religious identity; her frustration is indicative of the process of merging religious and secular identities among Muslim girls. Kassam’s (2007) paper displays the value of exploring issues of religious identity and experiences through curriculum. There is a lack of research in Ontario that looks at the experiences of Muslim girls through such a lens, and her story is a powerful example of the role of teachers and curriculum in the lives of Muslim students. As a teacher myself, I know the impact of classroom and schooling experiences on my students. My study sets out to explore the experiences of Muslim girls in this context.

**Identifying the Gaps**

This literature review ties together several different fields of research: theories and conceptualizations of curriculum/schooling, student experiences in education, immigrant and minority youth, inclusive and multicultural education, and the education of Muslim students in
the U.S. and Canada. It is necessary to include studies from the U.S. because of the lack of research on Muslim girls in Canada. Although it is of great value to have American research to draw on, the social conditions for Muslim girls living in the U.S. are different than those for Muslim Canadian girls. The diversity in Ontario, the large presence of Muslims, and explicit policies on multiculturalism and equity in education provide unique conditions in which to examine the experiences of Muslim girls.

A survey of literature on Muslim students indicates several areas that require further research. First, most studies of Muslim girls are highly critical of public schools as they are anchored in anti-racist and critical theory frameworks. These frameworks often pre-impose certain conclusions on the data that may be insightful, but also limit interpretations. Though my research takes into consideration anti-racist and critical theory, I was wary of relying too heavily on any one framework and used a grounded theory approach to analyze my data. Second, the majority of the research focuses on the psychological process of identity construction. Though research centred primarily on identity has been extremely useful, more research needs to be conducted that specifically focuses on how curriculum/schooling informs and influences the educational experiences of Muslim girls. Third, the majority of research on Muslim girls is either focused solely on hijabi Muslim females or gives precedence to the experiences of hijabi Muslim females. More research needs to be conducted on both hijabi and non-hijabi girls to broaden the scope and provide more insight into experiences of various types of Muslim girls.

My study seeks to bridge some of these gaps in the research. It provides much needed insight into how Ontario public schools are experienced by Muslim girls and what can be done to improve the schooling environment and curriculum instruction to better meet the needs of Muslim girls. It provides an opportunity for Muslim girls and their families to reflect and learn
about how to work through certain tensions and conflicts with public education, voice their concerns, and understand their own experiences in the context of the education of diverse students in multicultural societies.
Chapter 3:
Research Methodology

The central question of my study is: *How do Muslim girls understand their experiences with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in Ontario, Canada?* To investigate the central question, I conducted a **qualitative study** that included individual semi-structured interviews with nine Muslim girls from two regions in the Greater Toronto Area, followed by one focus group discussion combining girls from both regions. I used **grounded theory** to code, categorize, and analyze my data. This method reduced the chance for presuppositions in my analysis and ensured that my findings would emerge directly from the data.

My goal was to engage critically with the participants’ experiences both to convey their diverse and rich experiences and to create an opportunity to jointly explore and deconstruct their experiences. The purpose was to unearth some of the deeper beliefs, values, and motivations that underpinned their thoughts and to highlight key influential factors. I strove to create a space for critical reflection and dialogue for my participants and an opportunity to provide valuable insight to educators on the opportunities and challenges that come with being a Muslim girl in public secondary school.

In this chapter, I describe my reasons for selecting a qualitative methodology, share my basis for using grounded theory to analyze the data, describe the research setting, list the criterion for participant selection, highlight recruitment strategies, identify the data collection methods, outline the process of data analysis, and share some ethical considerations.
Research Design

I chose a qualitative, grounded theory methodology to anchor my research and analysis in the participants’ lived experiences. Qualitative research is concerned with “understanding the meaning people have constructed … how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). The heart of my research is the participants’ personal narratives, the goal being to unearth how Muslim girls understand their daily lived experiences in public secondary schools. Grounded theory “provides a means for conveying these meanings and for describing the psychological and social processes that have been developed to assist people make sense of their world” (Morse, 1992, as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 184). I wanted to understand these processes without superimposing any overarching theoretical framework that could potentially transform the data to reflect a given viewpoint. Grounded theory provides an opportunity to do just that. It creates a system for approaching the data that is open and anchored to the thoughts and feelings of the participants. This was a powerful tool for me in conducting my study, and I believe it sets this research apart from others on Muslim students.

The strengths of qualitative, grounded theory research are manifold. To name a few, it awards a unique proximity to the research issue or “local groundedness” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10) and has the potential to reveal complexities that may otherwise be difficult to grasp. These complexities refer to conceptual intersections, contradictions, confusions, depth of thought, and particular insights that quantitative research cannot provide to its audience. It was very important that my research was designed to bring such complexities of experience to the forefront. Since my study is focused on how each participant understands their curricular and
schooling experiences, a phenomenological method is best suited to probe how each individual student makes sense of what they are learning in school.

**Research setting.**

The study focuses on Muslim girls attending secondary schools in two municipal regions in the Greater Toronto Area. The 2001 census indicates that 579,640 Muslims live in Canada, of which 352,530, or 61%, live in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2001b). This is over double the number of Muslims tallied only a decade earlier. The majority of Muslims living in Ontario reside in the Greater Toronto Area, numbering more than 254,100 (Statistics Canada, 2001a) and this number is increasing. Statistics Canada Projections, 2001–2017 forecasts that by 2017 there will be a 160% increase in the number of Muslims in Canada, along with significant increases in the populations of other religious groups, such as Sikhs and Buddhists (as cited in Jedwab, 2005, para. 3). Since a significant number of these groups are youth, this shift would dramatically change the composition of Greater Toronto Area schools. Statistics Canada predicts that one out of six individuals will be either Muslim or Hindu in the Greater Toronto Area by 2017 (Jedwab, 2005, para. 3). For example, as of the 2001 Statistics Canada Census, 168,120 of Canada’s Muslims were under the age of 15 (as cited in Jedwab, 2005, Table 2). As a result, it becomes ever more important to research how these diverse groups are experiencing public school.

As per the Canadian Census, the Greater Toronto Area includes Toronto and the municipal regions of Peel, York, and Durham. The significant presence of a Muslim population in the Greater Toronto Area is one of the key reasons I chose the Greater Toronto Area as the setting for my research study. It is an extremely diverse area, with 43% of the population identifying themselves as visible minorities (Ontario Trillium Foundation, 2011) and 2,320,160 of its 5,072,057 population identifying as immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2006). This area is rich
in languages and cultures, which provides a dynamic context in which to research the experiences of Muslim girls.

I chose to focus my study specifically in two distinct regional municipalities in the Greater Toronto Area to provide a defined context for the study and to have some basis for comparison. The two regions I selected (I will from here on refer to them as Region A and Region B) both have a large number of Muslims, though Region B has double the amount of Muslims as Region A. There is also an array of other religions and cultures in these regions. The most significant populations in these regions are people who identify as Chinese, South Asian, and Black (Ontario Trillium Foundation, 2011). As my study progressed, I became less concerned about comparisons between the two regions and more intrigued by the specific demographics of the various schools the girls attended and how that influenced educational experiences. I also purposely chose not to select participants from Toronto proper because it has a particular set of contextual factors that make it unique from the suburbs, or municipal regions, such as population density and socioeconomic structure. The presence of a Muslim population in Regions A and B, though in differing numbers, along with the unique and diverse populations of each area, provided an interesting opportunity for exploration. My study focused on Muslim girls who were attending, had attended, or had recently graduated from secondary schools in one of these two regions.

Since my research study was focused on how Muslim girls understand their experiences with curriculum/schooling, I conducted my research outside the physical realm of school. Though an opportunity to do ethnographic research within a school would have allowed me to observe my participants as they navigated their way through public school, I was most interested in probing their perceptions, understandings, reflections, and ruminations on what they learned
and how it connected to their religious, cultural, and social identities. Since this was my focus, both the semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussion provided ample data. I was more concerned about having a sample of Muslim girls from various schools in each region to obtain a degree of breadth and insight into how the participants from different schools perceived issues related to curriculum/schooling. By staying outside of school, I had the chance to acquire such diversity in my sample, which I believe enhanced my research and provided opportunity for fruitful conversation in the focus group discussion.

The locations for the one-on-one interviews and the focus group discussion varied. For the interviews, I spoke with each participant in an environment where they felt comfortable and safe, such as their homes, coffee shops, and the local library. The focus group discussion was conducted in a small conference room at a local library located between the two regions. Several of the girls were able to reach there on their own, and several had to be both picked up from their homes and dropped off by me in order to be able to attend.

**Participants.**

I wanted to limit the number of participants to approximately five girls from each region. As a result, it was crucial that my participants were individuals who could provide, “information-rich cases for study in depth” (Patton, 2002, p. 46). For the purposes of the study, I searched for participants who fulfilled a few important criteria. First, the participants had to identify themselves as Muslim. This does not mean that they had to be devout or orthodox followers of the religion, but merely that they recognized their Muslim identity as a component of who they were. Second, the participants must have been enrolled or be enrolled in secondary school in either one of the regions, or have graduated within the last two years. Though two years may seem like an arbitrary cut off point, I was wary of including participants for whom high school
was too distant a memory. Two years provided room for participants who were slightly removed from the high school experience to engage in fruitful and healthy reflection, without the risk that they have forgotten much of what occurred when they were in high school. A preliminary phone conversation with potential participants who had graduated helped me to identify whether they felt their memory served them well enough to reflect back on their secondary school experience.

The decision to limit the sample from each region to approximately five participants was intended to allow greater depth of communication with each participant. The hope was to acquire a greater sense of the meanings the girls placed on the, “events, processes, and structures of their lives” (Van Manen, 1977, as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10), thus a smaller sample provided the opportunity to delve deeply into each participant’s experiences. I used purposeful sampling to help me identify individuals who could provide me and the other participants insight into their unique experiences. I also used this method to create a heterogeneous sample. The reasons for pursuing a heterogeneous sample were:

1. to capture the diverse incarnations of being Muslim,
2. to glean what phenomena were shared by the girls and which were particular to each participant, and
3. to provide an opportunity for cross-cultural discussion in the focus group discussion.

I selected participants who represented the cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of Islam. Ideally, I wanted each participant in each regional sample to come from a different background. Despite these intentions, the scope of the study limited the amount of time I could devote to ensuring that each participant had a unique cultural, racial, ethnic, or linguistic background. Nevertheless, I tried my best to have as heterogeneous a sample as possible
within my time constraints. I also selected participants who varied in their adherence to Islamic tenets. Most obviously this manifested in girls who chose to wear the *hijab* and girls who chose not to wear it. Though a homogenous sample has its benefits, I was excited about the prospect of diversity among the participants in my study.

**Recruitment.**

To locate participants, I used purposeful, snowball sampling. I tried several avenues. I contacted teachers I was acquainted with via email (see Appendix A) to share with them the details of the study and ask if they could both share the details of the study with their students and forward information about the study to teachers from other schools and boards. This ended up being my main method of recruitment. I also sent an email (see Appendix A) regarding my research to a couple of Muslim and cultural community organizations hoping that members would share this information with their family and friends. Soon after my initial efforts, I began to receive emails and phone calls from teachers and community members identifying Muslim girls who were interested in potentially participating in the study.

Once I had the girls’ contact emails and phone numbers, I sent an email (see Appendix C) introducing myself and requesting a time for us to speak in detail about the study on the phone. I felt more comfortable having a phone conversation with the potential participants about the study, as it provided opportunities for them to ask questions and feel comfortable with the nature and structure of the study. In our phone conversations, I once again shared information about the study (see Appendix D) and provided ample opportunity for them to ask questions. If they were still interested in participating at the end of the conversation, I forwarded the consent form (see Appendix E) to them via email and set up a time for the interview. During the initial phone conversation or at the end of the interview, a few participants shared the names of friends who
would be interested in the study. However, because of the high degree of interest, I did not need to pursue this method of recruitment.

As mentioned earlier, I was very eager to have a diverse sample of students and stressed this in my email to teachers and community members (see Appendix A). If a teacher recommended three potential candidates, I began with contacting the student whose ethnicity was yet to be represented in the study. The same applied for girls who wore the *hijab*. I wanted to have a representation of girls who veiled and girls who did not. In the end I was comfortable with the having three *hijabi* girls in my study, though I would have preferred to have equal representation of *hijabi* and non-*hijabi* girls. Time constraints and my goal of a diverse sample limited my ability to get such equal representation.

The only problem that arose in my recruitment involved Sophie. Sophie is a half French, half Bengali Muslim female, who attended a Toronto high school with almost no Muslim students. She is currently attending a post-secondary institution in the Greater Toronto Area that has many Muslim students. As a result of a misunderstanding on the part of the individual who referred Sophie and miscommunication between Sophie and I, I only realized at the start of the interview that she had *not* attended high school in the Greater Toronto Area but in Toronto proper. Nevertheless, I decided to conduct the interview since I was sure that the process would inform the study in a meaningful way. I also had Sophie participate in the focus group discussion after consulting with my supervisor. Though I did not use any specific data from her interview in the study to stay true to the initial research design, her perspective enlivened the focus group discussion and provided an interesting point of view.
Table 1

*Participant Information: Region A*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Cultural background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yasmeen</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Pakistani; grew up in Abu Dhabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laiba</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Afghani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maliha</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Pakistani-Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iman</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ethiopian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ameera</td>
<td></td>
<td>2nd year of university</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Participant Information: Region B*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Cultural background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hena</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabeen</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariam</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Guyanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>5th year of high school</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data collection.**

To conduct the study, I used semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. Semi-structured interviews can be a mixture of unstructured and structured questions. Such a format, “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). This methodology has been used extensively and with much success in other research studies involving Muslim students (Collet, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2008). I had the opportunity to pilot my study with one Muslim girl as an assignment for one of my graduate courses and found that semi-structured
interviews provided an overall framework for the discussion, while allowing the participant to take part in defining the course of the interview.

In total, I conducted 9 semi-structured interviews, one with each participant from Regions A and B, which were approximately an hour-and-a-half in length and were audio recorded. As mentioned previously, I also conducted 1 interview with a student who attended school in Toronto (Sophie), which I did not use in my data analysis. During the interviews I referred to my interview guide questions (see Appendix F) to facilitate the interview. Though I did not share the specific questions with the participants beforehand, I shared with them the general topics we would be discussing to alleviate any nervousness, provide a degree of transparency to the process, and give them a chance to prepare if they wanted. The interview questions provided a platform for them to share their thoughts and feelings, as well as to probe contextual factors, ideological underpinnings, contradictions, and personal histories. However, I made a point not to make copious notes during the interview because I felt it detracted from the flow of the conversation and made participants uneasy. I felt it was much more natural and effective to be truly engaged in the interview process and make field notes when I returned home. There were times when I audio recorded my thoughts on the drive home if I really felt that I would forget or lose an important detail.

Once I have interviewed each participant, I conducted a focus group discussion with the participants from Regions A and B that was audio recorded and videotaped. Of the nine girls that were part of my study, six took part in the focus group discussion, two participants from Region A (Laiba and Ameera) and four participants from Region B (Hena, Sabeen, Mariam, and Nadia). I also allowed Sophie to participate as I felt she would provide an interesting perspective and counterpoint to the discussion being from Toronto and of mixed ethnicity. Though all but 1
participant wanted to be a part of the focus group discussion, the timing and location made it difficult for a few of the girls to attend. I spent over a month trying to coordinate the discussion to ensure that all of the girls who were interested would be able to attend, and I even picked up several of the girls. Maliha and Iman dropped out the morning of because they could not get a ride. Yasmeen told me kindly in advance that she would not be able to participate, but she did not provide a reason why.

There are several reasons I wanted to conduct a focus group discussion. First, I used the group interview to explore and compare themes that emerged from the individual interviews. I framed these as potential topics for discussion (see Appendix G) in order to facilitate the discussion and generate a healthy debate that would provide more clarity on some of the emerging themes. Second, I used the focus group to spark conversation on some provocative issues related to the central question. For example, I used the extreme case of Aqsa Parvez, a teenage Pakistani Muslim girl murdered by her father after rebelling and leaving home, to bring to the forefront issues related to tension between home and school life. Third, the focus group served as a form of triangulation by way of using a multi-methods approach to investigate the central question. As mentioned previously, I was less concerned about “proving” whether the girls’ responses are in fact “true” representations of what is occurring in the classroom and the school in general, and more about how they understood, perceived, and reflected on their experiences. The focus group provided a forum to explore how the various participants expressed their views in a different setting.

**Process of Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis was iterative, ongoing, and reflexive. I relied on the principles of grounded theory to interpret the data. I chose a grounded theory approach for its
emphasis on human experience, which “provides a means for conveying these meanings and for describing the psychological and social processes that have been developed to assist people make sense of their world” (Morse, 1992, as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 184). This analytical method creates a system for approaching the data that is open and anchored to the thoughts and feelings of the participants versus imposing a pre-existing theoretical framework on it. To best grasp and compare the emerging themes, my process of analysis followed a particular route.

As soon as I confirmed a handful of participants and had several other potential participants, I began interviewing. My first interview was on February 12, 2011, and my last interview was on March 26, 2011. During the interviews I made a point not to make notes because I wanted the participants to feel comfortable and the conversation to feel organic. As per Delamont’s (2002) recommendations, I did not want the data to accumulate without being read or analyzed. When I returned home from each interview I made field notes that included basic information, such as the name of the participant, date, time of interview, and location, along with a lengthy exposition of my thoughts. The exposition included information such as a description of the overall interview process, my personal observations, anything that I found to be interesting or surprising, regrets relating to issues I wish I had probed further, questions, and any emergent themes that jumped out from the conversation. The field notes also served as a textual medium where I continued to be self-reflective, bringing to the forefront any biases and limitations I may have. This strategy also served to explore and highlight similar biases and limitations that my participants may have had.

Along with writing up the field notes, I also listened to the audio recording of the interview either that evening or the following day. If any other thoughts came to mind, I added these to the field notes, indicating that these notes were a result of listening to the audio
recording. Listening to the audio recordings also allowed me to hone my interview skills. I paid attention to the way my questions were framed, my responses to the participants, and the flow of the interview. I made mental notes on how to improve the next interview, understanding that part of conducting my Master’s research was to improve my skills as a researcher. As the interviews progressed, I reframed some of the questions, became even more careful to listen to the participants without interrupting, and began to feel more comfortable with the interviews taking their own course.

I was also very aware of my own effect on the research as Muslim female and teacher. I agree with Patton (1990) that, “evaluators should strive to neither overestimate nor underestimate their effects, but to take seriously their responsibility to describe and study what those effects are” (p. 335). I found that my participants were more often than not quite comfortable sharing their experiences with me as they felt I was an insider who understood what it was like to be a Muslim female. One concern I did have was whether the participants would feel it necessary to act like a “good” Muslim girl in the interviews because I was either someone from within their community, a Muslim female, or a teacher. Though it is difficult for me to know for certain if this was the case, I believe their candour during the interviews and the discussion with the other participants during the focus group indicates that they were being authentic during the research process.

To create the transcriptions of the interviews, I had the help of a professional transcriber (see Appendix H). Using transcription services was extremely worthwhile for me. I submitted the audio files immediately after I had conducted each interview and so had a transcription in hand several days after I had finished the interview. I found this effective for the data analysis process because there was no lag between the time that I had collected the data and when I had a
transcript in hand. As soon as I received a transcription, I played the audio file again and went through the entire transcription word for word to ensure there were no errors, to familiarize myself with the transcript, and to experience the data in both verbal and written form. This ensured that I remained close to my data during the data collection process. Simultaneously reading and listening to the interviews enhanced my data analysis process; later on I could hear the girls’ voices as I sifted through the transcripts, reminding me of their tone and mood during the interview.

Once I completed all of the interviews I ran the focus group discussion. By getting the girls together, I was able to facilitate a lively discussion because of the number of participants and the diversity of the group. In regards to data analysis, I used the focus group discussion to explore some emergent themes, discuss provocative issues, and as a form of between-method triangulation. I found that a couple of girls were less vocal in the focus group discussion and that the girls generally shared less personal information in the group setting. However, many of girls were more vocal on a “philosophical” level, genuinely enjoying the opportunity to discuss with other girls some of the larger issues related to being a Muslim girl. Some girls used the forum to share their “wisdom” or “theories,” while others saw it as an opportunity to voice frustrations to a group that understood what it was like to be a Muslim girl. In contrast, the one-on-one interviews were a great deal more personal in nature. Several of the girls shared information that they did not share in the focus group discussion. Also, those who were slightly more shy in the group setting were quite open and forthcoming in the one-on-one interview. In the end, there was no contradiction between what the girls shared and how they generally behaved in both settings. Their thoughts and opinions were consistent; it was merely the nature of the conversation that differed slightly.
The process of coding was long and arduous. I began by level one coding or general coding, describing small blocks of data to clarify and organize the content. Following this, I level two coded or “open coded,” identifying concepts present in the data. Simultaneously, I “axial coded,” relating concepts together to build larger concepts and identify sub-concepts. All the while, I wrote memos, as per the recommendations of Corbin and Strauss (2008). These memos were a space where I explored emergent themes, made connections, drew in literature, and posed questions. This process allowed me to delve more deeply into the data and eventually create a more robust analysis. By the time I had open and axial coded the seventh transcript, I started seeing patterns emerge. However, I was careful not to let this determine the codes for the remaining transcripts. I did not want to miss out on anything significant by imposing a scheme on the data.

Finally, I considered how all of the categories I had developed fit together. This was the most enjoyable process of the analysis. I had printed off lists of all the codes from the transcripts and began organizing them by hand into super- and sub-categories. Among other things, I found myself going back over transcripts, examining the initial codes, abandoning some, keeping others, and refining several. I spent hours and hours diagramming as I pulled together the concepts in multiple ways until they “fit.” It feels almost impossible to describe this process. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) explain, “where art comes in is in the ability to ‘make the scheme work’ based on the data and the insights gained into the data in the memos” (p. 274).

The process of writing out my data analysis forced me to further evolve my findings. I pulled all the relevant excerpts from the transcripts to develop the outline for the data analysis chapters. Creating the outline provided me with another opportunity to consider connections between categories and pull out pieces of the participants’ transcripts that displayed subtle
nuances that I had not seen earlier. Conversations with my thesis supervisor regarding my rough draft forced me to push my analysis even further, such as exploring themes I briefly mentioned or pulling several concepts together to build larger conclusions. The process of sharing my findings further sculpted the analysis, especially the feedback I received from my peers and the participants (I will discuss this aspect of my research in the next section). Though I initially lacked the confidence to make conclusions based on my data analysis, sharing my findings with others provided me with the feedback and encouragement to do so.

Once I completed the first stage of my data analysis, I considered rival explanations such as studies that indicated that Muslim students were struggling in public schools (Abu El-Haj, 2006; Kassam, 2007; Zine, 2001; Zine, 2008). I found that, although the participants in my study did face challenges, they were surrounded by many positive individuals and had many positive experiences in their schooling environment that offset the various challenges of being Muslim in public school. A combination of their background, school environment, and parents’ religious values influenced how they experienced public school and the degree to which this was a positive or negative experience. I recognized that public school could be a very difficult environment for some Muslim students, but this was not the case for my participants. In addition, there were several studies that corroborated my findings (Collet, 2007; Cristillo, 2008; Sirin & Fine, 2008), providing me with greater confidence in the end results.

However, I did have one participant whose experiences and thoughts were quite different from the other participants. Though she enjoyed her experiences in public school, she chose to switch to an Islamic school at the end of the year. This “negative case” forced me to delve deeply into the reasons why this participant was unique in her decision to switch. I found that her very recent immigration, conservative family upbringing, devout religious beliefs, and desire to “fit
in” as a hijabi motivated her to go to school in an atmosphere that was more similar to the one she had experienced in Abu Dhabi. She felt at home in a religious atmosphere that constantly validated her religious identity, and public school could not do that for her. In addition, she had mostly positive things to say about her public school experience. Her decision to switch was, at the end of the day, a matter of personal preference. Her case did not counteract my findings, but merely highlighted the multiple ways the participants understood their experiences in public school and the freedom they had to determine their educational futures.

Finally, I gauged my subject and audience reactions by taking opportunities to share my findings. I emailed all the participants in my study a summary of my findings requesting their feedback. Several girls responded with insightful comments, which helped me work through the data. They also shared that they agreed with the findings and felt it spoke to their experiences as Muslim girls. Hearing back from the girls was one of the most gratifying aspects of my research. I also shared my research at a seminar at OISE/UofT. The audience consisted of a small group of Muslim parents, teachers, and researchers interested in topics of faith and schooling. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and several individuals met with me afterwards to express that the research spoke to their experiences and had provided insight into an important issue. By using all of these methods, I felt more confident with my analysis of the data and final conclusions regarding the experiences of Muslim girls.

**Ethical considerations.**

I ensured that my research adhered to research ethics standards by fulfilling University of Toronto’s ethical review process. In completing the ethical protocol, I outlined the worthiness of the project, my competence in pursuing this research, the methods through which I would gain
informed consent, the benefits and risks to my participants, and how I would maintain the highest degree of confidentiality where it was deemed appropriate.

While conducting my research I did not encounter any ethical issues. My greatest concern was maintaining a degree of confidentiality among the participants as a result of the focus group discussion. I made a point of stressing the importance of this at the start and the end of the focus group discussion (see Appendix G) and ensuring my participants were comfortable with the nature of a focus group discussion prior to agreeing to participate.

In the following three chapters I share my analysis of the data, organized by the religious, social, and curriculum experiences of being a Muslim girl in public secondary school.
Chapter 4: 
Religious Beliefs and Schooling Realities – Findings

Being a Muslim girl meant believing in a core set of Islamic religious beliefs, behaving in accordance with Islamic values, and performing various religious rituals. Cultural values were also intertwined with religion as five of my participants had immigrated to Canada (four as children, one recently), and four were first generation Canadians. Despite a common understanding of Islamic values, the girls varied in what they felt was mandatory to be a “good” Muslim girl and the degree to which they observed their religion. High school was where the Muslim girls most consciously had to consider the degree to which they would publically observe Islam and where they questioned and evolved existing beliefs and values. Curriculum/schooling played a significant role in this negotiation process.

In this chapter, I explore my participants’ religious beliefs and the experience of observing their faith privately and publically in relation to their lives as public school students. The chapter begins with my participants’ beliefs regarding the hijab and how their decision to wear or not wear the hijab influenced their school lives. Following this I share their views on observing various Islamic practices and rituals, such as praying, eating halal food, and fasting, and the experience of publically observing Islamic rituals and practices in school.

The Hijab: Beliefs and Actions Inside and Outside School

Female Islamic dress code, depending on the individual female’s perspective, is anywhere from not baring arms and legs to wearing the hijab. Dressing according to Islamic code for the participants varied from avoiding tight fitting clothes, sleeveless tops, and short skirts to wearing the hijab. A question that often arises when discussing Islamic dress is whether
it is compatible with life in North American public schools (Azmi, 2001; Sarroub, 2005; Zine, 2008). More specifically, is it possible to dress modestly or wear the *hijab* and still “fit in” with the rest of the student population? I begin this discussion by exploring the experiences of the three participants who chose to wear the *hijab*. I will use the words *hijab* and *veil* interchangeably to signify the Muslim head scarf. Following this, I explore the experiences of the six participants who chose not to wear the *hijab*.

**Hijabi girls: The value of wearing the *hijab*.**

**Maliha.**

Maliha is a Pakistani/Indian-Canadian student who was in Grade 11 at the time of our interview. Born in Canada, her parents immigrated before she was born, her mother from Pakistan and her father from India. Since the majority of her mother’s family had also immigrated and settled in the Greater Toronto Area, she identified more with her Pakistani heritage than her Indian heritage. She described the school she attended in Region A as very diverse. Maliha had a positive, upbeat spirit. Her large black eyes shone as she spoke about her experiences in public school. Dressed in faded blue jeans, a casual loose fitting sweatshirt with a white tank top peeking out from below it that covered her hips, and a cotton black scarf that covered her hair and framed her face, she sat on an embellished floor pillow in her home and explained why and how she decided to start wearing the *hijab*:

In the summer of 2008, my Mom, she asked me … I was going to go into Grade 9, and she asked me, do you want to start wearing the *hijab*? What my Mom thinks is that she doesn’t want to force it upon you because it’s your actions that matter and not if you have – because it’s just a piece of cloth that’s covering your head, right? It doesn’t really speak for you; it’s your actions that speak for you. So basically my Mom, she asked me do I want to start wearing it or not? My sister doesn’t wear the *hijab* because right now she doesn’t feel that she’s ready for it.
But then I thought that maybe I am ready for it, right? The majority of my cousins, all the girl cousins, they wear a hijab. My family is pretty religious so I talked with them about it too and asked them what they thought about it and would their view change in any way, would people think of them in a different way if they wore the hijab? And many of them said it was good for them so I started wearing it in Grade 9.

Maliha went on to discuss the initial struggles of wearing the hijab:

At first I had two friends in Grade 8 and they were Sikh and I don’t think they accepted me wearing the hijab, so they just left me and that hurt because I was friends with them for a while … Well they were talking to one of my other friends and they said they don’t really like me wearing the hijab so that was that … but I liked wearing it and got used to it and I made new friends … Maybe it’s just an obstacle that Allah is challenging me so see how steadfast I am, so I took it as an obstacle and overlooked it.

She also shared how her male friends shifted the way they interacted with her:

_Maliha:_ Well, in high school a lot of the guys and the girls are really close with each other and like even physically they’ll be hugging each other or something … So even my guy friends they know they have to keep a distance from me. I won’t be like, okay you have to stay away from me, but they’ll know because I wear the hijab. Like, what I’ve realized after wearing the hijab is that you get more respect from people that maybe you might not necessarily get if you don’t wear a hijab, that’s what I’ve found.

_Interviewer:_ Really. Respect in what sense?

_Maliha:_ You know how guys have a wandering eye and stuff, right? That won’t happen to me. I see that I’m treated with more respect and stuff. And you know how people, they make their comments, people are more careful when they see me because they think like, “Oh, she wears a hijab.”
Interviewer: Comments? You mean about girls, like hitting on girls do you mean? So they’ll be careful about saying it to you or even saying it about other people in front of you?

Maliha: About me.

Interviewer: About you. Okay. Some girls who wear the hijab don’t maintain friendships with boys, but you’re okay with it?

Maliha: I’m okay with it, as long as they keep a certain distance then I’m good with it.

Ultimately, Maliha chose to continue to wear the hijab because of how it made her feel. She explained:

I feel more secure when I wear it because I didn’t used to wear my hijab in Grade 8 and all those years and stuff. And as soon as I started wearing it, I felt a different feeling, more attached to my religion and to God … Before when I used to see people wearing hijab my view would be totally different of them, like stereotypical, “Oh they’re probably really religious” and blah, blah, blah. But then when I started wearing it, I’m like, “No they live a normal life like me,” … it totally changed after I started wearing it and these girls live the same life as me and it’s just a piece of cloth that is covering their head, it’s nothing big.

In regards to how it changed the clothes she wore, Maliha did not feel that drastic of change:

My parents – I wasn’t allowed to wear short dresses or short shorts or anything like that. It always had to be jeans and shirts, but before I used to wear t-shirts … but now, I’ve noticed ever since I started high school, I think I’ve only worn a t-shirt a couple of times. One of my friends, she’s Muslim and she’s like, “Maliha, I never see you wearing t-shirts anymore.” I feel kind of strange because when I wear the … like, even some days I feel, “Maybe I’ll wear a t-shirt today,” but then I’ll rethink that.
Mariam.

Mariam is a Guyanese-Canadian student who was in Grade 12 at the time of our interview. She was born in Canada and both her parents had emigrated from Guyana. She also had a large extended Guyanese family that had also immigrated to Canada and were settled in various parts of the Greater Toronto Area. She saw them very often, and so they were a significant part of her life. No one in Mariam’s immediate or extended family wore the hijab and in general she did not consider them to be “that religious.” Mariam attended a diverse school in Region B that had a large South Asian population, which was predominantly Indian. Mariam met me at a coffee shop next to her local library. She was a petite girl, dressed simply in a loose sweatshirt and jeans. Mariam came to the hijab in quite a unique manner. She explained to me that her decision to wear the hijab was part of a personal transformation she underwent during the summer after Grade 9:

Before I was a bit more – well, I hung out with different people and I was a bit more, um, a bit more crazy, I guess … But the summer of, I think, 2009 … I actually I went to a camp. I go to this camp every year and it’s an Islamic camp. And it’s a whole bunch of my family friends. And just being around them and listening to the sheiks, the teachers, scholars, it made me realize that I want to become a better Muslim … my family’s not really religious. My parents, they didn’t really use to pray or anything. You know, it’s a basic part of Islam to pray? And so I came home and I’m like, “Mom, I think I’m going to start wearing the hijab if I can change schools.” So she was like, “Um, are you sure? I mean, you know, this is a very big decision. I don’t want you to start wearing it and then take it off, you know, a few months after and decide it wasn’t what you wanted.” I said, “No, I want to start wearing it.” Because I had friends from the camp that wore it so they influenced me as well. So I’m like, “I want to change schools. I want to go to Elmwood Secondary, which is maybe 10 minutes away from Oscar Peterson Secondary. And we realized there’s no bussing for Elmwood. And she
said, “You know, it’s much better if you go to Oscar Peterson wearing it.” It’s better, it’s good, it’s a better experience for me, to deal with [it].

Mariam reflected on how she felt wearing the *hijab* at school:

Well, I didn’t really go through any challenges. I didn’t really lose any friends, but it was different because people had never seen me in a *hijab* before. They were probably like, “Why’s she wearing that?” Because I hung out with a posse. I hung out with other Guyanese girls like me. And I used to skip class a lot in Grade 9. And I wasn’t really that good of a student. So when I started wearing it, it was a total personality change. Actually, usually when you hang out with those kind of people, usually [you] get into a lot of problems. It’s not really school oriented when you go to school. So I’d already made some enemies. Yeah, so when I went back to school, they [the Guyanese girls] would just be staring at me like, “What is she wearing?” And I’m like – I had other friends at that time that would accept me. And they were more school oriented because I was friends with them in Grade 8 before I mixed with these other girls in high school. So I was with them and they’re just staring at me. I remember the first day of school and they were just looking at me. I was like, “I’m not going to look over there.” But, after that, they just accepted it. They were like, whatever. They went on with their lives. I went on with mine. I made new friends and my interests changed a lot … Things I did changed. I went to class, obviously, more often. I took school more seriously. And it was a good experience for me. I became more religious. I think my friends changed a lot.

She explained how wearing the *hijab* was more than merely a way of dressing for her, but symbolic of a new way of life:

I used to be like, “Wow, I don’t know how they do it! How they wear it, how they pray five times a day?” But then when I started doing it, I was like, “Wow, this is really easy and it makes me a better person.” And even if people may not understand it, it makes me feel better as a person. Even the way I handle
situations. I look at it through a religious point of view ... Like, if I were to cut class or whatever, before, I would just be like, “Oh whatever, I’m going to go hang with my friends.” But now I would be like, “Why would I do that? I’m here to get an education. I have to go to university. I have to – there’s so many opportunities,” ... I saw my future, and I can’t be skipping school. I can’t be hanging out with these kind of people ... they weren’t good for me. So when I started wearing the hijab, it was a very big experience.

Mariam also reflected on the difference between wearing the hijab with “regular” clothes instead of wearing the hijab with an abaya, a long loose overcoat, usually black, that some Muslim females wear over their clothes. She described herself as more “Western” than other hijabis in her school. When asked to elaborate she explained:

Meaning I don’t wear a big long gown. A lot of Somalis in my school, they wear a big long gown ... so I think maybe they were more targeted to be called oppressed maybe a bit more? If I could I would wear it [the abaya] all day ’cause it’s just so comfortable ... I’m not at that stage yet. I don’t think I’ll ever ... be at that stage. I don’t think – it’s not a compulsion of Islam ... to wear an abaya. But I think as long as you’re dressed modest, it’s enough.

Yasmeen.

Yasmeen is a Pakistani immigrant who was in Grade 11 at a private Islamic school in Region B at the time of our interview. However, when she first immigrated to Canada only a year earlier, she completed Grade 10 in a public school in Region A. Yasmeen provided the study an interesting perspective as someone who attended public school but changed to an Islamic school. We met at her home to conduct the interview. Her hair was tied back in a low ponytail and she wore light, airy clothing. She was not wearing her hijab since she was at home. Similar to Maliha, Yasmeen was part of a family where almost all the women wore the hijab:
I always knew that I’m going to wear a hijab because my family – my Mom started wearing a hijab when she came to Dubai because she started studying Islam. And then my sister started wearing hijab, and then eventually all of my sisters, they started wearing hijab. And then I knew that one day even I have to start and wear my hijab. So yeah, I didn’t start till Grade 8. But then I remember my father telling me that, “You’re old enough now, I think you should start wearing a hijab.” So, I was like, okay, fine.

Yasmeen narrated all of this with a great deal of calm. She had been brought up in a family where the hijab was the norm and not really considered as an option. What also set Yasmeen apart from the other participants is that until Grade 9 she had been living in Abu Dhabi. Of Pakistani descent, Yasmeen’s family had moved to Abu Dhabi when she was a child and then surprised her the summer after completing Grade 9 with the announcement that they would now be moving to Canada. As a result, Yasmeen’s experience with the hijab was linked profoundly to the experience of immigration:

So I started wearing [the hijab] during my summer vacations, and then the news came that we’re going to Canada. So I was like, “Oh, okay, I’m gonna wear my hijab. So it would be my first school year wearing a hijab [and I would be] in Canada … So about 2 months I wore it in Dubai and then we moved – because I always knew that one day I have to wear a hijab.

Yasmeen had many fears initially about immigrating to Canada, especially as a hijabi Muslim girl:

I remember the first day when I came for registering into a public school … because before coming to Canada my Mom was like search for schools or search for what kind of education system is there. So I was searching and then I found out an Islamic school. And then there was this idea which popped into my mind that, “Why don’t I go to an Islamic school?” And we were searching for Islamic schools, me and my sister. So then we came to our parents and said, “We want to
go an Islamic school. There are many Islamic schools in Canada, we researched it.” So they were fine with it, but then after we came to Canada my Dad was like, “You know, like just start, in a public school and then see how it is, because after that you have to meet other people. It’s not always going to be that you’re going to be sheltered in an Islamic environment. You have to always go out there and meet different people who are not Muslims and … you have to interact with them. So it’s kind of an experience.”

So, I was like ok, fine, but still I was very nervous. I was scared because my faith and my religion underline – I knew that it was strong enough … nothing can change me or nothing can change my iman (faith) or make it weak. But then I was still scared about the environment, [how] it’s gonna be because I heard – I remember before coming to Canada, my Mom was asking everyone who ever lived in Canada, “How was it there? How did they treat Muslim girls? How did they treat hijabis.” So there were people who scared us a lot. I remember one of my sister’s friends was like, there was this girl who lived in Dubai and she covered herself and everything. She wore a hijab and everything, but when she came to Canada she took off everything and became like the bad girl. So people tried to scare us, but then my Mom was like, “Just keep faith in yourself. If you have faith in yourself and if you have a strong iman nothing can happen to you, you can never change yourself.” So that was in my mind and I was like, okay, fine and then the first day when we came for the admissions in Greenwood Secondary, I was just looking, around here and there and I was so nervous. I still wanted to go to an Islamic school, but I was like okay, fine, let’s just see how it is. So I was searching for a girl who wore a hijab, any person who looked Muslim. But then I remember I saw a girl wearing a hijab, I was relieved. I was like there is anyone … who is like me. And then the first day of school, I was really nervous because I knew it’s going to be a whole new different thing for me, but then I met my first teacher in my first class [who was a Pakistani Muslim] and I was like okay it’s not bad.
In Chapters 5 and 6, I explore more deeply how Yasmeen’s experience with her peers and teachers altered her preconceived notions of what life would be like as a *hijabi* public school student. Though Yasmeen had many positive experiences in her public school, she decided to move to an Islamic school the following year. This was a result of her parents moving the family to another Greater Toronto Area suburb. She shared her reasons for choosing an Islamic school:

Being in an Islamic school, it was much more better for me … because I got to get an Islamic environment and there weren’t many challenges relating to Islam and me being a *hijabi* or me covering myself because it’s an Islamic school and it’s not me the only one who’s covering herself. That’s our uniform. We have to wear a *hijab*.

She explained the other benefits as well, such as, “There are no chances for you weakening your faith. You are always close to your religion and you are always close to your Muslim brothers and sisters.” Though her father discouraged her from moving, believing that public school was a healthy way to integrate into a new society, Yasmeen was firm about wanting to be in an Islamic environment.

**Non-hijabi girls: The role of choice.**

The majority of the participants in my study had chosen not to wear the *hijab*. Whether the participants chose to veil or not, *hijab* and the general dress code Muslim girls are told to observe were topics that came up in the interviews and in the focus group discussion. In my interviews, the responsibility of a Muslim girl to dress in a particular way was indicated as one of the primary reasons being a Muslim girl was different and potentially more difficult than being a Muslim boy. How this all played out in public school was also a point of reflection among the participants. School was a huge part of their lives, defining their daily existence, friendships, and
academic and career pursuits. The various aspects of being a Muslim girl were inextricably connected to their day-to-day lives as students.

All the girls who chose not veil were still closely connected to the issue. Whether this was because they had a sibling that wore the hijab, had worn the hijab at one point and taken it off, had seriously considered wearing it, or thought they may wear it later on in life, they all had reflected at some point on the concept and practice of the hijab. It is also important to note that whether a Muslim girl veils all the time or not, Muslim women are required based on common practice to wear the hijab when praying, reading the Quran, and attending a religious service. Thus, all the participants wore the hijab from time to time.

Ameera.

Ameera is a Nigerian-Canadian who attended high school in Region A. At the time of our interview she was in her second year of college and was planning to switch to university. Prior to immigrating to Canada at the age of nine, she had moved around Africa, living in Tanzania for several years. Initially, her family settled in the Jane and Finch area and lived in a small apartment. They moved to Region A in the Greater Toronto Area because of safety concerns. This is where Ameera started and finished high school. She was a gregarious and upbeat individual. She had an infectious smile and spoke about her experiences openly and with a certain lightheartedness. She explained to me the multiple reasons she chose not to wear the hijab in high school, spanning from the restrictions it put on the clothing she wore to the importance of showing her hair in her culture:

I don’t hate the hijab, I just hate what it restricts you from. I love hair … being a Black person, you do a lot to your hair. You always have your hair done in … because it’s hard to maintain … as a child my Mom would make at least once a
month or at least every 3 weeks [an appointment to] get our hair done … an outfit isn’t complete until your hair is done. I don’t know why. [laughter]

And certain things, if you wear the hijab, there is some clothing you can’t wear with it. You can’t wear a short sleeve, it defeats the purpose. Or you can’t wear a low cut top or capris. It just makes no sense, right? I feel if you’re going to wear it, go with the entire outfit. Don’t wear a top that shows your boobs and then you have a hijab. Don’t wear it half assed, like tie it up in that bandana form. People come to the mosque and like, what’s the point?! So, that’s why I probably wouldn’t wear it. I wear it to the mosque. And days if I wore it to the mosque and I have to stop places I just keep it on just because it’s a hassle. But in terms of like – I don’t know if I’d wear it just because it restricts the clothing I wear. Like it’s not slutty clothes, but I don’t think it would fit with the hijab. So I just wouldn’t again cover my hair up.

Ameera did not appreciate the limits the hijab placed on what she could wear. She was also adamant that if someone was going to wear the hijab then they should wear it in the traditional scarf fashion, not in the bandana form, and that the clothing should cover the majority of a girl’s skin. Like the majority of Muslim girls, Ameera wore the hijab when going to her mosque:

I didn’t really lead the traditional Muslim life because I didn’t wear the hijab, except a couple of times when I go to the mosque and we stop at a restaurant and the mall and I’m too tired to take off the entire hijab and I’ve been wearing my traditional gown … [the] long one I couldn’t change or was too lazy, so I just keep it on or [if I] have a bad hair day [laugh]. From the mosque I’ll just leave it on. And I see a lot of them would stare at me. And I’m like, okay, you’ve never seen a girl in the hijab?

Her opinion that the hijab was a choice was quite clear. She also contemplated whether wearing the hijab was actually compatible with life in a Western society:
I think I believe you shouldn’t be forced. That’s the only thing because if it’s forced the person’s not wearing it for the purpose. It’s more to go along with [it], it defeats the purpose if the girl’s being forced to wear it, right? So I don’t believe in it, but I don’t know. I do believe in it, but at the same time I don’t … To the mosque I say you should be – you should wear it because you’re going to the mosque for time to be with God, put it on just because it’s time to meet God. But on a regular day, when you want to go out with your friends or go to a party. Like going to a prom, like so many prom dresses I could not wear if I had that hijab on …

Just because, I don’t know, I guess in this society we live in, really a lot of the beliefs, just the lifestyle and the culture don’t – they don’t mesh with the hijab. They’re opposites and there’s no compromise, you know? And then also everybody would – if you wear a hijab it unfortunately – there’s a lot of bad stigma that comes with it. It’s just because of ignorance … if you’d been hanging around Muslim people that have been peaceful and then you see … 9/11, of course you understand. You know that not all Muslims do that just because you’ve been with Muslim people. There’s some that are relatively good people. Some people that live in the boonies, that never met a Muslim person will see someone with the hijab and will just automatically think, “I’m not going hire her for this job,” or, “Oh my God, she’s going to be one minded, like God for all,” or, “Oh my God, she’s going to be God preaching,” you know?

Ameera did believe there were some benefits to wearing the hijab:

I like it because when you wear it, I guess guys aren’t going to be pervy toward you. It’s just the stigma, like, don’t! Like there are days I go to the mall and get hit on by a lot of creepy people. I’m like, god why? [laugh] you know. But, when I have the hijab it’s more looks of curiosity as opposed to looks of pervy-ness. So that stuff I like.
Iman.

Iman is an ambitious and hardworking Ethiopian-Canadian who was in Grade 12 at the time of our interview. Her parents emigrated from Ethiopia to Toronto before she was born because of the instability in their country. Iman and I met at the local library. She had small features, smooth dark skin, and was dressed in a fitted sweater and jeans. She seemed apprehensive about being part of the study because she did not think she was “that religious”; she had expressed this to me in our first phone conversation. I explained to her that being “religious” was not a criterion to participate, as long as she identified with her religion in some way. We discussed this early on in the interview along with wearing the *hijab*:

Well, I identify myself as being Muslim. Obviously because I’ve been taught ever since I was little Muslim culture or the way to – the way to be a Muslim, I guess. But I haven’t really followed all the rules. I don’t pray, which is really bad … And I think one of the reasons why is because my parents aren’t doing that stuff either so … they haven’t really pushed me to do so. But my grandma would always call and she would always tell me to do that stuff. And I would always tell her I would but I don’t have the motivation to do so. But I mean I still fast during *Ramadhan* and … I pray during *Ramadhan*. I think that’s about the only time I do. Or whenever I go to mosque … and I don’t drink. I don’t party. Well, I do party but I don’t … I try not to do all that bad stuff … And, oh, in terms of wearing a *hijab* … For now I don’t think I’m ready for it because I feel it’s a big commitment and … I don’t think I can handle it at the moment.

Though she felt the *hijab* was a big commitment, she had worn it, in the bandana form, for a brief period a few years back. The bandana form is essentially a square cloth folded in half and tied at the back of the head. It covers the hair but is perceived by some girls to be a more hip, stylish or youthful way of veiling and by others, like Ameera, to be an inauthentic form of the *hijab*:
Well when I was younger, a few years ago, I actually used to wear it but I would tie it back. But I wore it for the wrong reasons … because I didn’t want to do my hair [laughter]. It was in Grade 7 … I actually have an uncle that’s really religious … and he would always tell me to wear it so I guess I had that in mind. Plus I didn’t feel like doing my hair in the morning … it kind of varied. Like I would wear it one day and then take it off the next … my Mom did not like it. She said, “If you’re going to wear it, wear it for the right reasons … don’t wear it just because you want to cover your hair.”

Eventually Iman decided to stop wearing it. She expressed to me that maybe one day, when she was, “more in tune with Islam” she might consider it, but for now she had “pushed it aside.”

Just because Iman identified as a Muslim did not mean she felt it was the most significant part of her identity. She explained this to me:

The first thing I’ll tell someone when they ask me, like, who are you or, like, explain yourself. I would say that I’m a hardworking individual. Because I feel like those are such vague terms. Like I’m Ethiopian. Anyone can be Ethiopian. Or I’m Muslim. Like, anyone can be Muslim. But, I feel like – I don’t know … Um, I feel like, all my life I’ve been, like, working so hard to get where I’m at now.

Sabeen.

For some of my participants, such as Sabeen, hijab was for girls who were “more religious.” Sabeen is a Pakistani-Canadian who was in Grade 11 at the time of our interview. She attended a school in Region B that had a large South Asian and Arab population and where the dominant religious group in the school was Muslim. Sabeen was born in Abu Dhabi. Her parents had moved there from Pakistan for work, and she immigrated to Canada with her family at age two. She was a stylish girl, dressed in black leggings and a long top, her long hair hanging down
her back. We conducted the interview in her room, where the walls were covered with various photo and art collages. Sabeen explained where she stood on Islamic dress code:

I don’t wear shorts. I don’t wear tank tops. Other than that, I wear tights, I’ll wear … if I go out with my friends, even if it’s in a restaurant or anything, I can wear dresses and stuff. But the thing is when I go out with my family friends, or family, that’s when I have to maybe wrap a scarf around my neck or just wear something that zips up, or wear tights, wear something that covers me a little more … I pray and I fast and I believe in the basic concepts of it … I’m respectful toward it. I’ve been brought up to respect it and … I believe in it. I pray about three times a day. I don’t really read the Qur’an that much anymore. But it’s not like I ever had thoughts about being anything else except for Muslim, no, I wouldn’t … I’m not that religious. I don’t wear the hijab. I don’t know.

Though Sabeen’s sister wore the hijab, Sabeen felt that it limited a Muslim girl’s opportunities:

When people find out that my sister wears a hijab, I always get asked this question, “Did your parents make her and when are you going to wear it?” I always tell them that no one in my family has worn it. My grandma, my Mom, no one. So it’s personal. We don’t have anything against someone wearing it and we don’t force it on anyone.

But I do think that a lot of opportunities are cut off if you do wear the hijab. One of my friends, she wears the hijab and the basketball team, she tried out for that and the first time they just completely didn’t look at her, didn’t whatever, no attention to her. And then she told me about it and I was like, “Why not?” She’s like, “My hijab. I went there in full tracks and I wore a shirt under my half sleeves.” So I guess they didn’t really take her seriously. Then she’s like, “You know, I’m going to go back. I can play better than a lot of those other girls.” So she ended up going back and talking to the coaches and proving herself. She made it onto the team, but she still felt a bit of discrimination, not only within her team
members, but also when she went to other schools, they would be like, “Why is this girl on the basketball team?”

And same with when I played lacrosse last year. There are a bunch of girls on the lacrosse team that wore the *hijab* and they always found it difficult because when we went to other schools, they’re all White people and hardly any Muslims. So they [the White people] were always kind of weirded out by the fact that we had a majority of people or some people wearing the *hijab* … It’s not normal for them to see that.

When I probed Sabeen to explain how her friend knew people were uncomfortable with a *hijabi* on a sports team she explained:

She could feel it. Between the coaches, how she was just … like she wasn’t paid attention too much. I didn’t experience it because I don’t, it’s just her experiences. She can tell when people … and even her parents told her before too, “Are you sure you want to do this? Because high school is the chance for you to turn into what you want to be,” I guess. And they also felt that she would limit her chances by putting on a *hijab*, but she’s on a basketball team and she does whatever she wants to do, so I guess … It’s just first when you go into a setting and people don’t really know, that’s when she felt weirded out.

Though Sabeen was frustrated by the barriers her friend faced and people’s perceptions of *hijabis*, she also had her own biases. She shared a story of how she became friends with a girl who was forced to wear the *niqab* by her family. Sabeen ended up befriending her through the girl’s brother and cousin, who were friends of Sabeen’s. The girl showed her face to Sabeen one day after school in the company of her brother and her cousin:

The girl with the *niqab*, she … I honestly would never have talked to her before, it’s just like you see the *hijab* more common than the *niqab* and I just think a person that wears the *niqab* doesn’t want to. I don’t understand why people cover
their faces … your face is … it’s kind of your identity, it’s what makes you different from everyone else. If you cover that, then you’re kind of confined and that just limits you altogether. I always think the *hijab* limits you in some ways, so the *niqab* totally … I mean, she doesn’t even talk to that many people. There’s me and her brother and her cousin.

I never thought I would talk to anyone that wore a *niqab* … and now she’s like … when she sees me she’d be like, “Oh, hey.” And I’m like, “Hi,” like it’s still kind of weird for me. And say like outside the school or something … like I’ve seen her study in class with it on and I just can’t imagine how she feels being in that. And say if she wants to talk to a teacher, [would she] pull it down a little? I don’t know what they do. I don’t know how that works.

**Hena.**

Hena was the youngest of my participants. She is a Pakistani-Canadian who was in Grade 9 at a high school in Region B at the time of our interview. She immigrated to Canada with her parents when she was only six months old. An avid athlete and gifted student, she was excited to be part of a research study on Muslim girls. We conducted the interview at her home, in her room. She had many athletic awards and trophies scattered around the room and piles of work on her study table. Between school and all of her extracurricular activities, Hena had very little time for much else, but she explained to me that she enjoyed being busy. She was bubbly and thoughtful. Her long straight hair hung down her back as she sat comfortably on her bed in her home clothes. Like many of my participants, her beliefs about the *hijab* were a not fully developed. She discussed her feelings about the *hijab* in reference to the murder of Aqsa Parvez:

I don’t think the father should have forced her to were the *hijab* … ‘cause she didn’t want to. But then if she was gonna take it off behind his back and then she should’ve just told him. Even though she was scared of him.
You don’t know what he would do. Thank God, my sisters and I, we’re not in that situation. Our parents don’t force it on us. Our oldest sister takes it but it was by decision. And so that’s what they have on us, if you want to, you do it. If you don’t, you’re not forced to. So I can’t really say, ’cause I don’t know that situation.

When I asked her if she had or would ever consider wearing it, she answered:

Maybe when I’m older. When I’m more into [it] – at least when I’ve done Hajj and I have more faith and … ’cause my sister took it right after she did Hajj. So I don’t know yet. When my sister took it, I thought about it … and maybe in university. Like when I’m done high school and … I don’t know.

Nadia.

For some of my participants the hijab was not necessary to display one’s faith in Islam. Nadia is a Pakistani-Canadian girl who was in her fifth year of high school. Nadia was born in Pakistan and immigrated to Canada with her family at age five. She attended high school in Region B in an area with a large Indian population. She had been eager to participate in the study, wanting to share her experiences with other Muslim girls. She was slightly nervous about being interviewed and seemed more serious than some of the other participants in her general demeanor. We met at a coffee shop in her area. Nadia explained to me the various reasons she did not wear the hijab and probably would not in the near future:

I’m not really crazy religious. I don’t wear the hijab or … We’re not strict religious, but we … you know, we pray and we follow the Prophet. There’s so many different types of girls that wear the hijab, so many, they’re kinda hypocrites. They wear the hijab and they’re supposed to represent … not really represent the religion, but you know, they’re showing that they’re from that religion, right? Most people know what comes with that … well, some people
know what comes with that religion, and they’re just doing things that are totally against it, which I think is just contradictory, it’s not right … wearing … not decent clothes and, yes [dating]. I just think it’s so wrong. But then there’s some that do wear proper clothes, they don’t swear, they [don’t] do anything like that.

When I asked her if she had ever considered wearing the hijab, she explained:

Yeah, but the thing is, it doesn’t … my Mom and aunts and stuff, they don’t all wear it, so they don’t force it on us. I don’t know. They don’t force it on us. If I had to wear it, I would wear it. If I have to go to the mosque, then I wear it, obviously, but yes, if I had to wear it … if I wanted to wear it. If I go out for one day or whatever, or go somewhere, if I want to wear it, I’ll wear it. There’s nothing wrong with wearing it, but I don’t think I could wear it all the time, everywhere I go. I don’t know … no one really does that in my family. Well, I know that it’s in our religion to have everything covered, but we’re in a place where I don’t know … I don’t know how to explain it. I know it’s necessary, but so many people don’t wear it and they’re still proper Muslims … I don’t do anything, you know, against the religion and I try my best not to. It’s really hard, we wear these clothes and stuff, that’s still sort of against our religion, but you know, there are some things you have to do.

Laiba.

Laiba is an outgoing and confident Afghani-Canadian who was in Grade 12 in Region A at the time of our interview. Her parents immigrated to Canada from Afghanistan because of political and social instability. She was born in Canada. Initially, her family settled in Rexdale, moving around to areas likes Jane and Finch until they “built themselves up” and moved to their current home in Region A. She explained that in comparison to the schools in Toronto, which had been extremely diverse, her current school was not as diverse. It had a very small population
of Muslims and had a large population of Italian students. When I asked her what it had been like to adjust to her current high school, she explained that it had been quite easy:

I don’t wear a hijab or anything. So basically I’m still just kind of like, yeah, I’m like normal. I’m from the norm basically. I’m just Muslim, I have a few differences [from non-Muslims].

She explained to me how she believed school demographics altered the experience of wearing the hijab:

Um, okay, Ledbury Secondary [my current school] for example, there are three, maybe four girls that wear hijabs and they stand out … My old school, like from [Grade 1] to Grade 8, there was like, I mean you can’t even count how many girls wear it because there’s a lot of Somalian people there too. And they wear hijabs and everything. So over there, everything was normal. So if I showed up one day with a hijab, everyone would have been like, “Oh, like whatever,” right? You were just one of another one. But in this school, if you show up with a hijab, they’re going to be like, “Laiba, what are you doing?” [laughter]. Yeah, so it’s a big jump.

Laiba’s tone here was lighthearted. Her friends’ laughter was to indicate the fact that wearing the hijab was out of the norm, but more so that it would be a surprise since it was not in her nature to wear the hijab.

Laiba shared that in her family hijab was a matter of choice. She also expressed her personal reasons for choosing not to wear it:

No it’s not mandatory. My parents don’t force it upon a person. Like my Dad always says, “Yeah, sure if you want to wear it, you should because it’s a religious thing.” But my Mom doesn’t force it upon, even my Dad doesn’t force it. Because it’s just like we live in Canada basically … they don’t pressure us at all.
Basically I think it’s just because it hasn’t been brought upon us. We don’t feel the need to do it to, get it. Ramadan, yeah, you have to fast. So every November we know, okay it’s coming. So we have to fast.

But hijab is something … and honestly it’s more work too [laughter] … I’m a bit lazy too. And there’s a difference in that too because, you know, it’s a lot of work. I’m not even going to lie, to get up, wear a hijab, make sure it matches with all your clothes, and to look good in it and everything. And when a person comes and asks you, “Oh what was the switch?” you have to explain it, over and over again. But I just basically prefer just not to do it. But if I would [have] come into this area wearing a hijab from the beginning, I would have done it. If it occurred to me, I would have done it.

Islamic Rituals: Beliefs and Actions Inside and Outside School

One of the key issues that arises in discussing Muslim youth is whether Muslim students can steadfastly observe Islamic religious rituals and practices in public schools (Azmi, 2001; Collet, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2008). For example, the majority of Muslims believe that they are expected to pray five times a day; however, prayer times may conflict with class schedules in public school. How do devout Muslim youth work around this structural conflict? For Muslim girls attending public school, it is not always easy to observe certain religious rituals during the school day (Azmi, 2001); however, many Muslim girls are finding ways to incorporate their religion into the school day (Collet, 2007; Sarrourb, 2005). My participants shared their experiences of actively observing religious practices and rituals during school. This was most often in regards to praying, eating halal food, and fasting.

Praying: Striving to pray often.

My participants considered praying to be an integral part of Islam. Several of the girls – Maliha, Mariam, Yasmeen, Nadia, Sabeen, and Hena – prayed quite regularly. While some of
them prayed without being told to by their parents, others sheepishly divulged that they needed to be nagged by their mothers to do so. For Hena, praying was one of the central components of being a Muslim. She separated practicing versus non-practicing Muslims based on aspects such as whether they prayed or not. Hena believed parents played a central role in instilling these values:

Probably their parents, [kids who don’t pray], don’t really … like our parents told us in the beginning, they probably pushed us to read namaz, to fast … because obviously we wouldn’t want to as kids … I don’t think their parents ever cared. And it’s mostly because of how you were brought up. How you were told to do things. So if they weren’t, then they probably don’t care anymore. Kind of like, “whatever.”

Hena prayed quite regularly, praying after she came home from school in the afternoon.

Mariam did not pray before she experienced her religious transformation; afterwards she prayed quite regularly. She was shocked that she had not prayed before and neither had members of her family. She told me, “You know, it’s a basic thing to pray.”

Yasmeen also prayed regularly. When explaining to me why she decided to move to Islamic school after a year in public school, prayer times was one of the reasons:

As I would come back from the public school, I would – like the timing for prayer would end, so I would have to quickly go for the prayer. But in an Islamic school you actually get the opportunity to pray.

Ameera, Laiba, and Iman did not pray as regularly. Laiba explained that she prayed in “stints” when she was feeling more religiously inspired but that she could not keep up with the daily ritual of praying.
I always pray, pray, pray, pray, pray [laughing] and then I’ll stop and then I’ll stop for a long time, and then I’ll just start praying again and then I’ll just stop again. I don’t know why.

For Iman, not praying was a source of guilt. Iman only prayed during the month of Ramadhan. She said, “I don’t pray, which is really bad … I don’t have the motivation.” However, her parents did not pray either, and she felt this played a factor in why she did not observe her daily prayers.

Private/public experience of praying at school.

My participants provided a wide array of responses to the question of whether they did or did not feel compelled to pray during the school day and the extent to which schools should accommodate religious prayers. Sabeen, a Pakistani student attending high school in an area with a very large Muslim population, explained to me that her school offered Friday prayers, which she chose not to participate in:

So I was saying the two that wear the hijab they do go and pray. A lot of the guys I know, all the guys go and pray. They go pray. I don’t know, I’ve just never been into prayers. I don’t think I need to pray in a group. Even with my family, we don’t go to the mosque much. Like on Eid we don’t go. Like my Dad will go. Friday prayers we don’t go, my Dad will go. We … yeah, and my Mom just for the Eid, I’ve been like twice, two, three times. My parents and my sister used to go. I never used to go. It’s just … you pray, you pray for yourself, that’s it.

In the focus group discussion she shared some thoughts on the connection between praying and being a “perfect” Muslim:

So for when we have Friday prayers … I don’t go but everyone goes, no matter how – I find for my grade everyone goes, no matter if you wear the hijab or not, or if you’re this or that. But some people think that only a certain type of people
would go to pray. Either you’re the perfect Muslim or you’re not. I know people that are not doing the greatest things but they’ll go to pray. So they’re doing what they can.

Mariam’s school provided communal prayers on Fridays for its Muslim students. On a daily basis she preferred to pray at home. However, she would attend Friday prayers if her schedule allowed for it. Mariam would make the decision to miss the last 20 minutes of class to attend prayers based on what was occurring in class on that day. If there was a test or something else important that she could not afford to miss, then she would skip prayers. Otherwise, she would attend.

Nadia, a Pakistani girl attending a school with a large Indian population, explained to me that she had recently started praying more, but still did not pray during school hours:

Yeah, if other people would and if there was a proper place for it. I know during Ramadan they make … they have a room in our school I think, where people can go. I’ve never been there, but my sister was saying how mostly all the guys go. So girls don’t go and I don’t know how it works, but, it’s just more comfortable praying at home. I’ve seen … somebody praying in the parking lot, so I guess if you’ve got to pray, you have to pray, doesn’t matter where. It makes you feel bad … because, I should be praying too.

Laiba prayed irregularly, but shared her strong opinion about adjusting to a secular environment, both at school and at work:

*Laiba*: I don’t know, praying is just kind of – like if someone told me, “The school should have a prayer room,” I’d be like, “Yeah, but you could pray at home too.”

*Interviewer*: What if they said, “No, I have to pray five times a day at the correct prayer time”?
Laiba: I’d be like, “Then you should go to a … private school, like a Muslim private school,” because you can’t adjust everything to a public school. It would be awesome if they had it, no doubt about it … I work too, so you can’t really pray at work either. And there’s no difference. You can tell the work because okay, I know McDonalds has one crew and one office. You can’t tell them we need a prayer room in this congested area because there is no room for it, right? So the same thing. You just need adjust yourself to it.

Maliha’s school did not provide a prayer room either. Maliha, however, prayed all five prayers. Despite her commitment to prayer, she did not seem overly concerned about the lack of a prayer room in her school:

Interviewer: You mentioned praying before and after school, do you pray during school?

Maliha: No, not during school … Probably because number one I have classes too, during that time so I don’t really get to pray. My Mom, I know, when she gets a chance, the Guidance office, they let her pray in their room … So yeah, that’s the only reason why because of the classes … I don’t think I would either probably because I’m putting too much of my religion into my school time … Not that I would be ashamed. Because I know in my elementary school, when I was in Grade 5 or 6, Ramadhan time, it was during school. So all the Muslim kids, we would come to the library at lunchtime and we would just pray there.

Eating halal food: Staying committed.

The dietary restrictions many Muslim girls follow are a significant aspect of their Muslim identity. None of the girls in my study ate pork, a meat that is forbidden to Muslims. The majority of the girls in the study ate halal meat only, which is a specific way of slaughtering meat under Islamic law.
Laiba was adamant about eating only *halal* meat, “When it comes to food, you have to eat *halal* food. That’s just how we grew up. I wouldn’t even eat it. Like if you had something, I wouldn’t even eat it.”

However, not all the girls ate *halal* meat. For Ameera, eating *halal* meat was more of a struggle. While Ameera’s father ate *halal* meat, her mother was not as particular:

I tried to. I really tried. There was like two weeks I went to – I really wanted know if I prayed a lot, really hard, would it change my view of fasting? I couldn’t even make it a few days! My Mom brought chicken wings from McDonalds. It’s like, “Ah!”

**Commitment, temptation, and options at school.**

For the majority of the girls, *halal* options at school were not a norm. They worked around this by opting for vegetarian meals or bringing their own lunch. Hena and Sabeen’s school had a large Muslim population. Hena shared that eating *halal* was not an issue at her school:

There is the *halal* stuff whenever we have something. In the beginning of the year for Grade 9s there was a *halal* – there was a barbecue and most of the hotdogs were *halal*. And then you either said *halal*, not *halal* and they had a lot of *halal* hotdogs. So they know that a lot of people have that.

However, not all schools could offer these types of dietary accommodations. Laiba expressed her frustration at the food offered in her cafeteria:

Laiba: You should cook at least, if it’s not whole meat, you should cook something vegetarian. Everything in the caf is meat … other than fries! Rice has meat in it, pasta has meat in it … soup will have meat in it!

Interviewer: Do you think you’d ever voice that to anybody?
Laiba: No … I don’t think it would make a difference … our caf … they’re supported by that company. They have to cook what that company gives. So it’s not even our school’s problem. It’s basically like, I don’t even know if the company would, whatever.

Ameera attended the same school as Laiba. Since she ate non-halal meat, cafeteria food was not as large of a concern to her:

I wasn’t like a full-on-completely-practicing-Muslim-down-to-the-core. So the halal stuff, if I was doing that, I wouldn’t be able to eat in a lot of places. Even, not only in school, but even the area.

Ameera considered the importance of dietary accommodations for students from various religious backgrounds, both inside and outside of school:

I think … they’re trying. They obviously can’t – it’s not really the ideal just because if they do it for Muslim people they have to do it … for all religions, right? But, you know, they’re trying … everywhere we go there’s always a vegetarian option. I don’t know if it’s because we’re Muslim or if it’s … just more of like many other religions doing it. Like Hindu, some don’t eat meat, Muslims don’t eat, vegans don’t eat. Just plain vegetarians don’t eat meat. Because it’s easier in numbers, right. If you come to where I live … I don’t think I know any Muslim person within my neighborhood … It’s easier when it’s in numbers, right? … If you go to downtown, you will see a large group of Muslim restaurants and you’re like, okay.

Fasting: Challenges and accommodations at school.

The majority of my participants fasted during the month of Ramadhan, though some found it much harder than others. Fasting is considered to be one of the five main pillars of faith in Islam. Once they have reached the age of maturity, barring certain circumstances such as
illness, Muslims are expected to fast during the holy month of Ramadhan from sun up to sun down. My participants all felt the responsibility to fast.

Ameera expressed how difficult it was to fast when all her friends were eating, especially if her friends were oblivious about it:

Oh my God, haaard! … Like there are some days that, even if they’re giving free food in the cafeteria, I can’t eat it. And food’s such a big part of like, I don’t know. It brings people together, so when you’re not eating, you’re, I don’t know. You just feel not part of it. When you go out with your friends, first thing they’re like, “Let’s go out to eat, let’s go somewhere.” Eventually you’re going to go eat somewhere. Like to go to the mall, we’re still going to go to the food court and eat. It’s just a big part. So the month of Ramadan makes me depressed sometimes [laugh]. Tired and then you don’t eat, you’re tired. And it’s like, people complaining, “I don’t want my lunch,” and throw it in the garbage. I’m like, “Really? I’m starving right now!” [laugh] “People are hungry right now and you’re throwing your lunch?” So, that is hard.

In reference to seeking accommodations during the month of Ramadhan, Ameera responded:

No, I’m kind of person that, the kind of person that I am, I never – I don’t like drawing attention to myself. So there’s some days I’d be really tired. I feel like, my Dad always goes to the mosque, and normally I have to go. So he’ll go from seven till eleven. And I couldn’t do any of my homework until eight. And then I wouldn’t come home till eleven so I wouldn’t be able to do my homework. So I’d just find a way to do it because I just didn’t want teachers to look at me bad [laugh], so I didn’t ask for accommodations.

For Hena, fasting during school hours was actually easier than on the weekends, since she felt the day would fly by during the school week:
Yeah, I don’t think – I think it’s easier when you have school because you’re more caught up in things. Except the beginning of – ’cause Ramadan went a bit into school … and in the beginning I had basketball tryout. So I told them that I couldn’t really do it … in the beginning. They were understanding of it … ’cause they know that people fast and on the announcements, like, the first day of school, they said, “People are fasting. Be considerate.” Stuff like that.

Iman was able to come to terms with fasting. Her friends’ consideration made the month a little less difficult:

At first I found it really hard because I would go to the cafeteria and smell the food. And I would be tempted, but I knew I couldn’t eat. But after awhile I got used to it. Now it’s not a big deal at all … And even I’ll have friends who don’t fast and they’ll try to refrain from eating in front of me.

Chapter Discussion

In discussing religious beliefs, dress, practices, and rituals, the girls revealed their core values and outlook on following their religion. They also expressed the opportunities and challenges associated with the intersection of their religious and school lives. In the next section I share key themes that arose from our conversations on religious beliefs and schooling.

Choice.

Religion and choice were two concepts that went hand in hand in discussions with the girls. The concept of choice and agency has been explored in several other studies on Muslim youth (Collet, 2007; Mir, 2006; Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008). For my participants, it came up most in conversations about the hijab but was an idea prevalent in reflections on other aspects of the Islamic faith as well, such as praying and eating halal. In respect to the hijab, discussions of choice can be divided into two considerations: are Muslim girls obligated to wear the hijab
and does one want to wear a hijab. The girls either spoke about one of the concepts or combined the two. When it came to the concept of obligation, only one participant (Yasmeen) felt that Muslim girls were obligated to wear the hijab. This belief influenced the second concept, since she felt that it was then only a matter of time before she too started wearing it.

Aside from Yasmeen, the remaining girls grappled with the more “conservative” religious notion of hijab as an obligation. Some girls were quite clear that there was no compulsion in Islam and that Muslim women were thus not obligated to wear the hijab if they did not want to. For example, Maliha, a hijabi girl, downgraded the importance of the hijab by reflecting that ultimately it was your actions, not what you wore, that defined you as a Muslim. Others were slightly hesitant about making such claims. Nadia stated that women “should” wear the hijab, but that it was not necessary in order to be a good Muslim. My participants used wording such as “respect” for the hijab or “belief” in the hijab in conjunction with their decisions not to wear the hijab. By doing so, they worked through their confusion with the hijab as a significant part of the Islamic faith for Muslim women, yet a way of dressing and a lifestyle to which they did not want to ascribe. It also allowed them to convey their belief in Islam and their identity as a Muslim female while simultaneously opting out of a religious practice that they did not believe was necessary to be a good Muslim.

As the girls discussed the hijab, they repeatedly referred to the idea of personal choice. Sabeen mentioned how her sister “chose” to wear the hijab even though no one in her immediate family wears it. Nadia and Hena emphasized that they had never been “forced” to wear the hijab, and thus the decision not to wear it was their own. When it came to exactly why they did not wear the hijab, the girls’ answers were a mixture of meaningful and lighthearted considerations. They discussed the idea that it was no longer necessary or that it did not really fit with the
society they lived in. Some of the girls discussed social barriers and limitations the *hijab* placed on a girl, deciding that that was not the kind of life she wanted to have. The girls also discussed the idea of being a good Muslim and whether the *hijab* in fact made the wearer a better Muslim. A couple of the girls were not convinced this was the case and thus felt less inclined to start wearing it. They also shared some casual and humorous reasons. Laiba cited pure laziness and Ameera explained she just loved styling her hair too much. This mixture of thoughts and feelings indicated a certain comfortableness with one’s decision to adhere to or, in this case, opt out of certain religious practices.

This discussion of choice was often juxtaposed with force. The girls were aware that many people, they included, believed that some Muslims girls were forced to veil. Sabeen shared a story of a girl who was forced to wear the *burqa* by her parents. This view influenced the way they approached their own experience with choosing to veil or not, along with other religious practices. Their mention of choice was also an assertion that they were to a large extent in control of their religious identities and personal lives, perhaps unlike some other girls who did not have a choice (Sarroub, 2005) or contrary to popular opinion regarding Muslim girls. Naturally, their parents did expect them to follow certain aspects of the faith with little debate (this varied from household to household), but there was leeway and room for them to make decisions about other aspects. Wearing the *hijab* was one example for almost all the girls. Praying and eating *halal* were also a matter of choice for several girls. This room to discover and develop their religious identities at their own pace was of great value for the girls. It provided them with a sense of agency and understanding of what they truly believed.
(Re)conceptualizing Muslim identity.

My participants made choices about what Islamic practices were important to them. They made these choices by experimenting with various religious practices, figuring out what worked for them and what did not. While some of the girls prayed regularly, others found that they only prayed regularly for short bursts of time or during the month of Ramadhan. The same can be said for eating halal food. Many of the girls were firm about only eating halal and some tried to eat halal but often failed to adhere to it. For example, both Laiba and Ameera experimented with trying to pray consistently to see whether it rendered greater religious devoutness or could become a permanent aspect of their life. When Laiba gave up praying, she merely shrugged her shoulders and figured that it was just something she could not commit to doing every day. For Ameera, trying to eat only halal food failed miserably as soon as she was tempted with fast food by her mother or a non-halal meal at school with friends. The realities of her surrounding environment, such as a mother who did not eat halal, no halal restaurant options in her area, and a dearth of vegetarian options in the school cafeteria, made it difficult to follow a practice she was not that committed to in the first place.

One of the only rituals that was observed by all the girls in the study, other than not eating pork, was fasting during the month of Ramadhan. They did not dwell on why fasting went unquestioned, though they did discuss some of the challenges of fasting in an environment where many other students were not. Though the girls were unequivocally expected to follow certain aspects of their religion, such as abstaining from drinking, sex before marriage, and eating pork (I will discuss these topics in greater detail in the following chapter on social interactions), they still had a certain degree of space to explore and understand their religion for themselves.
In practicing various aspects of their religion, the girls made decisions about what it meant to be considered a Muslim. They used terms such as a very “religious” Muslim, a “crazy fundamentalist” Muslim, or a “full-on-completely-practicing-down-to-the-core” Muslim to identify different types of Muslims. These types and conceptualizations varied from girl to girl based on her belief system. For example, Hena thought a combination of knowing the basics about your faith and participating in rituals such as praying separated Muslims from non-practicing Muslims. For Iman, not praying, eating non-halal, and dating made you “not a very religious” Muslim. For Laiba, drinking made you essentially a non-practicing Muslim. For Sabeen, wearing the burqa was an extremist form of the religion. Based on their conceptions, the girls placed themselves somewhere on the spectrum of religiosity. Despite the categorization, their religious location and conceptions were in a state of flux, more so for some girls than others.

In discussing types of Muslim girls, there was also a great deal of discussion about hijabi girls. The girls shared how they knew certain hijabi girls who were “hypocrites,” wearing the hijab but acting in un-Islamic ways. They cited behaviour such as dating, promiscuous behaviour, and swearing as some of the examples. The girls in my study grappled with their own expectations of the ideal Muslim hijabi girl and conversely their frustrations with people’s expectations that they behave like ideal Muslims whether they wore the hijab or not. Though the presence of Muslim friends is often considered either a form of positive peer pressure (Zine, 2001) or a type of support network (Alvi, 2008; Mir, 2006; Sarwar Sharif, 1996), this feeling exhibited one of the challenges of meeting the expectations of individuals within their own religious faith. Some of these girls used the poor behaviour of hijabi girls to further validate why they had chosen not to wear the hijab. Others, particularly the hijabi girls, felt that hijabi girls who did not act “properly” gave hijabi girls a bad image. Working through these notions about
the ideal Muslim girl and the ideal hijabi girl played a role in how each girl understood her own religious identity. At times it seemed that criticism of hijabi girls was a way of validating one’s decision not to veil and at other times a perpetuation of the same unattainable standards they struggled with themselves.

Each girl had a sense of what “type” of Muslim she was. This belief was at times coupled with a certain level of guilt with not being a better Muslim. Iman’s explanation that she did not pray was quickly followed by the declaration that this was “bad” and Nadia expressed her guilt associated with not being totally committed to her prayers after seeing another Muslim pray in a parking lot. The source of this guilt seemed to arise from general expectations of how a Muslim person should act rather than personal beliefs. Guilt was not something these girls dwelt on, but it was definitely part of their ideas about what type of a Muslim person they were. The guilt, however, was not enough to inspire most of them to drastically change their belief system and actions. For most of the girls, the process of becoming more religious was a slow process, something they explained would potentially occur when they were “older,” “in university,” or after “Hajj.” These time periods or events were considered new opportunities to explore one’s religious faith.

Two of girls had had intense personal and religious transformations. For Mariam, the transformation was inspired by a falling out with a rough group of “mean girls” and a summer spent at Islamic camp. For Nadia, it was inspired by getting caught by her parents in a terrible lie. These intense experiences were catalysts for turning toward their faith. However, they had different tones. For Mariam, re-conceptualizing her religious identity was a source of liberation; for Nadia, doing so provided her with some form of solace and comfort after the guilt of hurting her parents. Mariam and Nadia’s conceptions of being a Muslim girl had shifted drastically as a
result of these events. For the remaining girls, understanding and exploring their faith and as result becoming more or less devout was an individual process. Thus, “the pictures that the narratives display represents a number of individual biographies, each representative of a young person forging ahead and constructing an identity that works for them” (Collet, 2007, p. 149). As the Muslim girls moved through their daily lives they were forever working and re-working what they believed and how they would go about observing their faith.

**Parents: The religious standard.**

The girls’ religious beliefs and identity could not be divorced from their parents’ values and teachings. For most of the girls, the Islamic religion and the way their parents followed the religion were one and the same. For example, if their parents did not make them wear the *hijab*, then they did not feel compelled to wear it and most often did not wear it. The girls who spoke of Islam often began their sentences with, “Well, my parents …” How their parents, particularly mothers, made sense of Islam in the Canadian context was usually how they perceived the religion and what they were obligated to do. This attitude reflected a desire to please their parents and maintain a certain degree of honour (Moghiassi et al., 2009). It also reflected deference to parents in matters of religion. Though the girls in my study had other sources of religious knowledge, such as Islamic conferences, weekend Islamic school or lectures, and other Muslim friends, for most of the girls, their parents still defined a large part of what they believed to be true about their religion.

For the girls in my study, religion was as much about pleasing your parents as it was about pleasing a higher power. In homes where the parents’ religious beliefs varied, such as Ameera’s, the difference at times caused her to experiment with being more or less religious. In households or families where the *hijab* was a common practice, girls were more likely to wear
the *hijab*. Mariam was the only participant who developed an Islamic identity that greatly differed from her parents. In her case, the religious influence worked backwards. After she started wearing the *hijab*, her mother decided to wear the *hijab*. However, in general, how the parents practiced Islam was the standard for how the girls felt they should practice Islam. This did not mean that the girls did not question their religion or their parents’ values, but merely that they more often than not conflated the two.

**Being “normal”: Fitting in, flying under the radar, and visibility.**

Being normal was a theme that arose in the interviews with the girls, particularly in respect to the social atmosphere at school. The importance of fitting in was obvious in many of the interviews. What was also very clear was a sense among many of the girls that being a Muslim girl, particularly a *hijabi* Muslim girl, could hinder this goal.

The concept of normal came up most often in conjunction with discussions regarding Islamic dress. Wearing the *hijab* in public school where veiling is not the norm has been the source of much discussion and concern among Muslim girls in North America (Cristillo, 2008; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Moghissi et al., 2009; Zine, 2008). Several of the girls considered how the *hijab* fared in respect to what was the mainstream way of dressing in Canadian society. Laiba explained that one of the reasons her parents did not feel it necessary for her to wear the *hijab* was because they lived in Canada now instead of in Afghanistan. The *hijab* was not as necessary in a Western context. Ameera took a more adamant approach, claiming that Islamic dress and Canadian life were incompatible because of the various limitations the *hijab* placed on a Muslim girl. Similar to Ameera, Nadia felt that wearing Western clothing was something one had to do living in “this society.” She also struggled with the idea of whether the *hijab* was necessary in the environment she lived in. The underlying feeling here was a that there was a normal,
mainstream way to dress and the *hijab* either conflicted with that by posing certain restrictions that made operating in such an environment more difficult, or a feeling that the *hijab* was not required to the same degree that it might in a more Islamic society and context. Yasmeen recognized the difference between her hometown of Abu Dhabi and the Greater Toronto Area when she expressed her fear of not finding anyone at school who “looked” like her. The girls were aware that outer appearance played a role in how one was perceived, especially somewhere where such a dress code was not the norm.

What was normal also varied from school to school. The girls referred to Islamic practices that were considered normal in one context but not so much in another. For example, some schools offered communal prayers or prayer rooms and others did not. Some schools had many students who wore the *hijab* and others did not. Practices depended on the location of the school and the population of students that attended that particular school. The girls were acutely aware of what was the norm in their school in relation to Islam and in comparison to other schools. For example, eating *halal* food at school was not out of the ordinary for Hena since her school made sure to have *halal* options at school events. Wearing the *hijab* was not common at Laiba’s current school, but her old school in Toronto had many *hijabi* girls. If she had shown up one day with the *hijab* at her Toronto school, it would not have attracted a great deal of attention. However, if she showed up with the *hijab* at her current school, she would definitely stand out. Sabeen knew it was “weird” for White girls at more culturally homogeneous schools to see *hijabis* playing sports. Her lacrosse team, which includes several *hijabis*, showed up to play at a more culturally homogeneous school and it was clear that this was an uncommon experience for the other team. Because of such experiences, the girls were extremely sensitive to and aware of how being Muslim, particularly a *hijabi*, shifted depending on the social context.
The social environment, demographics, and equity policy in their schools affected what was considered and accepted as normal. Schools where regular announcements were made about religious holidays, where religious accommodations were standard, and where the student population was a diverse mix, shifted how the girls felt about aspects of their religion and religious identity. For Yasmeen, one of the greatest motivations to move to an Islamic school was the promise of no longer being one of a handful of hijabis. She loved the fact that the hijab was the normal way to dress at her Islamic school and thus a place where she would not stand out because of what she was wearing. Islamic schools have often been considered safe havens for students who are more religiously inclined and seek to have no disconnect between their religious identity and student identity (Azmi, 2001; Haw et al., 1998; Zine, 2008). However, Yasmeen was the only girl in my study who felt this way. In my study, awareness of mainstream behaviour not mean that a girl in a school where there were few Muslims or no prayer room did not wear the hijab or were not regular in her prayer. Just the knowledge of the school environment affected how they considered their hijab or fasting in Ramadhan.

Several of the girls shared a hesitation to draw attention to their religious identities. Ameera was not sure who should bring up dietary needs of different religious groups and none of the girls asked for accommodations while they were fasting. This theme comes up again later in my study. Several of the girls viewed religion as a personal aspect of who they were and thus drawing attention to that aspect in school was not really necessary. Moghissi et al. (2009) indicates a similar trend toward religion being a more private affair in their study on Muslim youth. For my participants, this also seemed to be a function of the general environment in the school. Girls seemed more hesitant to draw attention to themselves if they felt their religious needs would make them stand out in some way. Though none of the girls were willing to
compromise their religious beliefs, the desire to fit in and belong was equally strong. A large part of their high school experience was striking a balance between these two desires.

The limitations of being a Muslim girl also affected how normal a Muslim girl feels in her school environment. Several studies indicate the unique experience of being a Muslim girl in relation to the social responsibilities and limitations placed on them by their religion and their families (Cristillo, 2008; Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008). Laiba and Ameera both felt that since they did not wear the hijab, they were from the “norm” or had not led a “traditional Muslim life.” Several of the girls, hijabi and non-hijabi, discussed the limitations wearing the hijab placed on a Muslim girl. Clothing, participation in sports, and behaviour were a few of the examples the girls provided. Ameera explained how it would be really difficult to find a prom dress as a hijabi and Sabeen shared the frustrations of her athletic hijabi friend who struggled to be taken seriously by coaches on the basketball team.

The girls also spoke about the behavioural expectations of a hijabi girl. For example, a hijabi girl should not swear, openly date, or party. There was also a belief that being a hijabi in public school altered the social experience; this view was particularly held by the non-hijabi participants. However, the hijabi girls in the study explained that though there were certainly a few challenges, for the most part they felt included in the school social environment, had many friends who accepted them as they were, socialized inside and outside of school, were respected by their teachers, and were able to maintain their Muslim identity without any significant hurdles posed by the school. Some of the reasons they provided for having such experiences was that they dressed in “regular” clothes, just more modestly, maintained a degree of separation between their academic and religious life, and attended schools with diverse student populations. Thus, their day-to-day experience was not that different from other students. Nevertheless, the notion
that there was a normal way to be in high school and being a Muslim girl who veiled posed a certain challenge was a real belief among the majority of the girls.

Perhaps the most concerning part of the norm discussion related to the stigma associated with being a Muslim female, particularly a *hijabi* Muslim female. The girls discussed the negative social perceptions of Muslim women who veiled. They explained that *hijabi* girls were more likely to be considered oppressed by their families and forced into the practice of veiling. They were also more likely to be considered overly religious and perhaps aligned to some degree with Islamic fundamentalist ideology. The girls had come to these conclusions based on questions asked by peers and reports in the media.

They were all acutely aware of the stereotypes relating to Muslim women. Kassam (2007) highlights the stigma associated with veiling that many Muslim girls have internalized. Having these ideas deeply ingrained in their minds, my participants, *hijabi* and non-*hijabi*, were also guilty of projecting the same stereotypes onto other Muslim girls. Sabeen shared how she felt a girl who wore the *burqa* at her school must have been forced to do it, and Maliha noted that prior to wearing the *hijab* herself, she felt that *hijabi* girls at her school must all be “really religious.” Once she started wearing the *hijab*, she realized that they lived a “normal life” just like her. These beliefs were a mixture of personal experiences and internalization of the image of the oppressed Muslim women. An example of a stereotype proven to be true occurred when Sabeen found out that the girl with the *burqa* had been pressured to wear it by her family. For girls who wore the *hijab*, existing in school and social environments where these stereotypical views were present created some anxiety, trepidation, and a desire to blend in. For girls who did not wear the *hijab*, the existence of such stereotypes was one reason they were even less inclined
to veil (though this was never the main reason) or it influenced how they understood their experience of being a Muslim girl in contrast to a hijabi girl’s experience.

**Religion and schooling: Degrees of separation.**

The extent to which religion and schooling should intersect was central to the discussion of religious practices. The issue was most obvious when it came to the matter of praying since it was the one ritual that most conflicted with the basic structure of a secular public school day. For the girls who prayed more regularly, making the decision to pray at school, if accommodations were provided, was personal. Mariam would decide whether to miss the last twenty minutes of class on Friday depending on what was happening in class. Though Mariam yearned for a greater intersection between her spiritual and academic life, finding school life lacking in spiritual depth, her desire for greater intersections was not enough to compel her to relocate to a private Islamic school. Islamic school, in her opinion, was too rigid and could not provide her the space she needed to explore her faith at her own pace.

Unlike the girls in Zine’s (2008) study on Islamic school, who felt that public schools did not support embodied differences and were generally hostile to hijabi Muslim girls, the girls in my study did not believe this to be the case. Though Yasmeen was firm about wanting no disconnect between her religious and academic life, a desire that eventually lead her to switch to a private Islamic school, at no point did she cite a hostile environment as the reason for relocating. For many of my participants, a degree of separation was important. Maliha explained that she did not want religion to interfere with her academic life too much. Missing class to pray was one such interference. She was proud of her religion, but preferred praying on a daily basis at home so as not to disrupt her class activities. The same sentiment was shared by several of the participants. For some, religion was a private affair, one that to a certain point did not have to be
observed publically or communally. Sabeen preferred to pray at home, though her school offered communal prayers, and Nadia enjoyed praying in the comfort of her own home instead of the school prayer room. For these girls, separating aspects of their religious and academic life was a healthy way to balance the two worlds. They were pleased and proud when their religion was acknowledged and respected in school, but this did not mean they wanted their entire day at school to be about Islam. By attending public school, they were allowed to explore various aspects of their identity in a space outside their family home that provided them another forum for understanding who they were and what they believed.

Finally, friendships also influenced the intersection of religion and school. The type of social network a Muslim girl had influenced how she made sense of Islamic identity and practices in school. For some girls, friends who were oblivious or sometimes insensitive about their religious beliefs and practices made observing their religion more challenging (though this was not often the case). It required greater effort on the part of the Muslim girl to adhere to their beliefs and values. On the other hand, friends who were respectful and understanding of what it meant to be a Muslim created a more comfortable and safe atmosphere in which the girl could observe her faith. These girls did not have to worry as much about answering questions and generally felt accepted among their friends. The issue of friends will be tackled to a greater degree in the following chapter.

Adapting to the school environment.

Whether a school provided religious accommodations or was inclusive of Islamic events and holidays played a role in how my participants approached certain religious practices. While schools in Toronto have generally been more inclusive of Muslim religious practices, schools in the Greater Toronto Area seem to vary. In Toronto, the presence of concrete inclusive strategies
is a result of struggles between Muslim groups and the Toronto board of education (Collet, 2007), which resulted in the “Report on the Religious Needs of Muslim Students in the Toronto Board of Education” (Toronto Board of Education, 1992). Though schools in the Greater Toronto Area use the ministry’s Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Policy (2009) to develop their own equity documents (York Catholic District School Board Antiracism, 2003; York Region District School Board Antiracism, 2002), no such policy specifically geared toward Muslim students exists. Thus, it is no surprise that the types of accommodations provided by schools in the Greater Toronto Area greatly varied for my participants. For schools that provided religious accommodations in the form of prayer rooms or communal prayers on Fridays or during Ramadhan, praying or not praying during school hours became more of a conscious option. All the schools that provided accommodations for prayers were in Region B, a region with a significantly larger Muslim population than Region A. The girls who attended these schools had more definite reasons regarding why they chose to participate or not participate in communal prayers or use the prayer room. The majority of these girls did not pray at school, but having the option allowed them to think about why they did not want to. It became more of a personal choice than one that was inevitable. This issue also relates to accommodations during Ramadhan. In Hena and Sabeen’s school, Ramadhan was acknowledged in the announcements. This acknowledgement made it easier for Hena to ask for accommodations during Ramadhan, since she knew her teachers were aware of the holy month.

In schools that did not provide a great deal of accommodations, these being located predominantly in Region A, or performed poorly at acknowledging religious holidays and events, the girls were more prone to discussing issues like integrating and adapting to the school environment. For example, Yasmeen and Maliha prayed before and after school. Laiba, who
attended a school with a small population of Muslims, expressed that it was important for minority Muslim students to integrate into the school environment and that schools could not be expected to meet all the needs of Muslim students. Ameera, who wondered whether schools could meet the dietary needs of all the religious denominations and belief systems represented in the school, shared a similar sentiment. These girls were also quite tolerant of their schools’ struggles in the department of inclusiveness. They considered the reasons why the school did not offer certain meal options, such as the complexities of meeting the dietary needs of the entire student body, or laughed off how bad the school was at mentioning religious and cultural holidays of various groups in the morning announcements. Though the lack of vegetarian options frustrated Laiba, who only ate halal meat, she blamed the company that provided the food for the cafeteria, not the school. There was also a degree of hesitancy and trepidation about asking for religious accommodations, particularly in schools that had a small percentage of Muslim students. For example, there was hesitancy regarding who should bring up the topic of accommodation for issues such as halal options or providing a prayer room. As for Ramadhan, Ameera and Iman figured out ways to fast and get all their schoolwork done during Ramadhan without asking for extensions, both citing their personalities as the primary reason why they did not bother their teachers with their difficult schedule. Thus, school policies influenced student perceptions of inclusiveness in subtle ways. In schools with fewer Muslim students or poor multicultural practices, the girls were prone to forgive their schools for their failings and emphasize the difficulties of meeting the needs of a diverse student population, focusing on the positives.

**Summary of Key Themes**

This chapter explores some of the religious beliefs and related conduct of Muslim girls both inside and outside of public school. The key areas that the girls focused on were religious
dress and following Islamic rituals such as praying, eating *halal*, and fasting. The girls also spoke about social practices such as drinking, dating, and partying; however, these will be taken up in the following chapter. In regards to veiling, my participants shared their reasons for choosing to wear or not wear the *hijab*, along with their general beliefs about veiling. They also discussed the challenges of trying to follow various religious practices on a daily basis and how their beliefs were evolving. Several themes arose from my interviews with the girls:

1. *Choice*. The girls discussed the importance of personal choice in religion, especially in relation to veiling, but also in terms of following other practices. My participants were constantly working through what they had been taught by their parents and religion, and how that related to their evolving beliefs that were being shaped by numerous factors, such as friends, school, and society in general.

2. *(Re)conceptualizing Muslim identity*. The participants were constantly working through what it meant to be a Muslim girl in the Canadian context. They experimented with different religious practices, abandoning some and embracing others. The also created their own continuum of religious “types” and placed themselves somewhere on this spectrum depending on how conservative or liberal they felt they were. Experimenting with their religious identity was not without its share of guilt, and a couple of the girls had to work through feelings of not being a good enough Muslim. For most of the girls, religious identity was a slow evolution; however, a couple of the girls had had personal and religious transformations at some point in high school. These shifts provided unique opportunities to compare their experiences in high school before and after the change in their beliefs and conduct.
3. *Parents: The religious standard.* For many of the girls, religion could not be
separated from their parents’ values and beliefs. Conversations about religion almost
always involved what the girls’ parents believed and the degree to which they had
encouraged them to observe a certain religious practice. Though none of the girls
seemed to be in direct agreement with everything their parents believed and did in
regards to Islam, for most of the girls, parents were the key source of religious
knowledge and instruction.

4. *Being “normal”: Fitting in, flying under the radar, and visibility.* Conversations
relating to being normal and fitting in were present in almost all of my interviews
with the girls. Several of the girls considered whether the hijab was compatible with
Canadian society, some believing that it was not and others feeling that it posed
certain challenges. What was normal also varied from school to school depending on
demographics, social environment, and the equity policy of the school. These shifts
either made it easier or harder for some girls to observe their religion. There was also
an awareness of the limitations on a Muslim girl that at times hindered her ability to
fit in. Finally, the stigma associated with being a veiled Muslim female was not lost
on the girls. Stereotypes related to the hijab were commonly known, and the girls had
to deal with the opinions of their peers, as well as their own biases.

5. *Religion and schooling: Degrees of separation.* The desired degree of separation
between one’s religion and academic life varied from girl to girl. For some, keeping
the two worlds mostly separate was the most comfortable way to be. This generally
meant keeping their religious views to themselves. For others, a certain amount of
intersection, such as wearing the hijab or praying once in a while at school, was
healthy and allowed for them to feel a sense of connectedness between the two. For a couple, any separation created a form of tension that was difficult to work through. Various factors played a role in the degree of intersection or separation and how a girl felt about this process, including personal beliefs, school environment, and friends.

6. *Adapting to the school environment.* The process of adapting and integrating as a Muslim female varied depending on the accommodations a school offered and the general ethos related to multiculturalism in the school. In a school where religious accommodations were the norm and diversity was routinely acknowledged and celebrated, the girls had opportunities to make conscious decisions about whether they wanted to observe certain religious practices. On the other hand, schools that provided few accommodations or where diversity was poorly acknowledged created a greater sense among the girls that one needed to integrate and adapt.

On the whole, the girls in my study were dynamically working through what it meant to be Muslim in the context of public school and Canadian society in general. This process was active, daily, and evolving. They understood that for some people Islam and the “Western” way of life were completely at odds, but for these girls the challenges were by no means insurmountable. They worked creatively each day to find a sense of harmony between their cultural and religious backgrounds and their daily lives as public school students.

In the following chapter, I explore my participants’ social experiences inside and outside school in relation to their religious identities.
A large part of the high school experience is the various social interactions that take place. It is fair to say that for many students the social aspect of high school is one of the most important. My participants were not that different. Though academics were extremely important to many of the girls, it was the friendships and social activities, both inside and outside of school, that they spoke about with the most enthusiasm and candour. Their social interactions both aligned with their Islamic beliefs and values and challenged them. These friendships and social activities were influenced and informed by the school culture and curriculum. In this chapter, I discuss the how the girls made sense of their experiences with Muslim and non-Muslim peers, social challenges, social activities inside and outside school, and extracurricular involvements.

Friends in School

All of my participants had a close group or network of friends they associated with at school. Some of the girls had friends from diverse backgrounds, while others chose to have a more homogeneous group of friends that complemented their own religious and cultural background. Various factors influenced the type of friends the girls had, such as their parents’ preferences, personal interests, and school demographics. Their friendships played a significant role in defining their schooling experience.

Embracing diversity.

The majority of my participants had friends from diverse backgrounds. They discussed how religion was not an obstacle in their relationships. Instead, friendships were based on commonalities and differences were generally accepted.
Laiba attended a school where a significant proportion of the student population was Italian, and the Muslim population was very small. She explained to me that the Italian kids usually socialized with people of their own nationality, therefore someone like her, an Afghan girl, was more likely to be friends with the other kids, “mostly brown people and Asians.” Her parents also played a factor in the type of friends she was close to:

My parents aren’t more like what your friends do or not do, my Mom just likes friends that are basically more school orientated, in comparison to party orientated [laughter]. In comparison, she saw one of my friends … making out with her boyfriend once in the public … and the thing is, my Mom knows that she’s Afghan. So my Mom, if I’ll be like, “Oh I want to go to her house,” my Mom will be like, “No!” [laughter].

Despite her mother’s disapproval, Laiba was friends with students who did not necessarily hold the same religious values as her. Some of them drank and others dated, two things Laiba was strictly not allowed to do. Despite these differences, she felt very comfortable being a practicing Muslim among a group of people who were either non-Muslim or, in her eyes, non-practicing Muslims.

Ameera, who attended the same school as Laiba, described a somewhat similar experience. The various boundaries on what she could do made her gravitate toward the more “nerdy” kids. She explained the relationship between the friends she made and her evolving religious beliefs:

I couldn’t find a lot of Muslim friends. It was just circumstance, where I was in school. Not a lot of people like that [Muslim] went to my school … and if they were Muslim they were more by name, but didn’t really believe it. It was more of a, “You’re Muslim, why?,” [and they would say] “Because my parents believe it” … so most of my friends were non-Muslim and that opened my eyes a little bit
because I was like, not everything my parents say is always one way. There are 
still things that I always believe. Like, being a good person and never a liar or 
cheat … and I’d always just befriended the nerds too [laughter].

Ameera’s friendships were the catalyst to making her question what she had been taught:

With friends they’d ask, they’d be curious. I don’t know, I guess the people I 
hung out with were a little, I guess, more intelligent that they wouldn’t assume 
that because I was Muslim I was going to bomb the towers.

When 9/11 happened, I didn’t get any questions at all. It was a little new. I 
came to Canada about two months ago and then bam, September happened as 
well. So that topic never brought up. Just because I was new … Then like over the 
years people ask, they just ask questions about the religion like, “Are men 
allowed to marry more than one wife?” I’m like, “Yeah, but that’s more like – 
they don’t do that anymore. More modern Muslims don’t do that.” So then they’d 
be like, “So why do you [Muslim girls] wear the hijab? Are you forced like to 
have to?” And I’m like, “No, it’s a choice.” They’re like, “Would you ever wear 
it?” And I’m like, “I don’t know, maybe when I’m very old, and I have … I don’t 
really care about my hair that much. So I don’t know. I don’t know. It’s 
personal.” Like a lot of them would be more bothered like, “So there are Black 
Muslim people, there are African Muslim people?” … or they’re like, “Do you 
pray? How many times do you pray? Why do you fast? … What if you die of 
fasting? Or what if you’re sick?” I’m like, “You cannot fast if it’s going to affect 
you. It’s not something that’s supposed to kill you. It’s supposed to teach you a 
lesson.” Or they’re like, “Why are you fasting?” I’m like … “It’s more to 
appreciate food and to see what people do. You have a choice to eat at the end of 
the day, some people don’t, right? And [its] more of a time of reflecting on your 
belief in God, and you’re not supposed to do certain things like swear, go out, 
watch bad movies … it’s more of a time where it’s like a pilgrimage. And they’re 
like, “Oh okay.” So they were like, “I always wondered why you couldn’t eat. 
Can you drink water?” I’m like, “No!” [laugh]
People always ask the questions that affect lifestyle more. Things like, “Can you stay out late, can you go out, can you drink?” and anything that affects what people enjoy. They will ask, “Why?” So in terms of the basic religion most people don’t really ask like, “Tell us the philosophy of Islam,” it’s more of like, “Can you do this?” what are the rules basically [is] more what they’re interested in.

Maliha, who had only a year previously started wearing the *hijab*, also had many friends from various backgrounds. She described her school to me:

It’s really multicultural so there’s an even ratio of brown people, Asian people, and Africans and stuff … There aren’t a lot of White people, the minority is White people, probably twenty in the school … and two of them are my best friends.

Well with me, I don’t really stick in one group. I do have my main friends, but then I’m always – not moving around I don’t think that would be the right word – but I have a bunch of friends so some of them are brown, some are African, some are Chinese, and like the White friends … one of my friends, her background is a Jehovah’s Witness so she’ll always tell me something about it and I find that it’s very interesting because some of the things relate to our Muslim religion and our culture so I tell her that. Then, one of my White friends she has a twin brother so her and my Chinese friends are always arguing back and forth because their religions in a way, they kind of clash and they kind of don’t go together … he’s Atheist … and she doesn’t like that, it just doesn’t stick with her … so they’re always arguing back and forth.

Aside from this debate between two her friends, Maliha felt that religion was not a significant factor in the friendships in her group:

We don’t really have conversations. No, not really. We’re just a big bunch and don’t really talk religion and stuff much. It may come up once in awhile, but it doesn’t really play a big role in our friendship.
She also shared that diversity was one of the benefits of being in a public school:

I’m not really a big fan of the Islamic schools because you’re only in one group, there’s like all Muslim kids and you’re not really … Because when you get older in your life, you’re not always going to be surrounded by Muslim people. You are going to be [with], you know … African Americans, Asians, South Asians. So they’re not really being exposed to the real world, and they’re just in their own little community kind of thing, so I think that’s kind of … it’s not all that great.

Hena, a Pakistani-Canadian, attended a school with a large Muslim population that consisted mainly of Arabs and Pakistanis. Despite this, she had very few Muslim friends. She reflected on this in her interview:

‘Cause mostly growing up it was a lot of brown people in our school, not in – well, mostly my friends, I don’t really have any Pakistani Muslim friends … but there’s a lot … The people that are Pakistani or Muslim … I’m not really friends with and I never … knew why, but even my Mom tells me that I should have Muslim friends.

Sometimes I think about it but I don’t know, I just don’t. [My friends] they’re everything. I have Italian [friends], I have a Spanish friend, I have a Black friend, I have Asian friends. I have a couple of brown friends, one or two or three. But that’s it. I don’t know, but it’s just, I have [had] the same friends since Grade 4.

When I go to their houses and they’re eating food, most of their parents know that I eat halal food. And they are very considerate about [it] because I think I’m one of the only people that is like that. When I go to birthday parties and they have pizza, they’re like, “Who can have pepperoni?” And they all know that I can’t … and they’re very like, “Okay, so we’ll order a cheese pizza.” They know that. It’s not any different.
Iman, who is of Ethiopian background, had a diverse group of friends as well:

They’re all from different backgrounds. I think my group of friends are one of the most diverse groups of friends out there in my school because … I have a … friend that’s Pakistani and another one that’s Indian and another one that’s Chinese … and then there’s another one that’s Tamil and there’s just a bunch of us … It’s interesting because we all have different cultures, and whenever we get invited to each other’s house it’s always a lot of fun because you get to experience different things. And for example, one of my friend’s parents had a wedding anniversary, so we went over and we borrowed some of her clothing, some cultural clothing … she is actually Indian … We don’t really talk much about religion.

Seeking out Muslim peers.

Having a group of Muslim friends made life a little easier for a few of my participants. After deciding to wear the *hijab* the summer between Grade 10 and 11, Mariam was excited to reconnect with some of her Muslim *hijabi* friends from middle school, who were in the same high school:

Actually, I have one. Her name is Afsoon. She’s from Afghanistan. She started wearing it in Grade 9 actually, and she didn’t wear it in Grade 8. And I always used to be like, “Wow,” she was so pretty … like, why’s she wearing it? That’s what I said. And, actually, we were pretty close. And then when I decided to wear it, I came to school and I was like, “I can’t wait to find Afsoon. She needs to see I’m wearing it.” And when she saw me, she’s like, “Wow.” And I’m like, “Yeah.” And I actually have another friend, she’s Somalian. She was wearing it too and we were really close. And we were talking this summer and you know [during] the month of *Ramadhan* she was like, “I think everyone should wear – like, you should wear it just for *Ramadhan* for school” … I’m like, “That’s never going to happen.” I come back from the camp [and] I’m wearing it all the time. She’s like, “Wow.” Yeah, so, those were a few of my friends.
This did not mean that she only associated with Muslim girls:

I have about three that do [wear the hijab] that are really close to me … and the rest just don’t, but they’re different, like, Hindus, a lot of Hindus, a lot of Sikhs, Christians … We actually don’t really judge each other. We just hang out, whatever. We respect each other. I have a Sikh friend. He wears a turban. He’d be like, “Salaam!” I’d be like, “Sasrikal!” We just talk about school, whatever, go see movies. We don’t really bring religion into it. I have a Christian friend. She has events that are at her church that are for everyone. They’re called social events … You sit down in the café and you eat and mix with the different people … and I’d go to those and she would come to my kind of events.

Only two of my participants only associated with students who were of the same religious or cultural background. Yasmeen, having only immigrated to Canada the summer prior to Grade 10, found it easier to be friends with the other hijabi girls in her new public school.

I got new friends … When I looked at myself and when I looked at the whole school, I realized that we were about four girls who wore hijab … It was weird because in that whole school, me and my sister and … two other girls [wore hijab] … We were all friends. We were a group … We were just minorities so that I knew people would look at us in a different way and they would know, “Oh there are two more hijabis coming to this school,” … So that was kind of weird, but then I was fine, no one discriminated me or anything like that … everything went fine. It was just me who was very nervous … The first days when I came, there were very nice people. They were like, “Oh, hi. What’s your name?” They wanted to be friends with me and I was fine with that.

As she progressed through the year she made a few other friends through her classes. One of them was an Indian girl:

And then in my second semester in my science class, I had a non-Muslim friend, her name was Anishka, she was from Sri Lanka … She was really nice, although
she used to keep asking me, “Why do you wear a hijab?” … And, you know, like, “My Mom says that ‘why do these ladies wear a niqab?’ ” And she used to ask me about Islam and everything but it was fine with me. As long as I can educate people about my religion … it was fine with me.

Sabeen also chose to associate with a more homogeneous group of girls. However, she was quite different from Yasmeen in the sense that she had been living in Canada for the majority of her life and, though she observed basic aspects of her religion, she was not as devout. Sabeen attended a school where the dominant population was Muslim and South Asian, making it much easier to make such friends:

*Sabeen:* There’s obviously a lot of different opinions or different types of Muslims or people that are more religious than others, but I think it’s a lot easier for people to get along and to understand one another. A lot of my friends, well mostly all of them, are Muslim … or they’re South Asian. So, yeah, there’s a lot of similarities. And then for doing – say for parent consent for doing things, my parents are more lenient now because they know all my friends and they know their families and they know that they’re Muslim.

*Interviewer:* Does it ever make anything harder?

*Sabeen:* Harder [pause] there are … there might be aunties that, see you around and yeah, they just come and … I don’t know, their views about how you should be are different than what your parents have taught you. So they might take things that they see or things that you do the wrong way. Also, even for kids, say if you have someone that’s extremely religious, they don’t understand why you can’t be like them, so I guess that’s when things become harder.
Social Challenges as a Muslim Girl

Social interactions in school were not without their challenges. Interactions with friends included issues such as contending with religious stereotypes, and social pressures such as dating, drinking, and attending parties. The next section explores these issues in greater depth.

Stereotypes and stereotyping.

A few of the girls had to contend with Muslim stereotypes at some point in school. Discussions on stereotypes usually fell into one of two categories: jokes or intentionally hurtful comments.

The majority of the girls shared that stereotypical comments made about Muslims in jest were usually not meant to be hurtful. The girls explained that most of the comments were harmless and were usually made by their friends. This did not mean comments had no effect. Hena, who attended a school with a big Muslim population, shared, “They’ll say jokes about terrorists and Muslim people … stuff like that. It doesn’t bug me … because they’re jokes, but maybe, probably bugs other people.” Similarly, Nadia explained:

I don’t think they have the courage to say it to your face, although there’s some people that would, but like, they just joke around, “Oh, you’re terrorists,” and stuff like that. We’re all just like, “Whatever,” yeah. Everyone’s joking, but you never know. People could take it seriously. I don’t know.

Laiba shared similar sentiments:

I have this one friend and he’s Italian, but he was like, “Laiba you’re going to bomb somewhere!” We always like – we were just joking around and everything, right? … it’s not offensive … but everyone does it. I always joke around … like if someone’s driving and they’re Asian, you’ll be like, “Asians cannot drive.” But
it’s always solely to poke fun. It’s nothing offensive. No one would ever say anything offensive, at least not in a public school.

In the focus group discussion, Sabeen explained that at her school stereotypical and racist comments about Muslims were not tolerated.

I think at our school, well my grade specifically, it’s if you say something against Muslims then you’re kind of screwed because we have a large amount of people that are Muslims. And then there’s specifically the Arabs, so if you say anything then you’re kind of gone. So no one really says anything about Muslims and if they do, then yes, there have been a couple fights and stuff.

Nadia explained that at her school, with its large Indian population, she would hear the derogatory term “Paki” being thrown around. She also shared an episode where a White boy in one of her classes insisted on calling her a terrorist because of her Pakistani Muslim background.

Well, it was like this guy used to call me a terrorist … we were in the same classes … The first few time he called me a terrorist I’m like, okay, and after, I was like, “Can you just stop?” but I don’t remember if he stopped or not. I think he stopped eventually, but not right when I told him to stop … he’s Caucasian.

Nadia explained to me that she was not a very aggressive person. Her fear of confrontation did not allow her to take the boy head on. As a result, he continued till he got tired of it. She also shared that comments made by friends about her religion were at times felt as insulting:

Well, there’s so many restrictions. If you explain to someone the Muslim religion they go, “I would never turn Muslim because of the restrictions and all that.” I did co-op at the hospital and there was – I think she was Guyanese … she’s like, “I don’t know, I don’t understand the Muslim religion.” … and then I started telling her some things and I told her that people always say that, “Oh, I would never turn Muslim because of this because you can’t do this, you can’t do that, you
can’t drink and all that.” And then when I told her she was like, “Yeah, I would never” … like, right to my face! She’s like, “No, wow, I can’t believe you’re not allowed to do this, you’re not allowed to have a relationship before marriage” … I was like … yeah, I don’t know.

**Social experiences inside and outside school.**

For many Muslim girls, one of the social challenges of being in a public school environment is contending with religious boundaries and restrictions on activities such as experimenting with alcohol, attending parties, and dating – practices common for many high school students. It is not so much that they want to participate in all of these things (of course, some girls do), but a sense of feeling left out or pressured to engage. All the Muslim girls in my study were generally not allowed to participate in any of these activities, though there was some leeway when it came to attending parties. Each girl dealt with the restrictions in her own way, depending on her relationship with her parents, the types of friends she had, and how religious she was.

**Alcohol and parties: Religious taboos.**

Drinking and parties more often than not go hand in hand in high school. Some of the girls were allowed to attend school and house parties, and others were not. Drinking was obviously one of the biggest religious taboos for all of my participants. For some girls, drinking was a completely foreign act, one of the worst sins a Muslim girl could commit. These girls were not exposed to drinking as much because they had few friends who drank. Other girls were slightly more comfortable with the act since they had friends who drank or went to parties where people were drinking.
Laiba firmly expressed to me that she did not drink, nor would ever drink. Despite her very strong beliefs, she was very good friends with girls and boys who did drink and partied. Some of these friends were even Muslim. She described to me various interactions around alcohol:

When they talk about stuff like partying and stuff, it’s like, “Oh, okay I’ll be the sober buddy because I don’t drink.” And they’ll be like, “Laiba, come on!” I’m like, “No!” They’ll be like, “Come on, we’ll slip it in your drink.” I’ll be like, “I would, honestly, I would probably snap if you ever did that!” … I have a lot of Indian friends, Middle Eastern. But yeah, so obviously they drink, it’s okay in their culture. But that’s the only difference … I don’t find it to be a challenge … they’re okay with it … I have one friend, she’s Afghan, she’s Muslim, but she doesn’t really – she’ll drink, she’ll eat whatever she wants, whatever. She’s just not religious. So I know if we go out and we eat and the waitress will be like, “What do you want to drink?” She’d grab like the, you know how restaurants have the little booklet that has all the alcoholic drinks it? [laughter]. And my friends know I don’t like it. They wouldn’t come to me when they’re drunk or anything because they know I just don’t like it.

Iman shared that she did attend the occasional party and her parents seemed okay with it. Her view on alcohol was more standard: “Um, and I don’t drink. I don’t party. Well, I do party but I don’t … I try not to do, like, all that bad stuff.”

Ameera was the only participant who hinted at having tried alcohol. She reflected on why it was considered wrong to drink in her religion:

Certain things, like drinking, I’m not completely – I’m not an avid drinker, just because the smell of alcohol makes me kind of queasy. It doesn’t make you a bad – like I get why alcohol is not permitted in Islam because it makes you do stuff that you wouldn’t normally do if you weren’t intoxicated, like get pregnant. Crimes are more prominent when there’s alcohol involved. So maybe that’s where it came from, but the actual act of drinking I don’t think is the sin.
In the focus group discussion, Sabeen spoke candidly about the pressures associated with being a Muslim girl and the desire to participate in social activities, such as parties, that her parents were not comfortable with:

Like sometimes I feel guilty if, say if you want to go to a party or something and your parents know, like they know what happens. So you fight so much to try to go there and then you’re proven wrong. It’s like “No it won’t be like that, don’t worry about it!” and then you go there and it’s exactly what they told you. And it’s like, “Oh my gosh, how did they know?” And then you feel guilty about trying to – thinking that they don’t know, or trying to hide it from them because you’re still doing it. Say if you’re going to a party and there’s going to be guys there, or just anything like that, they know, and they’re trying to just guard you from that.

For Maliha, house and school parties were out of the question. She was, however, able to negotiate with her parents to attend school social events, such as academic or athletic banquets:

Semiformal and prom and stuff like that, it’s a total no-no … and it makes sense because I don’t see what I could do in a place like that. Plus the hijab, I wouldn’t even be dancing or anything.

At first … I was, “Oh my gosh I can’t go to prom. I’m going to be so sad,” blah, blah, blah. But then I’d think about it and there’s nothing good that actually happens at a prom, right? Except for that all that dancing and stuff. So then I think about it, I’m like, you [know] what, I’m better off without all that kind of stuff, and I can just like hang out with my other friends that aren’t going. Because my friend, the one who her background is Jehovah’s Witness, she’s not allowed to go to that kind of stuff either. So me and her were like, “Oh we’ll have a movie night or something like that.”

There’s a banquet coming up for business students on Thursday and I asked my Mom, “Can I go?” I was surprised she said yeah. And I told her there
was going to be a dance, dinner, and then awards after. And I told her that I’m not going to dance, I’m just going to – like me and a couple of my friends we’re just sitting out the dance. So she’s like “Okay I’m fine with that, you can go.” … basically that’s it. And I think … even though my Dad, he’s not that religious, he still wouldn’t want me going to – even for this banquet, he’s like “Oh, there’s a dance, I don’t think you should go.” You know, a little concerned kind of … My parents are really protective of me and my sister.

**Boys: Friendships, relationships, and boundaries.**

Interacting with boys in school was a significant part of life for my participants. As Muslim girls, this could be problematic. Conversations regarding boys were related to male friends, romantic relationships, or finding a suitable boy for marriage. When it came to friends, the girls discussed issues such their parents’ thoughts about their male friends or dealing with male peers as a *hijabi*. Romantic relationships were discussed more abstractly, since the girls considered dating, in the Western sense, non-negotiable or wrong. Finally, marriage was a source of much discussion, particularly in the focus group, where the girls considered the various options available to Muslim girls. In the next section I discuss friendships with boys, dating and marriage simultaneously, as many of the girls linked the topics together in our conversations.

Dating was a delicate subject, rarely brought up in any of the interviews. Only two of my participants shared any information about romantic attachments. Iman was candid with me about having a boyfriend:

I have a boyfriend who is Muslim … like, he doesn’t drink … I think he’s pretty good for me for the most part … like I know what I’m doing and I wouldn’t put myself in a situation where I would do something that, like, I would regret later on … I feel like my boyfriend is someone that I actually like and someone that … is actually good.
For Iman, dating a boy within her own faith, someone she respected and she felt made her a better person, could not be all that bad. She explained that her parents were not aware of it and would be very upset if they knew. Regardless of her parents’ feelings, she was positive about her relationship.

For Mariam, dating was out of the question. She was deeply religious and so would never consider having a relationship with the opposite sex out of wedlock. Interestingly enough, this did not stop her from having romantic feelings toward a boy who was part of her Islamic summer camp and sharing them with me:

I want to get married before twenty-five. I kind of already like a person. Well, um, there’s this boy … he was at the camp and he was always a close family friend that I’ve liked for awhile. And actually, now that I started wearing the hijab, I think he likes me more ‘cause his sisters wear it, you know. They’re always a very religious family. But when I tell people, it’s like, “Oh, you started wearing it for him?” No, I didn’t. But now that I do it’s kind of like … we’re just family friends. And I hope to get married to him one day.

And when you get married, for example, they say, “Oh, you know, no sex before marriage, no dating,” you know? Well, it’s actually really beautiful, the idea that only your husband can see your hair. And you’re supposed to in Islam adorn yourself for your husband. You’re supposed to look good for your husband and it’s actually good to be intimate with your husband and all of that.

As for male friends:

I’m really like – I’m not really – I don’t really talk to guys. I’m kinda shy. Not because of Islam or anything. I just don’t really have a lot of guy friends. And if I do, they’re just like, um, they – they’re really nerdy ones.
It was difficult to tell from Mariam’s conversation whether she and the boy she liked had voiced their feelings for one another. Her confidence that he was “the one” indicated some degree of friendship or closeness. She was clear that she did not believe in having a physical relationship with a boy prior to marriage. That being said, she did not see any harm in having feelings and perhaps expressing them to some degree as long as the relationship remained platonic.

The girls discussed this concept of platonic romantic relationships, dating, and marriage in the focus group discussion. They reflected on the need for beliefs about dating and marriage to change as a result of living in Canada and having daughters attending public schools with boys:

_Ameera:_ Well I have story. Because I was like her too because I wasn’t ever allowed to date, so now I seriously think my Dad, like talked to my Mom and he’s trying set me up with someone [laughter]. And I’m like “I want to date before!” It’s like they assume the person you date is the person you’re going to marry. And I’m like, “In this society it’s not like that.” So I feel so bad. And then I’m like “Why?!”

_Hena:_ I think there should be should a _halal_, Islamic type way of dating because when they say you shouldn’t have a boyfriend because you’re not supposed to interact with guys that way … but I think there should be a way where you can find a guy yourself instead of getting set up. Like my sister is engaged and the guy that she’s engaged with, they’ve known each other since forever. And so it was arranged, but at the same time … so like they’ve liked each other for a really long time. And I think it should be like that. It should be – you should know the guy, it shouldn’t be like old times where it’s just arranged and you meet the guy after you get engaged and kind of like, “Hi, you’re my fiancé now.” There should be a way where you can meet the guy before you actually talk about getting married.

_Sabeen:_ And also when your parents bring you here and put you in a setting where you’re going to school with guys, they can’t expect you not to. The same
with my Mom, she knows that I talk to guys, I have friends that are guys and stuff like that, but they also trust you to have those boundaries or whatever. But it’s not a big deal like you have a guy, or you’re talking to someone, it’s not like that.

For Laiba, friendships were something her parents needed to accept. Dating on the other hand was out of the question:

Like [if] my Mom didn’t want me to talk to guys … she would put me in an all girls Muslim school. We live in a public school. She can’t say don’t speak to guys. Come on. Like she went through my phone once and she was like, my phone would always have like girl numbers. But then I started working so I had to have like people I work with, guys, girls, it doesn’t matter. So I used to have their numbers. And she went through my phone once and she was like, “Who is Kevin?” I’m like, “A guy.” … and then my little sister … she’s like, “Oh don’t worry Mom, he’s Asian.” And I go like, “What?!” [laughter]. And my Mom’s like, “Oh, okay,” and that was it, [laughter]. And I just started laughing. I’m like, “So what if he’s Asian? Like whatever, he’s my friend.” But my Mom doesn’t, like obviously she goes through my numbers, whatever, guys, girls. Like she knows, like she trusts me … Unless it’s like a project, and I’d be like Mom, “I have to go to his house.” But I would never say that because she’d be like, “No you can’t go.” So I’d be like, “Hey, I’m going to a friend’s house to do a project.” That’s not something I have control of. Like, whatever.

People go out in our school. I know like [I can’t], I don’t want to be plopped into like an all girls Muslim school just for getting caught for dating. Therefore, I wouldn’t do it … Yeah, I’d get shipped to an all girls Muslim school [laughter].

Sabeen described the realities of going to a public school with boys and the challenges of being friends with boys in a suburb with a lot of other Muslims:

Like my Mom knows that obviously I go to school, a mixed school, and if they wanted me to not interact with guys then they would have sent me to a separate
school, right? And they know that … like my Mom knew that my older sister she used to go … she went to a restaurant, she knew that there would be guys and girls there. So if it was a birthday party, then there would be guys and girls mixed. She has a problem with obviously going to a house with guys and girls mixed, but if you’re outside and everyone sees that and you understand that everyone is going to see you and you’re doing nothing wrong, then she’s okay with that. My Dad is a little more not so happy with that, but my Mom knows. Yeah, I think it’s more of what other people would think because what happens [at] our school … it’s more of a community … what I was saying with the aunties and stuff like that, so it’s more of a community. I think that’s the same thing with Arabs. [Arab students are] like, “Oh, this lady is staring too hard at me, she must know my Mom,” or something like that. I don’t know, like I’ve had people see me actually at the plaza with a group of people. I don’t really panic anymore or care much anymore … like if I was on the phone with say one of my friends that was a boy … she’s aware.

Finally, Maliha shared how religion helped her deal with the desire and pressure to date:

Maliha: I wouldn’t go into that kind of stuff. I know it’s wrong for me. And I know … from a young age I was taught this and this, these are the rules of our religion, and you should follow them. Ever since then I don’t think I’ve been influenced by any of that kind of stuff. In high school especially, dating is like a big thing, right? So you do get the feeling of, “Oh my gosh I don’t have a boyfriend” or something like that. That feeling will cross my mind but then …

Interviewer: Feeling left out?

Maliha: Yeah, exactly. But then after, when I really think about it and what our religion has taught us, I feel better afterwards.
Extracurricular Activities and Participation

Extracurricular activities were a significant part of school for a number of my participants. These activities allowed them to explore their personal interests in a setting outside the classroom. In this section I explore the diverse interests of the participants and specifically look at involvement in interfaith clubs and Muslim Student Associations.

Participation and diverse interests.

Several of my participants were involved in extracurricular activities. These girls shared their interests in a wide array of areas. Ameera was part of several school clubs, such as the Empowered Student Partnership and Prom Committee. Iman described the various extracurricular activities she was involved in:

I started a newspaper club with one of my friends … so we’re busy working on that. I also am part of this Global Action Council which tries to raise awareness about global issues that are going on around the world … We’ve held assemblies. So I’ve been in charge of making, like, little videos and … Public service announcement … it’s just trying to get people aware of what’s going on … Two weeks from now we’re going to have another assembly for the earthquake in Haiti … And our council’s trying to raise I think $8,000 … to build a school in Haiti, so we’re just doing a video for that.

Hena was one of the few participants that discussed an avid interest in athletics. She was heavily involved in extracurricular activities and discussed how she balanced school and her other commitments:

I play basketball, badminton, and recently I’ve started to play lacrosse … actually basketball season’s done right now but when it was, it was like three times a week and it was from, like, 3:30 to like 5. So I’d come home and I’d have to do my homework, take a shower, eat … all this stuff and then I really – it was a lot of
work and then right now I have badminton and badminton club and then I have lacrosse on Thursday night and then I have swimming on Saturdays and I’m doing honour drumming … And so we practice every other Wednesday, so then I have to go to there, too. So it’s a lot. It’s a lot. [laughter] … the only thing that worries me is my homework. It’s kind of like I need to get home and do my homework. I need to get home early from school to do my homework before I go here.

Sabeen participated in a several extracurricular activities. She recently won an athletic award, but explained a lack of motivation to stick to any one activity:

I play badminton. I’ve been playing that since I was like four. After high school I swim, but not in a high school team. I’m in a badminton club. I used to volunteer at the library just here and there, but I don’t really go to that Friday Council and stuff, I tried that, but I just … I can’t commit to anything, I suck at that. Unless I’m really good at it, I just don’t feel like I need to be a part of it. I know a lot of things that happen at my school, say if you were on the volleyball team, you’re going to be on the volleyball team every year. They don’t really have a chance for new people to come in or things like that. And same with like the Friday Council, there is like five girls that run it, own it, everything, that’s it.

**Religious organizations: Advocating for Muslims.**

Some of my participants were part of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at their school. Other participants attended the MSA events but were not part of the planning and organizing. Not all the participants had MSAs at their school. Some schools had interfaith student associations, and a couple of the schools had no religious student associations at all.

Though Iman was not actively involved, she was aware of the MSA at her school through her close friend who started it:

My friend actually started that [MSA] and … she said there’s about, I think, twenty people that go there or who are part of the club. And she told me that
there’s even people who are not Muslim that go there … I guess they want to experience new things and they want to learn about Islam … But I think it’s good because, one of my friends, who actually goes there, who isn’t Muslim, she really likes Islam now. And I was reading one of her papers for philosophy and it was about human nature. And she started talking about God and she said her parents taught her, Hinduism … ever since she was young and she felt, like, restricted that she couldn’t learn anything. And by going to MSA and by, like, searching some stuff up on the internet, she feels like Islam is something that she wants to actually believe in instead of Hinduism.

Similar to Iman, Sabeen was not part of the MSA of her school but would attend the events:

I’m not a part of the committee. But, the people that come up with the idea to start up a MSA, they just hold meetings and everyone just comes together. And they asked, “What do you guys want to do for Eid? Do you want a dinner?” And they do a lot of things such as for the MSA dinner, all the proceeds, or most of it, went to the Pakistan the flood, yeah, to the flood in Pakistan, so they do things like that. We run charities and stuff. So I guess we get more response because that’s when you realize the large amount of Muslims at our school, when everyone comes together for their cause or just to have fun.

Maliha was actively involved with the MSA at her school:

Yeah, I have another friend, she does the hijab … [me], her, and a couple of other students, we created a MSA club, an association thing, and we basically talk about the stereotypes that are being put on Muslims and how we can make our school a place better for Muslim kids because some of them, they get bullied because of how the media is portraying Muslims as right? … Sometimes you can tell that people just don’t – like I wouldn’t because I’m wearing the hijab – but then you can sometimes tell, “Oh, you’re a Muslim” or something. Automatically you get
that terrorist kind of thing put on you even though you’re not. But that’s what happens.

Maliha described what they hoped to achieve:

It’s a discussion and basically we meet every Friday … after school. We’ll talk about what we can … like we’ll watch videos and stuff about Islam and we’ll discuss about it later and how that plays a role in our society and how that relates to us in our everyday lives and stuff. [The teacher advisor] she’s a Muslim teacher too and is the head basically of that.

Mariam’s school did not have an MSA, but used to have an interfaith council run by two girls from a university co-op program:

We used to have a Muslim group, an MSA, at our school. It was actually [an] interfaith council … so it wasn’t just for Muslims … actually two Muslim girls … they actually had to come in – I think it was part of their program but they had to come to our school and have meetings with us … and we had to come up with ways to kinda show the school that we’re more diverse. So I remember for Eid we had like a display – a display case up front. So we decorated that for Eid. We had a Skype [session] for Human Rights Day, International Human Rights Day … we talked to people in different countries. And we just did a lot of stuff like that.

**Chapter Discussion**

The personal relationships and social activities of my participants played a significant role in defining their schooling experiences. These interactions were intertwined with their educational lives and reflected various social values, forces, and influences. The following themes reflect to how the Muslim girls interpreted the social interactions and relationships they experienced as a result of attending public school. They also reflect the motivating factors behind beliefs and actions related to their social experiences.
**Affirmation of Muslim identity.**

Despite the lack of an environment that directly complemented the girls’ Islamic identities, several of the girls looked for means to affirm their religious and cultural identities in school. They did this through various avenues such as friendships, MSA involvement, and maintaining certain Islamic values and rituals during the school day. Though the majority of the girls had a diverse group of friends, several of them also had a group of Muslim friends or a few Muslim friends who they could relate to. Mariam chose to reconnect with her friends from Grade 8 once she started to wear the *hijab* because she was looking for positive affirmation of her new religious identity. Though she associated with many other students from various backgrounds, having a small inner circle of *hijabi* friends who could relate to being a *hijabi* provided her with a source of support, comfort, and connection to her faith. Other girls shared examples of similar actions as well, seeking out a few friends or sometimes even just one friend who was of similar religious or cultural background. Even if these students did not always have the same values as the girl, there was still a level of comfort that came with having a friend of a similar background. Yasmeen felt relieved that she had found *hijabi* friends who could help her adjust to life in a Canadian high school, and Laiba enjoyed the company of her Afghani Muslim girlfriend, even though her friend drank, had a boyfriend, and Laiba’s mother did not approve. It was not that the girls had to be on the same page religiously, but that such friendships allowed for a certain understanding regarding various values and beliefs. These friends were people who intimately understood what it was like, for example, to be Muslim, Afghani, or Pakistani. Regardless of whether their friends challenged or embraced their backgrounds, the girls felt their religious and cultural identities affirmed in their relationships with such individuals.
Another method was involvement in the MSA or interfaith organization. MSAs can be viewed as a forum for the intersection between the dynamic identities of its participants and the “dynamic nature of religious and philosophical inspiration” (Schmidt, 2004, pp. 92–93, as cited in Mir, 2006, p. 57). MSAs have also been shown to be a source of positive peer pressure for Muslim students at times when they are torn between societal norms and religious expectations (Zine, 2001). Maliha, along with a few of her friends, was the founder of the MSA at her school. Though she prided herself on being friends with a diverse group of friends, she still wanted to do something that supported the Muslim students in school and helped to create harmony between various faiths and groups. Her involvement allowed her to be true to this aspect of her identity in a meaningful way. Several of the other participants were also either part of the MSA or interfaith council at their school, affiliated with it, or attended events thrown by the club. MSA involvement allowed these girls to maintain a link with their religious and cultural identities and potentially do something meaningful to either raise awareness or support religious and cultural communities back “home.” For example, Sabeen reflected on how her MSA had raised money for flood victims in Pakistan through various fundraisers. The MSA provided her with the means to do something charitable for her country of origin. In this manner, MSA involvement provided a counterpoint to school clubs that were related purely to sports or social activities and provided a link to the student’s religious and cultural lives.

Finally, observing certain aspects of their religion at school was perhaps the most genuine way of affirming their religious identities. For some girls this was achieved by wearing the hijab; for others it was achieved by staying true to certain values, such as fasting during the month of Ramadhan, eating halal food, and praying during school hours (see Chapter 4). Which practices were observed depended on factors such as personal values, peer influence, school culture, and
their parents’ beliefs. Like Collet’s (2007) participants, there was a great deal of diversity in what religious beliefs and rituals the girls chose to observe. Hardly any of the girls had the exact same set of beliefs; it was their desire to observe some aspect of their religion that united them. The girls who consistently observed certain aspects of their religious beliefs in school were not swayed by what was the “norm.” They felt quite comfortable stating their beliefs to their friends and explaining why they acted in a certain manner. School provided some challenges to their religious observances but was not a roadblock. These girls felt buoyed by their belief system and were confident in their decisions to observe certain practices. Affirming one’s Muslim identity was important to many of the girls. Though they wanted to feel like a part of the school culture, and for the most part they all did, this did not mean they were willing to ignore their religious and cultural backgrounds to achieve that purpose. Though some of the girls felt this was more trying than others, ultimately, finding a way to strike a balance was what many sought to achieve.

**Valuing diverse friends.**

It was very clear from the interviews that the majority of the girls had a deep respect and regard for diversity. This was particularly obvious when it came to friendships and the school environment. Most of the participants had a multicultural group of friends. Cristillo’s (2007) study of Muslim students in New York City indicates similar findings. Her data reflects that the majority of students see no conflict between associating with and having friends that are non-Muslim. For my participants, their social groups consisted of students from various religious, cultural, and racial backgrounds.

The girls cited the many benefits of having such a diverse mix of friends. Several of them explained that having diverse friends allowed them to learn about one another’s cultures. These
experiences were regarded as enjoyable and interesting. For example, Iman shared with a certain level of pride that she had one of the most diverse groups of friends in the entire school. Weekend visits to friends’ homes created opportunities to learn about one another’s cultures and religions. Similarly, Mariam’s Christian friend was happy to invite her friends to her church for social events. Mariam happily attended, viewing it as an opportunity to learn about her friend’s religion and also just as a purely social activity.

Having diverse friends also provided opportunities to discuss differences among their various religions. The girls patiently answered their friends’ questions about Islam based on whatever knowledge they had of their religion. However, religious discussions and debates were not only related to the Muslim identities of students. Maliha recollected a constant debate between two friends, one Atheist and the other Christian, about religion. Though a few of the girls mentioned discussions of religion, for the most part, differences were put aside. It was the commonalities among the friends in the group that brought them together and allowed them to see beyond their religions and cultures.

For some of the girls, friendships were based on attitudes toward school, such as being more “school-oriented” or “nerdy.” With such friends, the chances of dealing with issues such as drinking and partying were less likely. Thus, although these students were not Muslim, they were more like the Muslim girls in their social activities and in their general attitudes toward the balance between school and socializing. Mariam explained that in her group of friends, they put religion aside and focused on things they all liked or enjoyed, like going to the movies. Maliha explained that one of her best friends was a Jehovah’s Witness whose religion was quite similar to Islam. This allowed the two girls to develop a unique relationship. In this manner, the majority of the girls in my study were able to maintain a diverse group of friends who they felt accepted
them and opened their eyes to other customs, traditions, and beliefs. The girls felt such
differences enlivened their friendships rather than stifled them. Moreover, the commonalities
they shared overshadowed religious and cultural differences in their day-to-day lives as students.

It is important to mention that school demographics played an interesting role the girls’
decisions to make certain types of friends. If a girl attended a school with a large Muslim
population, or one that mirrored her cultural background, she didn’t necessarily become friends
with girls like her. In Sarroub’s (2005) study of Yemini girls, the hijabi girls generally associated
with one another, finding comfort in their shared cultural and religious experiences. The strict
boundaries placed on them by their communities, made associating and connecting with other
students difficult. This was not the case for any of my participants, whose families did not place
the same degree of restrictions on their daughters.

Decisions made regarding friends were informed by a multitude of factors, such as stage
in life, personal beliefs, parents’ values, school culture, and coincidence. For example, Mariam
attended a school with a large Indian population. After her religious transformation, she
abandoned her Guyanese group of friends, who were the same cultural background as her, and
made all new friends. Some of her friends were Muslim hijabi girls she had been friends with in
middle school and the remaining was a mix of diverse ethnicities and religions. Hena, a Pakistani
girl, attended a school with a large Muslim and South Asian population but chose to hang out
with girls from various backgrounds, most of them not Muslim or Pakistani. She explained that
these girls had been her friends from childhood. Meanwhile, Yasmeen attended a school with
very few Muslims but chose to hang out with the only two other hijabi girls in the school. Thus
the presence of few Muslim students or many Muslim students did not always predict whether
the girls would be friends with people of the same religious background. However, it did impact
how they perceived their friendships in respect to the school’s student population. Hena remarked that her mother found it odd that she had no Muslim friends in a school with so many Muslim students, and Yasmeen was extremely conscious that she and the other hijabis in the school were only friends with one another, making them quite visible within the school community.

All of the girls displayed a keen awareness of the school demographics and where they and their friends fit into the mix. This awareness guided how they spoke about their friendships, social interactions, and general school culture. However, it did not necessarily change their choices regarding their friends. Girls who were generally drawn to people of their own culture or religion were able to find at least one friend (or a few) who fit this criteria, just as girls who enjoyed a diverse mix associated with people from various backgrounds.

Tolerating stereotypes.

Attending school in a diverse environment was not without its challenges. A number of the girls were exposed to negative beliefs and comments about Muslims. The girls in my study were exposed to these views several ways, including questions, both innocent and ignorant, and stereotypical jokes.

Many of the girls mentioned answering questions from their friends and peers about Islam. The girls always responded to the questions respectfully based on what they had been taught or personally believed about their religion. Many of the questions, though seemingly innocent, had an undertone of judgment or conveyed a preconceived notion of the religion. Some of the girls picked up on this, while others, if they did pick up on the undertones, did not convey that they had or ignored it.
Several studies indicate the frustrations Muslim girls experience with having to answer questions from their peers about their religion peers (Alvi, 2008; Hanson, 2009; Sirin & Fine, 2008). Their frustrations related to insensitive and insulting questions that put Muslim girls on the spot or seemed antagonistic. My participants did not share the same level of frustration as many of the girls in the aforementioned studies. Questions usually revolved around topics dealing with the *hijab*, marital laws, such as a man having four wives, dating outside of wedlock, and fasting. How these questions were posed influenced how the girls perceived the question. For example, Yasmeen was asked by a new friend why she wore the *hijab* and about the practice of wearing the *niqab*. The way the question was phrased indicated that the girl felt the *niqab* was an oppressive form of dressing. In addition, the redundancy of asking Yasmeen why she wore the *hijab* indicated an issue the peer had with the *hijab*. Regardless of this undertone and the fact that Yasmeen wore the *hijab*, she saw it as an opportunity to educate someone about her religion. Ameera took a similar approach, though her recollection of all the questions she had to answer, including what would happen if one died of fasting, held a tone of humour and exasperation at having to constantly explain aspects of her religion to her friends.

For the most part, the girls were comfortable responding to questions about their religion, finding that it provided them an opportunity to clear up misconceptions about Islam. In addition, most of the questions were more inquisitive in nature. At times a question could go from inquisitive to insulting. One girl’s avowal that she would never convert to Islam after asking Nadia several questions about it upset Nadia. A sense that Islam was excessively strict in comparison to the norms of Canadian society seemed to exist behind many of the questions posed to the girls. Trying to explain that this was not always the case was a little frustrating for a couple of the girls. Despite this, they participated in this dialogue with their friends in hopes of...
clarifying aspects of the religion. Their tolerance toward their peers’ unawareness indicated a desire to educate people and display a more peaceful and rational side of the religion, one that is not always conveyed through the media coverage.

Jokes about Muslims were another way the girls were exposed to certain stereotypical notions about Muslims. Though several of the girls referred to the prevalence of jokes about Muslims being terrorists among their friends and peers, this was not the case for many of my participants. It seemed that most of the jokes and comments students made related to topics such as 9/11, Osama bin Laden, and terrorism. The attitude the girls had toward these types of comments was intriguing. Almost all the girls remarked that jokes of this nature made by friends were not a big deal. These comments were perceived as harmless and not indicative of what their friends actually thought about the Muslim girls. For example, Laiba insisted that no one really meant any harm by making terrorist jokes when it was done among friends. It was done, “solely to poke fun … no one would say anything offensive, at least not in public school.” However, a couple of the girls noted that, just because they were not offended by the comments, didn’t mean that someone else would not be. They were aware that another Muslim student might find such comments offensive and insulting.

There was also a point where comments such as these crossed the line. The two instances shared by my participants of a comment being insulting and offensive were made by peers, not close friends. Nadia shared an episode where a non-Muslim peer continued to call her a terrorist, even after she asked him to stop. She differentiated between such an episode and silly jokes made by friends. The former was seen as antagonistic, while the latter was meaningless banter. Still, she felt that people’s true thoughts about Muslims, not the comments made as jokes, were things that would be never said to someone’s face.
Many of the girls referred to negative perceptions regarding Muslims, but these were seen as separate from jokes several girls experienced made by friends. Context in this respect was very important. Who made the comment and how it was made influenced the girl’s reactions to it. For the most part, the girls were highly tolerant and accepting of such jokes. Laiba shared that she too partook in the jokes, making comments about her friend’s racial and religious backgrounds. Though Laiba was the only participant to say that she also participated in such behaviour, the belief that racial and religious jokes were harmless, as long as they occurred between friends that had an understanding, was shared by many of the participants. The girls were willing to brush such comments aside with a laugh or a retort. Explanations about the nature of the religion and issues related to Islamic terrorism were saved for conversations among friends. In this manner, the girls were able to keep their more serious concerns of negative perceptions about Muslims separate from the casual conversations about religion. It also provided a strategy of not dealing with some of the more widespread stereotypes.

It may be fair to argue that some of the girls would rather not deal with the underlying issue, choosing instead to chalk such jokes up to teenagers being juvenile. Such trepidation is seen elsewhere, where a few girls felt conscious of drawing attention to their Muslim identity in regards to religious accommodations, class activities, and acts of discrimination (see Chapters 4 and 6). While some researchers would argue that such behaviour is indicative of an academic and social environment that marginalizes Muslim students and allows Islamophobic behaviour to take root (Abu El-Haj, 2006; Zine, 2001), the participants in this study neither felt marginalized nor targeted. Though there were challenges to being a Muslim girl in today’s society, such instances were perceived as minor hurdles instead of insurmountable obstacles. These instances did not occur frequently enough for the girls to feel threatened or marginalized.
Home and school life: Negotiating boundaries.

The daily life of a public school student posed certain conflicts for my participants and created the need for compromise. As Muslim girls, their religious and cultural values did not always align with the behaviour and activities that were the norm in school and among their peers. These issues related to several areas, including friends, clothing, dating, boys, and social activities. When conflicts occurred between what was happening at school and what the girls had been taught, a compromise was often required between the girls and their parents.

The role of parents in the lives of Muslim girls is often central to influencing their experiences in public school (Cristillo, 2008; Moghissi et al., 2008; Orgocka, 2004; Sarroub, 2005). Sarroub (2005) discusses the pressure Yemeni Muslim girls feel to be successful in both the family sphere and the school setting, while Moghissi et al. (2009) highlight the importance of maintaining family honour for Pakistani Muslim girls. In order to both participate in social activities and maintain their religious and cultural values, the participants turned to their parents for permission and approval. Many spoke about the various compromises they made with their parents in regards to certain social activities. The types of friends a girl had is one example. Some parents preferred more academic friends, hoping it would steer their daughter away from activities such as drinking and partying. These girls sought to make friends that were more school oriented, who were less inclined to participate in such social activities, and had similar restrictions. Clothing was another example. Sabeen shared the variances in her dressing based on whom she was with. Though she was allowed to wear dresses with tights when she was with her friends, her mother expected her to be slightly more modest among family friends and community members.
Having male friends was a more significant concern. A couple girls mentioned their parents’ concerns about socializing with boys. Sabeen and Laiba both explained that this was something their mothers had learned to accept, though the trade-off was that they absolutely did not date. Finally, social activities, such as school banquets, prom, and parties thrown by friends, were a point of debate in some households. Maliha was not allowed to attend prom, though her parents had given her permission to attend the athletic banquet as long as she did not take part in dancing. Mixed gatherings were also an issue; however, some parents capitulated and allowed their daughters to attend. This process of compromising was the norm for many of the girls. Whether their parents were “strict” or “laid back,” religious or not, there were still aspects of their social activities inside and outside of school that did not complement the general religious values espoused at home. Parents, particularly mothers, were constantly finding a middle ground that respected both their religious values and their daughter’s desire to participate in certain activities and behaviours.

Several of the girls mentioned the juxtaposition between their parents’ values and the society they lived in. The used phrases such as, “in this society” to highlight that a change needed to occur in the way their parents understood their high school experience given that they lived in a society that greatly varied in many respects from the culture of their country of origin. There was a sense among many of the girls that the values and norms of Canadian society needed to be taken into account when making decisions about religious lifestyle. In their opinion, certain practices, such as arranged marriage, no longer made sense, and to a certain extent were not even being practiced in their home countries among certain social classes. The same concept was also used to consider the necessity or practicality of the hijab (see Chapter 4).
The girls also referred to the difference between public school and private Islamic school. For example, Laiba felt that accepting her male friends was part of the public school experience. If her parents did not want her interacting with boys, then they should have sent her to private school. Thus, several of the girls considered how differences in schooling and society required their parents to compromise on certain issues. For the girls, the norms of the society they lived in were not as foreign to them, since they were subjected and immersed in them on a daily basis through school. They also felt more connected to Canadian culture than their parents who had all immigrated to Canada.

Unfortunately, compromise did not always work effectively. Parents were not always open to everything that some of my participants wanted to do. In such instances, the girls pushed the boundaries of what was considered “acceptable Muslim girl behaviour.” Most of the girls did this quietly, by lying to their parents, instead of openly defying them. Afraid of disappointing their parents or simply not being allowed to do a certain activity, the girls avoided the conversation all together. Instances of lying involved having a boyfriend, trying alcohol, going to a boy’s house to work on a project, and attending a party. While some of the girls felt guilty about deceiving their parents, others did not. For example, Laiba did not feel guilty about going to a boy’s house for a school project because she felt that she was not doing anything wrong. Guilt was associated more with the awareness that their parents would be truly upset if they knew what their daughter was doing. Regardless of this fact, several girls continued with their actions because they were not fully convinced that what they were doing was in fact wrong. Iman shared that she felt her boyfriend made her a better person, and Ameera explained that she did not believe that the act of drinking was in fact sinful. In Chapter 4, I shared the story of Nadia who was caught in a major lie that truly shocked and dismayed her parents. This was the
only instance where being caught resulted in a major emotional breakdown, or perhaps breakthrough, for Nadia. The breakdown was as much about maintaining family honour in the community as having compromised the hardships her parents had endured to immigrate to Canada for a better life for their children. The guilt was too much for Nadia to bear. She refocused her attentions on school and made a vow to be more honest with her parents.

Many of the girls continued to push the boundaries with their parents. Lying was one of ways to participate in certain social activities without dealing with their parents’ views. By acting in this manner, some of the girls were able to falsely appease or please their parents while exploring certain social aspects of being a “regular” high school student. For the time being, they were able to push aside certain conflicts between their religion and their actions or their parents’ values and their own. Though this may not have been the most authentic way of dealing with a conflict of values, it provided them time to figure out where they stood on certain issues.

**Summary of Key Themes**

In this chapter, I discuss in greater detail some of the social interactions that define the schooling experiences of Muslim girls. This chapter explores friendships with diverse students and Muslim students, challenges, such as contending with stereotypes and social practices such as dating, drinking and partying, and participation in extracurricular activities. Each type of experience shows the various ways the Muslim girls sought to understand their religious and cultural beliefs and values in respect to various aspects of public school life. Several themes arose from the conversations related to social interactions:

1. **Affirmation of Muslim identity.** A desire to fit in did not compromise the Islamic identities of many of the girls. Many of the girls found ways to stay true to their
Islamic identities through friendships with other Muslim girls, involvement in MSA activities, and maintaining various religious rituals or beliefs regardless of school or social pressure.

2. *Valuing diverse friends.* The girls shared their value for diverse friends. These friendships allowed them to learn about one another’s backgrounds, discuss differences, and focus on commonalities. Though a few of the girls preferred to have a core group of female Muslim friends, they all saw the importance of associating with and understanding students from various backgrounds.

3. *Tolerating stereotypes.* Questions or comments regarding Muslims were a common occurrence for several of the girls. The girls dealt with the questions, which often had an undertone of judgment or negative perception, with patience. At times this was seen as an opportunity to educate their peers about Islam, and at other times a way to deal with misconceptions. Within some of the girls’ groups of friends or acquaintances, stereotypical jokes about Muslims were made. For the most part the girls brushed these off, explaining that they were harmless and meaningless. They differentiated between such jokes and more pointed, confrontational remarks about Muslims.

4. *Home and school life: Negotiating boundaries.* Several of the activities that took place at school or in relation to school friends challenged the values espoused in the homes of these Muslim girls. At such times, the girls worked out compromises with their parents that allowed for them to partake in various activities. Parents, particularly mothers, and their daughters worked through what would be appropriate.
When this did not work, a few of the girls pushed the boundaries of acceptable behaviour by quietly defying their parents. Though some girls felt guilty about lying to their parents, others felt that their actions were not actually deviant.

In the following chapter, I explore the role curriculum plays in how Muslim girls understand their experiences in public secondary school.
Chapter 6:
Curriculum Experiences: Present Impact and Future Aspirations – Findings

Curriculum is arguably the most concrete aspect of what happens in school. For this study, curricular experiences came to include (a) curriculum content, (b) curriculum instruction, and (c) curriculum impact on decision-making. My participants perceived the “intended” curriculum, meaning here the course content and learning material, as the most fixed aspect of their educational experience. Depending on the teacher, learning the curriculum could be either mundane or inspirational. The most interesting points of discussion on curricular experiences were when the participants reflected on the intersection of curriculum with their religion, culture, and gender. The dynamic interplay and interchange between the curriculum and their multiple identities displayed the evolving nature of being a Muslim girl in a public school environment. This chapter explores course preferences and learning styles, studying Islam in the classroom, student–teacher interactions, and academic and professional aspirations.

Curriculum Content

The participants had many opinions about matters related to curriculum content and learning methods. Their opinions can best be divided into course preferences, learning styles, and studying Islamic topics in class.

Courses preferences and learning styles.

My participants had diverse interests when it came to favourite courses and learning styles. They were motivated to study subjects or topics for a variety of personal reasons, had different learning styles, and appreciated a wide array of learning methods. While some of the girls excelled in school, such as Hena who had been identified as gifted, others struggled with
particular courses. The girls expressed interest in a wide variety of courses. Sabeen shared with me her preference for art and social science courses:

I like the artsy courses and I like the social sciences courses … All my teachers since Grade 9, they’ve been telling me to take social sciences courses because I like discussions and talking.

Ameera was very clear that she enjoyed science courses a great deal more than humanities:

I don’t know. I’m more of a math person, money, logistics, one answer. I hate that abstract … I try to stay away from all that philosophy. I get the math. And I like bio, mainly because I want to work in the healthcare field. And I like the blood and all that gory stuff … I don’t know, I just feel like it is what I like more than the English. English was very, very painful for me. It was hard because it’s not even the grammar, [that] part was fine because I’d ask teachers, “Is it my grammar, my sentences?” No, it’s fine, it’s not grammar now. More maybe … reading between the lines, and I was just never good at that [laugh].

Regardless of her course preferences, excelling at school was non-negotiable for Ameera:

Being a Muslim, in terms of academically, I guess like listening to your parents. That was a big – they always taught us in the mosque, listen to your parents, so that I’d always listen and fear them. So like that kind of made me work harder in school because like we’d get in serious trouble if we brought home anything less than an A. So it was annoying at first, but then that built in and eventually I just started wanting to get A’s because it’s something I’m used to.

Some of the participants’ course preferences were based on what they excelled at and others on their areas of interest. Nadia enjoyed the sciences: “I love science, but then the thing is I’m not that great at it.” Laiba’s course preferences were based on her skills and areas of interest:
I’m not good at science at all. Math I have to try hard to get good marks. So it’s not my thing … my spelling is horrible. My grammar is … my writing is good. If I write something, it’s good. But if I write something in class [the spelling] is horrible.

As for her personal learning style:

Ummmm, projects over tests. I can get 90s on projects, but I could get 50s on tests for some odd reason. I don’t know why. I don’t do well on tests. Group work over individual work because individual work is usually textbook work, and I don’t like textbook work. So I’d rather do group work. And listening to the teacher read or just speaking. Then I can absorb it that way easier.

Laiba gravitated toward the social sciences for these reasons, though writing was still a struggle in these courses. She also enjoyed learning about topics that directly related to current issues, a reason she fell in love with the Grade 12 World Issues course and had recently decided to pursue a degree in political science. Laiba expressed her delight at picking up on a reference to an individual she had studied in her World Issues class while watching TV one night:

I was watching Simpsons and they started talking about micro-credit banks and Mohammad Yunas … they were poking fun at it, but they were still … teaching … and I moodeled Ms. Pereira, “I’m watching Simpson’s right now and this is an episode!” And she’s like, “Oh, okay I’ll try to get it for next year!” … It’s good to know that the stuff you learn is actually used out in the outside world.

Like Laiba, Mariam also enjoyed courses that related to society at large:

I love world history … I love history teachers as well. I don’t like science, math. I love English as well … family studies … I think it’s more about the world. I don’t think you have to learn about trigonometry and all that stuff. I think it’s too in depth. I think you should focus on what has happened in the past. English is a bit
more like literacy … I like classes that will help you in life. Not science, finding molecules or whatever.

Iman was extremely academically motivated. She discussed how she enjoyed courses that challenged her:

I like a lot of the social sciences and philosophy and … law. Definitely … it challenges you in a way … especially with philosophy, it challenges everything you know, and it gives you a whole new perspective on different issues. So it’s interesting and that’s what I really like about it.

An extremely hardworking student, Iman shared how her work ethic was the most significant aspect about her:

The first thing I’ll tell someone when they ask me, “Who are you?” or, “Explain yourself;” I would say, “I’m a hardworking individual,” … because I feel those are such vague terms – [such as], “I’m Ethiopian.” Anyone can be Ethiopian. Or, “I’m Muslim,” anyone can be Muslim. But I feel – I don’t know, I feel all my life I’ve been working so hard to get where I’m at now. And I guess that’s why I choose to always say that as my [identity] … And even being Ethiopian, there’s little community centres where everyone would gather around, and I generally – I don’t like going to them because I feel I don’t really fit in with the rest of them. I feel our personalities are different … ‘cause generally those people live in Toronto. So I don’t really associate with them, so that’s probably why.

I want to be successful and I don’t think I realized that until I got into high school because … when I was younger, I used to get poor grades and I wasn’t doing as well, but I’m pushing myself now to do that because I know I can do it.

On how she defined success, Iman explained, “Going to school. Having a good career. Having a good life.”
Islamic topics in the curriculum.

My participants were minimally exposed to topics related to their religion and cultural background in the various courses they took. A couple of them could not recall even one instance where a topic related to Islam was brought up in class. Most of the participants could recall a few instances. My participants had multiple ways of understanding the disconnect between their backgrounds and what they studied in class, such as explaining that courses were generally from the “Christian” perspective or that the purpose of school was to teach the “basics.” Only a few participants, such as Yasmeen and Mariam, expressed an explicit desire for curriculum that spoke to their religious and cultural identities, bridging the gap between their spiritual and academic worlds.

On occasion, topics on Islam did make their way into the curriculum. These topics included discussion of current issues, controversial topics, and historical and general knowledge. Other than the inclusion of Islam in the Grade 12 World Religions textbook and other such course material, inclusion of Islamic topics were generally driven by the teacher and introduced through supplementary course materials.

Current and controversial topics: Deconstructing Islam in the classroom.

The inclusion of current and controversial topics occurred in several of my participants’ classes. I address these two types of topics in the same section because it seems that most of the current issues related to Muslims are also to some degree controversial. This speaks to the tenuous position of Islam in popular thought.
9/11, honour killings, and Quran burning.

9/11 was included in the curriculum in several of my participants’ courses. Maliha encountered discussion of 9/11 in her Grade 10 Canadian History course. She described her emotions while the teacher directed the lesson:

We were talking about 9/11 and … terrorists … Osama bin Laden, his name would come up. And then we would be watching video clips on it and I would feel uncomfortable because being a Muslim I don’t really want to be tagged as a terrorist or something … that was kind of uncomfortable.

Mariam also had to study 9/11, but in her World Religion class. 9/11 was part of their study of the religion of Islam. The textbook’s stance that violence was not in the true nature of Islam was comforting to Mariam:

We were talking about 9/11 and we were watching a video … and even in the textbook it said, and the teacher was talking about, it’s not in the true spirit of Islam. That’s what the textbook said, you know, to be doing that, to be killing people … Nowhere in the Quran did it say to kill people so … I don’t think people really look at me as being a terrorist or supporting them.

Sabeen’s Grade 11 Anthropology, Sociology and Psychology (APS) class leant itself well to topics related to Islam. Since a large population of the students in her school were Muslim, a current issues project assigned to students opened up a forum for discussing controversial Islamic topics. For example, one student chose the murder of Aqsa Parvez and another chose honour killings. After the students in Sabeen’s APS class presented their projects, a heated discussion began about whether Aqsa Parvez’s murder was in fact an honour killing. The teacher played a significant role in managing the discussion and the students’ emotions. Sabeen explained:
You never hear about an honour killing for a Christian or whatever, but you hear a lot of honour killings that happen with Muslims … She [the teacher] was convinced that the media was targeting Muslims too, even though she wasn’t Muslim, but by hearing what we had to say.

Sabeen shared her own thoughts on the murder:

It’s basically a murder to me, that’s what I think it was. Whatever reason it was, that doesn’t really matter. Someone killed another person so it’s murder to me, personally … But I think that … if a White Christian were to do it to someone else, they wouldn’t have as much coverage, but now they had the whole idea of wearing the hijab and going against her family’s honour or whatever. So, yeah, I think that the media does cover a lot of things incorrectly or highlights a lot of things that shouldn’t be … it helps them sell their newspaper.

The Quran burning in Florida was a source of discussion in Sabeen’s Grade 11 World Religions course:

In our World Religions class we were talking about how next to 9/11 they were trying to make the mosque. So we talked about things like that and how the priest was going to burn the Quran. For the World Religion [course], we were talking about people that use the religion or say that they’re doing it for a religion, they’re actually doing it just to gain – like personally [I think], just for fame or whatever. The guy that was going to burn the Qur’an, apparently it just created a hype about it and he didn’t actually end up doing it. He’s like, “I’m going to do it next week. I’m going to do it next week,” and stuff like that. And then all these Facebook groups started up about it, and so people boycotted Facebook because of it. Like all the time if I go on Facebook I see things like, “Click this if you want to stop the burning of the Qur’an!” but is that really going to stop it? Because you click a button that says “like?” So stuff like that in classes comes up and everyone gives their opinion on it, but you can’t really reach a conclusion about it because you’re not … we hear about these stories and read about them, but we don’t really know
what’s happening. We don’t know the idea behind why he wanted to do it or anything.

*Hijab.*

The *hijab* was the subject of a story read in Maliha’s Grade 9 English class:

I remember once in Grade 9 English, my teacher, she asked me how I feel about wearing the *hijab* because we were talking about a story about a Muslim girl who wore a *burqa* to school and the school didn’t accept it. So she asked me how I feel, am I treated differently? I told her what I thought about it and that I’m not treated differently, that’s good, that I’m still treated with respect and everything … It felt like I was being put on the spot because I really don’t like to stand out a lot. I just do my own stuff. But then once I told her it felt better to let people know what my own personal view is of the *hijab* and what I think about it.

The headscarf ban in France was a topic of discussion in Laiba’s Grade 11 APS class:

I think it was just a general topic that came up and [the teacher’s] like, “They banned it” … but I don’t blame them because they’re saying how people could have anything under there. Like they’ve got bombs and a guy could be under there, and you would never know. It’s for safety reasons; therefore I don’t … oppose it. Yeah, I’m Muslim and everything, but I don’t oppose it because it’s for safety reasons because safety reasons come before everything, right?

And also in religion it doesn’t say that you have to cover everything. It says you could show your face and your two hands. So I don’t know. If they’re doing it out of respect, you have to take in consideration where you live as well. [The French] didn’t do it because they’re like, “Oh we don’t like Muslims and we don’t want them to wear *burqas.*”
Islam and Islamic history.

Aside from current and controversial issues, several of the participants encountered topics related to Islamic history and religious doctrine in their classes. Yasmeen, having recently emigrated from the United Arab Emirates, was pleased at the inclusion of Islamic calligraphy in her art class:

I remember in my art class … there was a topic where … we had to study about the Islamic art and the Quran, calligraphy and Arabic, and the art and the architecture of the Islamic monuments, so we had to study about that. And it was quite interesting and she even came up with a topic that she even asked us that, “Muslims aren’t allowed to draw people and features and animals or anything that which has a face.” So she said that, “but if you look at the Christians, they actually depict biblical stories through images, through visual and everything.” And so she asked us, “Why do you think that they do that?” She asked, I think she was kind of pointing at me, that “Why aren’t Muslims allowed to draw faces?” so, um, there was another Muslim girl. She had her hands up and she [answered the question].

Similar to Maliha, Yasmeen felt a slight bit of anxiety when the teacher asked a question about Islamic art:

I remember when anything Islamic came up, I felt people were staring at me. That [they] had their eyes on me. I knew that there’s only one Muslim girl in their class. I felt like people are staring at me when an Islamic term [came up] or when we were talking about Islam or anything about Muslims. I felt I was being watched from people … Because I guess they knew that I was the only hijabi or … maybe, I don’t know, maybe they wanted, just they knew that I was the only Muslim girl, so they would just look at me, look at my reactions to that.
Despite the momentary feeling of anxiety, Yasmeen told me it made her feel proud to see her religion’s contribution to the discipline.

Other participants also elaborated on their experiences of learning about Islam in public school. Sabeen and Mariam both studied Islam in their World Religions class. For Sabeen, studying Islam alongside a multitude of other religions was an eye opening experience. She said to me:

I think that from hearing a lot of other people, well it’s mostly Muslims talking, but say one of the Buddhists or there’s three or four people that are from different religions, I have noticed when they put their views in, in a way my teacher and all the kids have kind of figured out that all the rituals and all the beliefs they tie in together, whether it be the reason why you perform a ritual in a different religion. But I guess the course … is teaching everyone to respect one another’s cultures and there’s a reason behind everything that everyone does, like every culture does or every religion does.

Even in this case, Sabeen’s teacher played a large role in creating an atmosphere where the students felt free to explore other religions without guilt that they were betraying their own faith in anyway:

And my teacher … I don’t know what he is actually. His name is Mr. Sidhu. He’s brown. But he doesn’t really tell us what … he hasn’t told us what he is, but he tells us that he has a lot of friends that are Muslims and this and that, he knows a lot of different people. I guess going into that class everyone feels comfortable when you have a teacher like that. The first introduction, the way he introduced the course, was very good because he tried to put all the religions in one. Tried to tie them all up and show the similarities. And then he said that, “Now we’re going to go … in specifics.” But he showed us the different … like a thing of the Kaaba, and he was quizzing us on all these things … I never had anything against other
religions, but I always thought Muslim made the most sense to me. And he’s like, “The course might confuse you a little bit.” He’s had one person convert out of the course too, but … He’s like … every time he starts something, like yesterday he’s like, “I’m going to teach you a meditation exercise.” He’s like, “I’m not looking to convert you or anything! We’re going to take a class field trip and it’s going to be every place. We’re going to go to a mosque, we’re going to go a church, we’re going to go to the Buddhist temple … and we’re just going to go everywhere.” He makes us feel as if the course is just a chance to open our eyes. A lot of my friends took the course. It’s a lot work. He teaches us like we’re in university and he’s hard on us, but one of my friends is like, “Now I know what I’m praying about,” after she took the course.

**Challenges to personal Islamic beliefs: Negotiating a middle ground.**

Public school was definitely an environment where the Muslim girls faced topics and issues in curriculum that at times contradicted with their religious beliefs and teachings. Topics such as abortion, homosexuality, and evolution came up in class from time to time and were occasionally the source of discussion among friends. The girls were forced to confront the fact that some of these issues went against what they had learned from their parents, at mosque, or during religious lectures and classes.

*Abortion.*

Among my participants, Ameera seemed to be the most frustrated with aspects of her faith. In her interview, she expressed the multitude of questions she had about her religion. Abortion was a topic that came up in her Grade 11 APS course. Though Ameera was not in the course, she had friends who were, and she described to me a discussion that ensued among her friends regarding where they stood on abortion:
That would be our lunch discussion. And then some of us wouldn’t really know where we stand, so we’d argue. I’m not, “Yes, abortion!” I’m not 100% no for it … people do make mistakes. I don’t think I would be able to do it, but for example if she was raped, like I can’t ask the girl that was raped to carry a baby full term and give the baby away. Like forever, there’s still something of yours that’s out there. You only have – I don’t know, [if] she wanted to stop the pregnancy, I couldn’t look her in the eye and say, “No, keep that baby!” Like after what she’s been through, right? So in those cases … and some people would be like, “No, it’s not the child’s fault, it’s a child of God” or something. I don’t know … but I just didn’t agree with it.

Ameera shared with me that she knew her father would not agree with even discussing such a topic. She explained:

I was glad I went to public school and not Muslim school because I wouldn’t have – because public school is more liberal. They’re more, “What do you think?” not rules. And there’s more accepting of every single culture. I feel sometimes my Dad, he is so one minded, he writes off everybody else that doesn’t follow his way of life.

I think to live in this kind of society you have to be willing to work with people, so many kinds of people. You know, my Dad, if he had to work alongside like – if found out before he got the job that maybe his boss was a transgender or something … he wouldn’t apply. Or if you go to work, sometimes you might go to work parties, they might serve alcohol. You don’t have to drink but everyone around you is going to be drinking. My Dad would probably not even go. And I found that, just I don’t know, maybe to live in this liberal country school just opens your mind.

You learn topics of abortion, you actually debate it. Look at my Dad. He probably wouldn’t even dream of topics like abortions. And then stuff just opens
your mind more, I don’t know. I learned so much other stuff and you just develop yourself as a person.

_Evolution versus creationism._

A couple of the girls discussed contradictions with their religious belief in regards to the theory of evolution versus a belief in creationism. Nadia felt deeply connected to her faith. She had turned to her religion after a terrible episode in her life, which she preferred not to share in the interview. She also was passionate about science and wanted to be a doctor. I asked her if she felt there were any tensions between what she had learned in various science classes and her Islamic beliefs:

When I read the scientific ways, it just makes sense, but it’s just, I know that God started it. Well, I think they just connect together … God created whatever the scientists are discovering now. That’s what I think and that’s how I believe in it and I haven’t really thought about it much. I guess I just connect science [with religion] and weigh them together. I know people say there’s a religious perspective and there’s a scientific perspective, but I think it just goes together for me.

Mariam shared similar sentiments:

Well at school, they teach that we came – well, they don’t teach us, but there are certain theories, we came from apes … but when I hear these things, I don’t believe it at all from what I was taught. In Islam I know where I’m from. I know where like – I have this set … belief.

When people talk about evolution and how there’s no God, it’s like if you actually look into religion and into Islam, when you look at a religious people, they’re not idiots. They obviously see something special in religion. It’s not just that they’re following blindly. They obviously see something. We’re humans, we have intellect. So you can’t say, “Religious people, they don’t know what they’re talking about.”
Homosexuality

Homosexuality was the final topic that came up as contradictory with Islam. It was perhaps the clearest contradiction with their religious beliefs and family upbringing. The Muslim girls in my study were forced to deal with their beliefs about homosexuality. It was not just a topic for discussion in some of their courses, but also a significant component of the school equity policy:

Laiba recounted to me her teacher’s words regarding GLBT rights:

I remember something Ms. Jones said in Grade 11 APS, she was like, “Oh our generation, we had to accept more of Black and White. Like put everyone together, everyone’s equal … So your generation has to be more accepting of gays and lesbians” … because it’s a new thing in our generation, and we need to learn to accept it, right? Just like they had to learn how to accept Black and White, means to learn how to accept gays and lesbians.

Though Laiba believed in respecting people who were gay, she did not feel this meant she had to support homosexuality within her personal sphere of life:

I make sense of it in the school; I think the school is trying to say respect everyone who is gay in the school. Therefore I respect everyone if they’re gay or not, or whatever in the school. I won’t state my opinions like you’re wrong, like, “I think it’s wrong,” like I won’t because it’s not my opinion basically. It’s their opinion, right? It’s their life, whatever. I respect them in the school. But obviously in my home life, or if my kid ever came up to me and said, “I’m gay,” I’d be like, “Uhhh, no …” [laughter] … As bad as it sounds, as bad as that they say you need to accept everything, I’m sorry, because I’m very religious, right? So I’m not going to let my kid come up to me and be like, “Yeah I’m gay.” I’m going to be like, “Uhhhh, okay good for you, you’re getting married to a girl or guy” depending on what it is.
Laiba went on to explain that her belief in respecting differences in sexual orientation extended to her job as well, where she had a gay manager. She was comfortable working with him and had no issue with his sexual orientation.

Mariam contemplated her own beliefs on GLBT issues:

Well, actually I’m taking a Challenge and Change class right now … So we have a unit coming up, our teacher was telling us about it. We talked about it a little bit about, um, homosexuality. And we have a HUGS group at our school … So it’s for gay and lesbian’s support group.

Well, there aren’t really many gays or lesbians. I don’t think there are many gays and lesbians at our school. But for me, I don’t disrespect them. You don’t make fun of them. You don’t do that. I don’t support them but I don’t – like I’ll accept you. If you’re a gay or a lesbian then that’s fine, but I won’t support it. I don’t know if that makes sense. I respect them, but I don’t support them. If I had maybe a younger cousin that wasn’t sure, I would support them. I would advise them, “Do you know what you’re doing?” Because I don’t really believe that – in school they teach you that they were born that way. And I don’t believe that at all. So I believe it’s more of a choice even if you feel you have certain feelings, but I don’t support it. But if you’re my friend and you’re gay, it’s fine. I respect you.

Not every student was as comfortable accepting of GLBT issues. Yasmeen discussed the acceptance of homosexuality in public school as one of the many reasons she chose to move to Islamic school:

My father still wanted me in the public school, but my mother was like, “It’s good that you’ll be studying in an Islamic environment” … because I knew that I had a strong faith in myself and nothing could change me. But then of course looking at, all this stuff and the environment of public school where boyfriends and girlfriends are common, homosexuality is also common, and all of these things which I’ve never confronted before. So she knew that because I was very
uncomfortable looking at these things which were kind of obscene for me but it could be normal for all of the other students, or all of the other people in the school. So I didn’t feel like I was very comfortable enough to study in a place where I had to see all of this stuff. So that’s why I wanted to go to an Islamic environment.

Curriculum Instruction: Teachers and Muslim Girls

Teachers are central to the experiences students have in school, particularly in the classroom. Most of my participants had a lot to share when it came to their teachers. Whether it was how a teacher inspired them to study a certain subject or recounting a meaningful classroom experience, teachers were a large part of the discussion when it came to curriculum experiences. My participants had many positive interactions with their teachers. Unfortunately, one participant had a very concerning experience as well. In the next section I consider the various ways Muslim girls are influenced and affected by their interactions with their public school teachers.

Respecting student diversity.

My participants valued teachers who recognized their diverse backgrounds and were interested in understanding them. Laiba discussed close relationships with several teachers at her school, particularly those in the Social Science department: “I practically grew up in that department!” Laiba appreciated her teacher’s interest in her Afghan background: “I was telling them [about] my parents, yeah they’re strict and everything. I was telling them how the culture went.”

Yasmeen recounted to me her first day of school as she and her sister searched unsuccessfully for their classroom:
A teacher came … he knew that we were new girls because we were wearing a hijab … he could see two new faces who were very scared and everything. So he just came with a smiling face, and he was like, “Oh, you’re new girls!” Then he was like, “Are you finding difficulty finding the classes?” Then … he escorted us to the classrooms and … then all the way he was telling us, “Oh, so where did you come from?” and he was making us comfortable and asking us questions. And he was telling us about the school, and then he took me to class.

As one of the few hijabi girls in the school, Yasmeen and her sister already felt extremely self-conscious when they started school in the Canada. Having a teacher recognize this and attempt to make both of them feel more comfortable surprised Yasmeen, who had been bracing herself for a more hostile environment based on stories she had heard from family friends in Abu Dhabi and in the media. Yasmeen also found that her teachers were quick to help her catch up with her school work, as she had entered half way through the semester, and make accommodations for her based on her hijab:

My science teacher, he called me up … he was calling all the students randomly … [to] come up to do a lab or something. So he called me up and then he was like “Okay, you have to wear the goggles,” and I couldn’t fit my goggles because I was wearing a hijab and he was like, “Oh it’s okay you can just wear it on top,” … I found that very comforting that he at least understands … like I realized that … a majority of them [teachers] knew that I’m hijabi and my restrictions.

Maliha shared many positive experiences with teachers as well. In discussing her frustration with the misrepresentation of Muslims in the media, she reflected on the interest her teacher expressed to her in wanting to learn more about Islam:

I was talking to Mr. Anderson the other day … He was just saying how media says all this stuff about Muslims and he said he searched up on it and he’s like,
“It’s not how media and Americans portray it. It’s actually different. It’s about peace and unity,” … That made feel good because I know there are people who do search up on it and they know that’s not what Islam is about. There is a complete different side of Islam than what is going on.

The religious and cultural background of a teacher played a small role in student–teacher interactions. When my participants did mention a teacher’s background or share that they shared a similar background as one of their teachers, it was usually because these teachers had either displayed a respect for the diverse students in their classroom or they had connected with the teacher for some reason, but not necessarily because of a shared background.

Hena commented on the fact that there were a great deal of “brown” teachers at her school, something she thought was probably a novelty. She described how the presence of “brown” teachers positively affected the school culture and atmosphere:

For Halloween, there was a whole department that dressed up in brown clothes and it wasn’t just all the brown people. There was a White teacher that dressed up too. And then they had a Halloween fashion show. So then they came down, started dancing with Bollywood music. And everyone [the students] was at the bottom of the stairs screaming and stuff.

For a school where the student population is largely South Asian, many of them Muslim, the teachers’ playful and inclusive attitude was greatly appreciated.

Other participants also mentioned their teachers’ religious or cultural backgrounds. Yasmeen remembered the happiness and relief she felt on her first day in public school when she realized that one of her teachers was both Muslim and of Pakistani origin. Seeing herself reflected in a teacher, who also showed genuine interest in Yasmeen, put her at ease. Mariam explained that she was not heavily involved in extracurricular activities but helped out one
Muslim teacher with a student club from time to time. This was the teacher who had recommended that she participate in this study. She said to me, “I talk to her a lot. Not really ‘cause she’s Muslim, just ‘cause she focuses on [the] Interfaith Council.”

There was only one instance where a teacher’s background was a concern for a student. Maliha explained to me her hesitancy of having a teacher who had converted from Islam to Christianity, a fact that was known among her friends:

_Maliha:_ My teacher for [Anthropology, Psychology, and Sociology], she’s a convert so she went from Muslim to Christianity. And at first I had a totally different view of her from what I’ve heard from other people but …

(Interviewer) _What was your view?_

_Maliha:_ Probably because she switched from Muslim to – because I got that thing, like, “Oh my gosh, why would she do that?” But then getting to know her a bit more, and learning in her classes, she was really nice and I don’t think that religion should be the thing that should judge people.

(Interviewer) _So you found yourself doing that, but then when you interacted with her, you liked her._

_Maliha:_ Well, she says that … even though she’s converted to Christianity, she still doesn’t eat pork because she said when she was young, her parents, like, it wasn’t allowed in her religion and she’s like, “Up to date, I still haven’t eaten it.” She got married to a Christian guy so it was a love-marriage. So she converted.

_A challenging experience._

The majority of my participants were clear that they had not experienced any form of racism or prejudice directed at them from their teachers. Maliha, however, shared a concerning story about a teacher who was known among Muslim girls to be “racist” toward _hijabis_. As a girl
who aspires to be a teacher and has had numerous positive relationships with her teachers,

Maliha’s story held added weight:

I liked that class but then the teacher, I could kind of tell that he was a little prejudiced so I asked my friends before, like my friends who wore hijabs themselves, like they were in his class too. And I was like, did they get the same kind of feeling? Because he would become kind of cold and I don’t want to say mean, but that would be kind of be the way he would be. And then with other students – like my best friend was in that class too – and he would be perfectly fine with her and all the other kids, but it was like he had a problem with me – and that was the only thing and that kind of made learning that course kind of hard, because I liked the stuff we did, but then it’s a major part if the teacher is not really cooperating with the students, that was the only downside to that … like one of my friends, she was like “Yeah, he’s racist toward hijabis.”

You know how there’s like parent–teacher interviews, right? He was talking to my Mom and at that time when he was talking to – like me and my Mom because both of us were there. He had a totally, it was like a complete different side to him, so he was friendlier, but then after, when my Mom wasn’t there, it was like that cold, mean kind of person again … like, if I was to say hi to him in the hallways, he wouldn’t really say hi back. And you know how you give teachers a smile when you’re passing them in the hall, he wouldn’t really return the smile. So like, the hi maybe he didn’t hear me, but the smile?

There have been a lot of complaints against him because apparently he interferes with kids’ lives outside of school. There was this girl in our class and she used to smoke and whatever, and so he told her Dad and he doesn’t have the right because it’s outside of school, right? So it’s off school time. So she went to Guidance and told them that this is what he did and they told her that they’ve had a lot of complaints about him and stuff.
Thankfully, Maliha had had such a wealth of positive experiences with her other teachers, that she did not allow this teacher to taint her entire perception of school, “My teachers – all the teachers I had last semester – and the ones I have this semester – they’re really nice.”

**Passionate and engaging teachers.**

Aside from teachers who showed respect for diversity and interest in their students’ cultural and religious roots, the participants admired teachers who they felt truly cared about their profession. My participants described their favourite teachers as those who made learning interesting and engaging, were enthusiastic and passionate about the subject, and cared about their students.

Maliha shared her respect for her math teacher:

She inspires me. Because like what she teaches us – it’s not a normal math class – she goes above and beyond, aside from math. In high school classes, as you probably know, there is a lot of swearing that goes around in classes, so she’ll tell the class to stop whatever they’re doing and she’ll be like, “That’s disrespectful, blah blah blah.” And no matter what, she’ll never lose her temper and that’s one thing I look up to her for because my math class, I know there’s a lot of kids in there who give teachers a hard time, but she keeps her cool and she talks to them, but she never yells and stuff.

Mariam also described her favourite teacher to me:

Some teachers they just come to school. They’re just teaching from a textbook … My history teacher’s actually really, really passionate about what she teaches. She’s been to India. She’s been to everywhere in the world … And she’s actually really passionate when she teaches. She takes us on trips. She wants us to actually learn to benefit our lives. She doesn’t just want us to pass the course.
Mariam seemed quite detached with school in general. As an individual who strongly revered her faith, she did not find any spiritual or emotional depth in her schooling experience and felt a profound disjunction between her spiritual life and her academic life:

They teach us to do the right thing and follow Islam, be close to God. And it’s like they put us in school. You have to learn certain things, you know. You have to get a certain percentage in a grade to pass. You have to have certain standards and some people – I think some Muslim youth have to base their whole high school life focusing just on that. And they don’t get to focus on their selves, their spiritual journey, I guess. They actually have to learn things that may not even benefit them, like math, just to make a living in this world. But you have to do it. It’s part of the Western society – well, actually, it’s part of any society, you have to go to school.

Despite that, she did not believe Islamic school was the answer. She explained why she chose to stay in public school instead of moving to an Islamic school after she started wearing the hijab:

So, I think if I went to an Islamic school, it would be too much for me because I was just transitioning from a different life. It was like I had to do it at my own pace.

**Curriculum Impact on Decision-Making: Academic and Professional Aspirations**

The Muslim girls spent a significant amount of time thinking about their futures after high school. Every single girl in my study was planning on pursuing higher education. They all wanted to work once they had been granted their degrees; however, not all the girls knew exactly what they wanted to study or what career they wanted to pursue. This section explores the impact of curriculum and schooling on these decisions.
Clarity: High aspirations and clear goals.

Several of the girls were very clear on what they wanted to do once high school was over.

Iman shared her desire to pursue a law degree:

I was thinking about majoring in law and consequently going to law school afterwards or just getting a Master’s and doing something from there … I find law really interesting because, it’s one of those things where there’s no right or wrong answer, as long as you prove yourself right then you win. And I feel like when you do win a case, for example that reward you get it, it just means a lot and I like standing up for human rights and all that sort of stuff.

As for where her parents stood on her aspirations:

They’re fine with it for the most part. They just are scared that … I’m not gonna – not that I’m not going to do well but … the fact that there’s so many people in that field so … I mean I question it myself … because there’s so many people … that are so good.

Maliha was less apprehensive about her aptitude. She knew she wanted to be a teacher:

Ever since I was little I really looked up to my teachers. They play a big role in your life so maybe I could be a person who played a big role in someone else’s life by teaching and educating them.

Laiba was very clear on where she was headed after high school. When asked, she responded firmly with, “University!” Taking the Grade 12 World Issues course had inspired her to pursue politics. She explained:

I took World Issues and that was all about government and politics, et cetera, et cetera … and then I’m like, hmmm, I like politics because World Issues is more about politics, World Bank, et cetera … and then I realized I liked politics. But it never occurred to me because it wasn’t a subject. So it never occurred to me. And
I’m like I want to go into politics … anything along the lines of government, political science, public administration. I just want to do anything with politics.

For Ameera, the decision to pursue nursing was a function not only of her personal strengths, but also her parents’ wishes:

I didn’t know whether I was going to be a nurse. In fact, if you asked me I probably didn’t even know or anything. I didn’t even really know what I wanted to do, but I knew it was either in the math area or the science area because it was just what I was naturally good at. And I mean, African parents, they want you to be a doctor or a lawyer, an accountant, those big titles. That’s what you had to take. You didn’t really have a choice. So no, I didn’t have a choice. I was good at the subject, so I just gravitated to it.

**Confusion: Academic and aptitude concerns.**

Not every girl was sure what she wanted to do with her life. Nadia had come back for a fifth year and was still confused about what to pursue. She explained her issues with post-secondary education:

Well, I really didn’t know what to do after high school. I was so confused and I’m a person that really likes different things, so I like business, I like science, so I couldn’t choose and it was like the deadlines were – they’d come so fast, right, just to choose what university you want to go to, so it was really, I don’t know … it was difficult. I applied to university, I got accepted, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do those things. I’d applied for Health Management at York and I applied for Business Management as well, at different universities and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do that. So I was like, it’s better to take a year off and maybe go back to high school and think of what I really want to do, instead of going to university and finding I don’t like it and wasting all that money. So yeah, that’s why I came back … I think it was a good choice because now I kind of know where I want to go. It’s still not as clear as I want it to be, but I still know.
Well, I’ve taken chemistry, good to have chemistry, and I applied for psychology at UTM, so I’m just going to go into that and go into the sciences, or maybe … I don’t know … but I just have to go now, I can’t take another year off … I love science, but then the thing is, I’m not that great at it. So … [my marks] they’re mid-70s to 80–85. It’s not great … that’s why I applied to psychology and I’ll probably do something with that. So I guess I’m satisfied with that, that’s fine. It’s better than not going.

As for where her parents stood on the matter:

Oh, they’re fine. They tell me to do whatever I want to do and what I think I’m good at. Because I always complain about science being really, really hard, but I really want to do it. They go, “No, if you don’t want to do that, if you think it’s really hard for you and you can’t do it, then don’t do it.” They’re supportive of whatever I choose … In my family, there’s two boys and there’s two girls, but they’re treated equally. It’s nothing how people think it is, you know, how girls can’t do, can’t work and all that. It’s not like that … I’m really good at art, they were even telling me to go into art, but I didn’t want to go into art because that was just a hobby.

My Mom, she has a lot of say in what goes in the house, so I see her … she’s broadminded, she’s open-minded, so she’d say, “We don’t think like that.” It goes back to our family, my grandma too, they don’t think like that. There’s not a set life for girls, like get married, whatever, no job, it’s not like that.

Sabeen’s decision was based more so on what career she would be able to procure with her degree after university:

I was just thinking about it the other day. I either want to go into a concurrent program for teaching either psychology or something like that, in the social sciences, or I want to go into business and do my BBA … but it depends on the requirements because I took a different math and I can’t really do business at this
point right now. But the only problem with taking the social sciences is I thought that there wouldn’t be that many job opportunities for me. Business has more of a wide range, that’s why.

Mariam was clear that she was heading to a specific university that her mother worked at, but was not exactly sure what she wanted to study. She was afraid that her shy personality might hold her back:

Maybe some social work. Well, my Mom works [at the university], so I get benefits, so I plan to go there. I don’t really plan to apply anywhere else. Maybe humanities, equity rights, social work, that kind of stuff … I’m not really strong in math or science, so nothing really in that field but, just helping people. I’m not really that social, but I plan to try to kinda [be].

For Mariam, life “began” after high school. She looked forward to a more flexible schedule and marital prospects:

University is a bit more … you can just go to your classes. They’re not 8:00 to 2:35 every day. And the classes are a bit different. The professors, you get more freedom, respect, you don’t have to be sitting at a table, staring at a chalkboard, and have to complete assignments that are so irrelevant. And at university you’ll be able to – well, you’ll be in a field that you actually want to study.

And for me, I can’t wait to get outta high school and get married. And I feel when I get married my life will actually start. Because now you have to focus on school, getting an education. And when you’re done school, you can focus on what you want to focus on.

All the girls in the study were driven to study and pursue fruitful careers. In the focus group Sabeen discussed her rationale of why some Muslim women may not work:
Sabeen: I don’t think that going out and working has anything to do with Islam. I think people use it as a way to make someone feel guilty, like, “This isn’t allowed in Islam, you’re not supposed to go out and work.” So if a husband doesn’t want his wife to work, or a father doesn’t want his daughter to work or do something, then they’ll make her feel bad about [it] by saying it has to do something with Islam, whereas actually it’s just their own boundaries that they’ve put up for their own world.

Chapter Discussion

The curricular experiences of my participants defined their classroom interactions. Favourite courses, beloved teachers, academic challenges, and ideological conflicts encapsulated their discussions on curriculum. The next section I discuss some key themes that arose from conversations about curriculum experiences.

Education: An individual journey.

The concept of individual choice was present in many of the conversations regarding curriculum, course preferences, and post-secondary aspirations. Almost all of the girls spoke about what they liked to study and what they disliked. They reflected on their personal skills and how that related to the courses they took, wanted to take, and the ones they avoided. For example, Sabeen shared that she enjoyed arts- and discussion-based courses. Her teachers had encouraged her to take courses in the social sciences, and she was glad that she had taken their advice. She was also considering whether to pursue business or education in university. Ameera explained that she liked logical courses that did not require her to understand the subtext, something she struggled with. Though her parents did play a role in pressuring her to get good grades and pursuing a career that is considered to be more “established,” such as becoming a lawyer or a doctor, this did not ultimately change the courses she took. Her parents’ preferences
most definitely influenced her, but she based the decision to take more math and science courses first and foremost on her own aptitude and preference. For Mariam, who had become deeply religious over the past year, the desire to take courses that would help her in life and had some spiritual depth was based on her own search for spirituality in school life.

It was certainly clear from the interviews with the girls, that they perceived their high school education as primarily about their personal educational and intellectual growth. Nadia was passionate about science and had come back for a fifth year to improve her grades and figure out exactly what she wanted to study in university. Her course choices were based on calculated decisions regarding what grades needed to be improved and what courses she needed to get into certain university degrees. In her opinion, working hard at school was part of being a good Muslim who respected the struggles one’s parents had made to immigrate to Canada for a better life. However, choosing what to study and to become was more of a personal matter. The girls were quite free to determine their academic choices and futures without many concerns relating to their religion or cultural obligations. There was no mention of subjects or careers that aligned better with more “conservative” Muslim values or pressure to pursue a career that was considered traditionally female, like being a teacher or nurse (Basit, 1995, p. 235; Sarroub, 2005). Several factors influenced the participants’ course preferences, such as parents, religion, and personal aptitude, but ultimately their educational choices were based on what they wanted to derive out of their schooling experience.

**Desire to succeed: Setting sights on university.**

For all of the girls, university was the most viable post-secondary option. Each girl, when asked what she wanted to do after high school, stated clearly that university would be the next step. Though Ameera, Laiba, and Mariam, spoke about struggling with certain courses, they
remained firm in their aim to go to university. Ameera was currently in a college nursing program but was planning to switch over to university the following year. All of the girls were in the academic stream at school and thus felt university was the natural next step in their education.

Some of the girls felt a certain pressure directly or indirectly from their parents to excel. Ameera spoke about the pressure from her parents to get straight A’s, and Laiba mentioned her parents’ preference for academically oriented friends, signaling an emphasis on education. However, Laiba also shared with me that her parents were comfortable with her attending college if that was what worked best for her. Nadia was guilt ridden at the thought that her parents immigrated to provide their children with a better education, while she had “wasted” several years of high school consumed with socializing with her friends. This comparison with life in her county of origin reflects one of the factors for academic success among voluntary minorities (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). She felt a certain degree of internal and external pressure to succeed in high school and make something substantial of her life afterwards. Succeeding did not mean pursuing a profession that her parents’ preferred. In Nadia’s case, her parents provided a great deal of encouragement amid all the confusion she felt. They even told her to pursue a degree in art, something she excelled at, but considered a hobby. For Iman, pursuing a law degree and becoming a lawyer was part of her personal desire to be successful and have a meaningful career. If anything, her parents were worried that perhaps the degree and profession would be too challenging for her. Iman put a lot of pressure on herself to be successful in the academic sphere of her life, seeing it as one of the most integral aspects of who she was as a person. These were not girls who were being forced into marriage after high school by their parents (Sarroub, 2005) or placed second to the educational pursuits of boys in their families (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 28).
If anything, their parents wanted to see them succeed both in high school and university. Dealing with a degree of pressure to pursue a meaningful career and get good grades to get into a solid post-secondary program was a daily reality of several of the girls in my study.

Attending university, however, was not only about the pressure to be academically or professionally successful. Many of the participants were also genuinely interested, even passionate about what they wanted to study in university. These subjects or fields were most often inspired by courses they had taken in high school. Iman, Laiba, and Nadia were all inspired by courses or subjects they loved in high school. For Iman it was law, for Laiba, World Issues, and for Nadia, science. Maliha was more motivated by a general interest in a profession than any specific subject. She had always been inspired by many of her teachers at school and wanted to play a significant role in the lives of others just as her teachers had for her.

Aptitude or lack of skill also played a role in the degree some of the girls wanted to pursue. Mariam mentioned her desire to go into social work by way of a process of elimination of all the subjects she was not good at. Ameera knew she was better at math and science and so felt that that was one of the reasons she had gravitated toward nursing. On the other hand, though Nadia was quite good in the arts and struggled with science, she did not consider pursuing art in university, brushing it aside as merely a hobby. The girls were conscious of their strengths and weaknesses and weighed their post-secondary options carefully with this in mind. They were quite practical about their futures and spent significant time thinking about their next steps after high school.

The modern Muslim girl: Compatibility between Islam and academic pursuits.

None of the girls saw any contradictions between their desire to pursue a university degree and professional career and the values of Islam. When the conversation turned to double
standards and the rights of boys versus girls, several of the girls felt that such views were either archaic or far removed from them. Though several of the girls had experienced some form of double standard from their parents, when it came to education this was not the case. In the focus group discussion, the girls spoke of men using Islam to make women stay at home or “conservative” cultures that did not like women to leave the house. They understood that in more conservative households or conservative communities there were Muslim girls that did not have the same freedoms they had. The girls were aware of the reality of these conditions, but did not feel directly affected by them. Their realities and futures were defined by the belief system that existed in their individual households and the society they lived in. Nadia spoke about the importance of equal treatment and rights in her house among her brothers and sisters. She was aware that people thought that girls were more sheltered and restricted in Pakistani Muslim households but was firm that in her home none of that was allowed to occur. She spoke about a general belief about the rights of girls in her family, something that had been passed down from her grandmother. For my participants, going to university and working were the natural extensions of their lives after high school, and their goals were unhindered by their religious or cultural backgrounds.

**Negotiating tensions: Creative solutions and managing conflicts.**

It is fair to say that curriculum and the entire experience of public schooling challenged aspects of the participants’ religious beliefs. Muslim girls are often caught between the belief structures at home and those espoused at school (Collet, 2007; Hanson, 2009; Orgocka, 2004; Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Zine, 2001; Zine, 2008). These conflicts are dealt with in numerous ways, such as rejecting one set of beliefs for another, experiencing a deep sense of bifurcation between one’s home and school identity, or mediating the differences. While some
students feel alienated by the differences between their religion and the curriculum (Orgocka, 2004), others are able to actively negotiate between their religious and academic worlds without feeling victimized (Collet, 2007). My participants dealt with concepts and values that directly contradicted with their personal religious values by conceptually separating the two worlds, creating hybrid systems of belief and forming a personalized version of Islam.

In order to alleviate tensions, a few girls addressed conflicts with the curriculum by creating two mutually exclusive set of beliefs. An example was Mariam’s approach to the study of the theory of evolution. She explained to me that it did not matter what she was taught in school, her ultimate faith was with Islamic scholars who she deeply respected. Instead of challenging creationism or evolution, she merely separated the two, concluding that one was a part of the school curriculum and the other was a part of her religious faith. This separation was enough to relieve or push aside any tension between differing concepts. It is important to indicate that though Mariam grappled with the various tensions and conflicts between her faith and the daily experience of public schooling, she did not feel this was enough to convince her to attend Islamic school. For Mariam, the secular nature of the school allowed her to take her religion at her own pace. She preferred this to being in an environment where certain religious values, such as a segregated schooling environment or all the girls having to wear the hijab, were non-negotiable.

What was more common among the girls was developing hybrid systems of belief that often sounded contradictory and rather confusing when the girls worked through them out loud. Mariam and Laiba’s approach to dealing with GLBT rights is a perfect example. Both girls explained that they did not believe homosexuality was morally right. Thus, they would “accept” and “respect” gay people, but not “support” someone who was gay or advocate for their rights.
Laiba explained that she had a gay boss who she was completely comfortable interacting with, and Mariam shared that she had a gay friend. However, both girls would not “support” someone in their own family if they were gay. This meant that the girls would never outwardly disrespect or deny someone rights if they were gay, but morally they did not believe it was right and would share this with someone in their family if they were in fact gay.

Nadia used a somewhat similar logic in approaching the tension between creationism and evolution. She explained that she dealt with the two concepts by placing God as the ultimate creator of everything studied in science. This would mean that perhaps evolution was valid on some level, but the ultimate cause of the universe’s existence was God. By finding ways to bridge the divides between potentially contradictory systems of thought, several girls managed tensions that arose between their faith and what they were learning in school.

Not every girl found success with this method. For Ameera, the contradictions between her faith and what she was learning in school, both through curriculum and her interactions with peers, was enough to make her wonder if there really was any one true religion. She used abortion as an example. Her logic claimed that abortion was not always wrong, but she felt pretty certain her religion, or at least her father, was against it. Trying to reconcile Islam with the secular values she was learning in school was becoming more and more difficult for her.

Creating a personalized version of Islam was another way the girls worked through tensions that arose in public school. Several of the girls consciously aligned themselves with a loving and peaceful version of Islam, one that was not necessarily present in discussions at school and in the media’s coverage of Islamic fundamentalists and terrorism. At times these were not based on actual research, but more a personal feeling about the religion. Both Ameera and Mariam explained that offensive killing was not in the Quran, and that Islam was in fact a peaceful and
loving religion. Maliha also shared a conversation with her teacher, where they both discussed the more peaceful side of Islam. The girls also achieved this by differentiating themselves from Islamic terrorists. Mariam and Maliha were both clear that their Islam had nothing to do with the Islam of terrorists. Mariam explained that it was not in the “true spirit” of Islam, and Maliha worried a little that people would “tag” her as a terrorist just because she wore a hijab.

For a few of the girls, creating a personalized Islam also meant distancing themselves from the practices of other Muslims. Laiba shared that she was supportive of the headscarf ban in France, arguing that veiling did not require a woman to cover her face. In doing so, she was able to establish what veiling practices she agreed and disagreed with, without feeling like she was betraying her personal faith. Girls who disagreed with certain practices were exploring ways to carve out a personal space in their religion without rejecting the entire ideology or feeling like an outsider. They were open to flexibility in the interpretation of aspects of the religion.

The importance of teachers.

Teachers were central in mediating the participants’ curriculum experiences. Those who displayed an authentic respect and interest in diversity, mediated content related to Islam in a sympathetic yet critical manner, and were caring and passionate played an integral role in the educational lives of my participants.

Multicultural values and inclusive classrooms.

Teachers who recognized the student’s diverse background and displayed a desire to learn or understand this aspect of their identity made participants feel acknowledged and included. This supports the belief that, “a person’s humanity cannot be divorced from his or her culture or ethnicity” (Gay, 1994, p. 7). That is not to say that a student’s religion or culture completely defines who they are, but that for many of my participants, the recognition of their
diverse background played a role in how comfortable they felt with a teacher and in their school environment. This indicates that, “to acknowledge and respect one another, to be fully human, requires mutual understanding and appreciation based on cultural understanding” (Spindler, 1987; as cited in Gay, 1994, p. 7). For Yasmeen, a simple inquiry in the hallway by a teacher made her feel like she was more than just one of several hijabi girls who was either hyper-visible or invisible to teachers. For Laiba, being able to speak to her teacher about her strict Afghan upbringing allowed her to share significant cultural experiences. Laiba had a sense that her teacher did not judge her or her family for their differences and cared to understand what it was like for her parents, who immigrated during a time of political upheaval in Afghanistan, to be raising children in Canada. Such teachers, who recognized the diversity present in their classrooms, were significant in the lives of several participants.

In terms of general attitude toward diversity, the girls reflected on class lessons and discussions where a teacher’s value for multiculturalism was obvious. The girls mentioned actions such as the inclusion of diverse topics and groups in the curriculum, efforts to promote interfaith and cross-cultural understanding, a sense of global responsibility and citizenship, and a personal desire to learn about the diversity present in the world. The girls quickly picked up on which teachers cared for diversity by what they said, what they taught, and how they acted. Some of these actions were more subtle, such as a teacher’s passion for travel around the world and learning about other cultures, and some more obvious, such as teacher’s efforts to display the similarities between various world religions in a class lesson.

My participants distinguished these types of teachers from the rest by discussing and reflecting on their interactions with them. Often these interactions were followed by how it made the participant feel, usually something along the lines of happy, comforted, relieved,
acknowledged, inspired, or safe. Such teachers displayed a form of “cultural transcendence” or movement beyond one’s personal worldview (McFadden et al., 1997, as cited in Mahon, 2006, p. 393). McFadden et al. argue that, “The development of multicultural understanding is measured by the teacher’s depth of cultural self-awareness, affective response to difference, capacity for cross-cultural relations, and the degree to which her or his teaching is multicultural as opposed to ethnocentric” (McFadden et al., 1997, p. 8, as cited in Mahon, 2006, p. 393). The teachers referenced by my participants either displayed such qualities or a movement toward such qualities. The participants knew that in these teachers’ classrooms various centres of knowledge (Dei et al., 2000) were recognized and thus their religious and cultural knowledges were valid, or at least valued. Such efforts were not lost on my participants.

Mediating Islamic topics: Making students feel safe.

Many of my participant’s teachers addressed issues related to Islam and Muslims in their class. It is fair to say that it is hard to escape the discussion of Islam and Muslims as a teacher in the 21st century; the religion has been placed in the spotlight since 9/11 and the events that have followed (Mirza & Bakali, 2010, p. 49). The girls discussed negative perceptions of Muslims and misconceptions about what it means to be a Muslim female. The focus on Muslim females in the media, particularly on their oppression and mistreatment (Mirza & Bakali, 2010), was not lost on them. They were aware of stereotypes surrounding Muslim females; that they were considered “oppressed” and “restricted,” particularly hijabi Muslim girls. They were also frustrated with the conflation of Islam with the terrorist activities of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Teachers who taught about Islam in class, engaged the students in critical discussion of controversial topics, and displayed sympathy toward the challenges faced by Muslims, gave many of the girls greater confidence in their Islamic female identity within school.
It was clear that how a teacher approached topics relating to Muslims influenced how my participants felt about studying and discussing them in a class environment. A teacher who displayed a desire to be impartial or even slightly sympathetic or sensitive toward Muslims was greatly appreciated. Sabeen reflected on her World Religions teacher who was aware that a large proportion of his class was Muslim. He put the students at ease by explaining that his desire was not to “convert them,” but teach them about various religions, including their own. His attitude allowed his students the space to explore and question their religion and others in an unthreatening environment. Mariam shared a time when the class was studying 9/11 and the teacher made a point to highlight that there was another side to the religion, one that did not involve bloodshed and terrorism. These efforts made by teachers were not lost on my participants. Situations where the teacher addressed controversial topics related to Islam head on and in a fair-minded manner often made the girls feel like they had an ally in the teacher. It allowed them to comfortably explore the issue, whether it was the Quran burning in Florida or the headscarf ban in France, without being put on the defensive. The girls could choose to defend the religion or critique it because they did not feel antagonized.

Several girls also shared accounts of teachers who tried to convey the “positive” or what the student believed to be the “true” side of Islam. They felt relieved that their teachers acknowledged misconceptions surrounding the Muslim population in the West. By taking on such issues in class, the girls felt these teachers truly cared to unify their student population instead of polarizing it. However, this did not mean that the teachers did not engage in critical discussion of the issues. Though teachers have been criticized for perpetuating stereotypes and displaying Islamophobic behaviour (Abu El-Haj, 2006; Sarwar Sharif, 2009; Zine, 2001; Zine, 2008), there is evidence that many teachers, Muslim and non-Muslim, are making great efforts to
foster critical discussion about Islamic topics and combat Islamophobia (Kassam, 2007; Niyozov, 2010). Several of my participants had teachers who strove to address and problematize controversial issues related to Islam. These were often framed as discussions, which allowed a healthy dialogue to ensue. Several of the girls shared discussions in class on topics such as veiling and honour killings. The ultimate goal was not to alienate the Muslim students in the class, but to come to some form of understanding that did not perpetuate misconceptions.

A teacher also had the power to make a Muslim girl feel ill at ease, uncomfortable, and threatened. Since topics related to Islam and Muslims were often controversial, students reacted to the curriculum depending on the method of curriculum instruction. For example, a discussion of a Muslim girl who wore a *burqa* in English class lead to the teacher asking Maliha if she had encountered any discrimination after starting to wearing the *hijab*. Having no advance notice that she would be asked to share her personal experience, Maliha felt “put on the spot.” Though the teacher’s intentions were innocent, the method made Maliha feel uncomfortable. Yasmeen also shared an instance when her art teacher asked a question related to Islamic calligraphy, looking at Yasmeen as if to expect her to raise her hand to answer the question. Once again, it was not the sentiment with which the teacher approached the content, but the method in which she dealt with it. Though Yasmeen was extremely proud that her religion was included in the curriculum, the thought of having to speak for Muslims as an expert of some sort made her nervous. Girls felt much safer when curriculum related to Muslims did not require them to be the expert on or spokesperson for the religion. When it came to Islam, the method or form of instruction was as important as what was being studied or discussed. How a teacher approached a topic affected how the Muslim girls responded to it.
The individual student’s personality also played a role in how she felt about the teacher’s efforts to discuss Islam in class. While discussion of Islamic topics made some girls uncomfortable, other girls did not mind. For example, Maliha was afraid of being linked with Islamic fundamentalists when terrorism was being discussed in class; however, Mariam was certain that her classmates could tell the difference between her and a terrorist. Girls who were more confident with their Islamic identity seemed more comfortable with Islamic topics in the classroom. The hijabi girls had more to share in this respect, since their hijab made them more visible in the classroom. They were aware that topics related to Islam in the class would naturally draw attention to them.

Though most teachers were not considered to be hostile toward Muslims, there were a few instances where a participant feared this to be the case. Maliha was particularly nervous about being in a class where the teacher had converted from Christianity to Islam. Prior to starting the class, this rejection of Islam felt almost personal to Maliha. Spending time in the class made her realize that this most certainly was not the case. Maliha remarked that the teacher was a great teacher. In addition, her willingness to speak to Maliha about her conversion and the reasons relating to it helped Maliha understand the various motivations behind the religious conversion and relate to the teacher on a personal level.

Unfortunately, Maliha also had an experience where a teacher seemed to obviously have a prejudice against hijabi Muslim girls. This was known among the hijabi girls in school, and Maliha experienced the teacher’s standoffish and cold attitude personally. In this teacher’s class, learning became a difficult and trying experience. None of the other girls had had such an experience; however, the fear of encountering such a teacher was also palpable in conversations with Yasmeen. She greatly feared being in a class with a teacher who treated her poorly because
she was a hijabi. The view that people in the West were inherently prejudiced against Muslims had been deeply ingrained from media reports and accounts from family friends in Abu Dhabi prior to immigrating. Fortunately, she had no such interactions and felt quite comfortable interacting with her teachers at her new school. For Maliha and Yasmeen, being a hijabi girl awarded them a certain visibility and this visibility brought along with it fears of discrimination. The desire to feel safe and secure in the classroom was an integral part of their educational experience.

**Care: Making learning meaningful.**

Another theme was the importance of teachers who truly cared about their profession and students. These teachers expressed a passion for their work and a vested interest in the educational, personal, and moral lives of their students. Thus, in addition to an interest in the religious and cultural roots of my participants, they cared about the student in general and their success both in school and in life. The girls referred to these teachers as the ones who went “above and beyond,” were “really, really passionate,” or had opened their eyes in some manner. Maliha described her math teacher, who made it a point to deal with disrespectful behaviour head on in class without ever losing her temper. For Maliha, this class was not just about learning math, but also about becoming a better human being. Often such instances occurred in “ordinary conversation” (Noddings, 2002), which allowed the teacher to deviate from the curriculum and discuss moral issues. It was valuable to several of my participants to be able to talk in class about such issues.

Mariam shared how one of her teachers’ passion for life, travel, and learning infused the course she taught with a certain depth. A devoutly religious person, this class provided Mariam with the deeper meaning she was searching for in school. She remarked that her teacher actually
cared about her students’ lives, not just their academics. The girls also shared the value of being able to discuss personal and academic issues with their teachers. This might include discussions about a personal struggle, religious conflict or philosophical idea. Such conversations, whether occurring in class, during a lesson, or one-on-one, provided the student an opportunity to understand their teacher on a personal level and express themselves more authentically then they would in a more formal discussion. Noddings (2002) explains this best:

As students talk, teachers come to know them better. As teachers join the conversation, students get glimpses of the teacher as a human being … and when they do, they ‘feel obliged’ to work not only for themselves but for the teacher, whom they now trust … they learn about one another. But they also learn from one another. (p. 142)

Teachers who put their heart and soul into their teaching and sought to know their students on a more meaningful level were usually regarded as the “best” teachers or the student’s favourite. The girls were keenly aware of teachers who held these traits and appreciated their teacher’s enthusiasm, consideration, and care. Having teachers like this made classes enjoyable and often inspirational.

**Summary of Key Themes**

This chapter explores the curricular experiences of Muslim girls. For the most part, these take place in the classroom and are mediated by teachers and peers. The Muslim girls in my study were a dynamic group who experienced curriculum in varying ways. They were comfortable discussing all aspects of their curricular experiences. This chapter looks at key topics that arose in the interviews, which include course preferences, post-secondary aspirations, teacher interactions, and the intersection of Islam and curriculum. Though the girls experienced challenges being Muslim in a secular schooling environment, they did not feel at odds with the
curriculum or the environment. Several themes arose from the interviews with the girls in relation to curriculum:

1. *Education: An individual journey.* The girls viewed their academic experience to be largely personal based on their aptitude, preferences, and aspirations. Though parents played a role in guiding the girls in certain academic and professional directions, the girls were mainly driven by their own thoughts and opinions on what they wanted to study and pursue.

2. *Desire to succeed: Setting sights on university.* For all of the participants, university was the most viable post-secondary option. The goal to attend university seemed to be a mixture of personal pressure to succeed and their parents’ desire for them to be an academic student. For many of the girls, their parents’ sacrifices and struggles as a result of immigration motivated them to do well in school. My participants were driven to pursue university degrees and careers that were both financially stable and personally fulfilling.

3. *The modern Muslim girl: Compatibility between Islam and academic pursuits.* None of the girls saw an incompatibility between being a Muslim female and pursuing post-secondary education and a career. The girls were motivated to study and work following high school and were supported in this by their parents and religious and cultural communities.

4. *Negotiating tensions: Creative solutions and managing conflicts.* Conflicts and contradictions arose between the curriculum and what the girls had been taught by their parents and their religion. Girls dealt with these tensions in a variety of ways,
such as separating the two systems of thought, ignoring the conflicts, or creating hybrid systems of belief.

5. *The importance of teachers.* This theme included three sub-themes:
   a. *Multicultural values and inclusive classrooms*
   b. *Mediating Islamic topics: Making students feel safe*
   c. *Care: Making learning meaningful*

Muslim girls respected and recognized teachers who valued diversity and genuinely cared about their students’ religious and cultural backgrounds. These qualities influenced how the teachers mediated content related to Muslims in the classroom. Teachers who were empathetic and aware understood how best to encourage discussion about controversial topics without making their Muslim students feel uncomfortable or putting them on the spot. Finally, teachers who displayed authentic care for their students stood out from the rest. The participants were clear that these teachers were the ones that made learning enjoyable and meaningful.

All of the Muslim girls in my study had found ways to bridge their academic and religious worlds in a way that was personal and worked for them. This subtle, complex process and the support they received from parents, teachers, and peers is what ensured their ultimate success as a student in public secondary school.

In the following chapter, I respond to the central and supporting research questions, share implications for the education of Muslim girls, highlight the limitations of the study, and conclude with some final thoughts.
Chapter 7:
Conclusions and Future Prospects

This study displayed the varied experiences with curriculum/schooling of nine Muslim girls in public high schools in the Greater Toronto Area. My participants were a diverse and dynamic group who were forging their own path and defining their futures. The particular experiences of these girls speak to the realities of life of many Muslim girls in Canada.

In this chapter, I provide the conclusions of my data analysis. I frame the major findings of the study within the central and supporting research questions. Following this, I highlight the specific contributions this study has made to the field of research on Muslim girls. Next, I indicate the implications of my analysis for various areas in the educational sector. I conclude this chapter with discussion of the study’s limitations, areas for further research, and some final remarks.

Response to Major Research Questions

My central research question, How do Muslim girls understand their experiences with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in Ontario, Canada?, provided the overall framework for my study. I used semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion to delve more deeply and intimately into the lives of the participants. In this section, I provide a distillation of my findings by responding to my supporting research questions:

1. How does curriculum/schooling influence Muslim girls’ conceptions and constructions of their religious, cultural, social, and gender identities?

Public school provided a forum for my participants to discover the multiple and unique aspects of their identities. Through activities such as classroom lessons, teacher interactions, and
conversations with friends, they continuously evolved their notions of what it meant to be an individual, a citizen, a friend, a student, a female, and a Muslim. These experiences provided opportunities and challenges for the girls to explore who they were and what they stood for.

As Muslim females in public school, the girls were forced to consider various aspects of their Islamic identity. They had to make decisions about observing religious rituals, adhering or rejecting religious and cultural values, dealing with controversial topics regarding Muslims in the classroom, and explaining their belief system to peers. These actions in turn helped them reflect on their religious and cultural beliefs and better understand who they were as individuals.

Being Muslim in a secular school environment was also at times confusing and challenging. Challenges related to wearing the hijab, observing religious rituals and practices and dealing with stereotypes frustrated some girls from time to time as they sought to develop their religious identities. However, none of these challenges were overwhelming and the girls found solutions to deal with the various issues. A few girls did not wholeheartedly believe in all of the religious values they had been taught and so felt somewhat conflicted in not following certain religious values when they were at school (e.g., dating or eating non-halal food). School was a forum where they explored these issues or perhaps were influenced by the beliefs of others. Many girls did not experience such tensions. Certain conflicts between their home values and school values existed (e.g., interacting with boys or attending school dances), but these were not overwhelming. For the most part, they felt like they could safely observe their religion to the extent that they wanted during the school day and that school provided a space for them to explore who they were as individuals.

For several of my participants, school helped them reaffirm their religious beliefs and values. By studying in a secular educational system, they were able to determine what aspects of
their faith were of real value to them. They were also forced to decide the extent to which they wanted to observe their religion in school (e.g., whether or not to pray during school hours, fast during the school week, abstain from dating and drinking, or eat halal food). Most of the girls did not feel like they had to significantly compromise their religious identities to fit in or that they were hindered from fulfilling their religious duties. If they wanted to fast, they fasted, and if they really wanted to pray, they prayed. Though it was not always easy to actively observe their religious values and rituals, most did not let certain obstacles stop them.

A few of my participants saw their religious identities as secondary to who they were as individuals. Public school provided an opportunity for them to step away from certain religious and cultural beliefs that they did not subscribe to. It gave them a chance to understand who they were outside of their faith and family structure. This did not mean that these participants rejected their religious and cultural identities, but merely that school allowed them to explore other aspects of themselves.

The girls made ongoing decisions regarding these issues. They were constantly evolving and developing as persons, and thus their religious identities were also in flux. Whether they felt proud of being a Muslim or embarrassed, uncomfortable being a hijabi girl or empowered, angry regarding a stereotypical comment or unaffected depended on their thought process at the time, personal feelings, and the context of the situation.

My participants were in the midst of a vital period in their life. They were making choices that would have long lasting implications. However, these significant actions were concealed amid the daily hum of life as a teenager. Many participants were not even conscious of the identity work taking place. All of this was just a natural part of their life. Nevertheless, their thoughts and emotions about their roles as Muslim girls and individuals were at the root of many
of their discussions. Inspiring teachers, favourite classes, school clubs, athletic activities, fights with friends, and fiery discussions with peers all helped my participants understand themselves better and on a deeper level. It was through their curricular/schooling experience that many identity issues were coming to the forefront and being worked through.

2. How do external factors, such as parents, community, and religious upbringing influence the educational experiences of Muslim girls?

External forces played a powerful role in the educational experiences of the Muslim girls. First, my participants’ parents played an important role in guiding the participants’ educational choices. Although the majority of the girls drove the decision-making process regarding academics and careers, the parents provided the support system or motivational force behind those choices. Parents either encouraged girls to strive for their goals or deterred them from certain academic pursuits (e.g., highly competitive professions or subjects they did not excel at). Despite parental involvement, there was only one instance of a parent who pressured their daughter to choose a specific profession; this was to find a job in the medical field. The majority of the parents were open to letting their daughters choose their courses and future professions. The girls shared with me their goals to pursue careers in various fields (e.g., medicine, nursing, law, education, social work, business, politics, and international development). Regardless of the girls’ choice of profession, good academic achievement was expected from all of the parents. At times, the daughters’ academic success was linked to the sacrifices made by parents in their immigration to Canada. Several of the girls viewed their academic accomplishments as a reward to their parents for leaving their home countries. Some girls felt this in the form of pressure to succeed, but most accepted it as part of the immigrant experience.
Parents played the most significant role in the mediation of the participants’ social interactions. Parents placed certain boundaries on socializing with boys, attending mixed gender parties, and wearing revealing clothes. Often the level of restriction depended on how religious or conservative the families were. For example, some girls were allowed to wear dresses while others were expected to cover their legs; some girls were allowed to have friends who were boys at school, but socializing with them outside of school hours was discouraged. None of the girls perceived these restrictions as overwhelmingly unreasonable. However, some did comment on restrictions that seemed silly, such as not being able to go over to a male classmate’s house to work on a school project. In this case, the participant went without telling her parents.

This being said, parents were open to compromise, and the girls were quite often able to do what they wanted as long they as respected certain rules. With regard to Islamic practices, none of the parents dictated the degree to which their daughter needed to observe Islamic rituals in school. Only the parents who encouraged their daughters to wear the hijab truly affected how their daughter experienced daily school life. Even then, these parents gave their daughters space to determine how to balance their embodied religious identities with secular school life.

My participants’ religious upbringing influenced their experiences in public school in different ways. The effects of their parents’ teachings were complex, varied, and often unpredictable. For one girl, her devout mother inspired her to wear the hijab, without compromising friendships and extracurricular activities. For another, her father’s strict cultural and religious values led to a rejection of religion at school. The values espoused and observed at home affected how the girls experienced their education, but the degree and form of this effect varied based on the particularities of each family, the personality of the participant, and the school dynamic. It was almost impossible to predict how the intersection of one’s home and
school life would manifest itself. The multiple permutations convey the complexities present in the experience of being a Muslim girl.

The religious and cultural communities my participants belonged to played a more subtle role in the curricular/schooling experiences of my participants. The values embraced by the communities were often similar and an extension of the values present in the household culture, but they influenced their educational lives in a different manner. A few girls spoke about a form of community surveillance in which they felt self-conscious about their behaviour. This pressure to behave as a good Muslim girl was a function of the critical eye of adults and students in their community (e.g., praying during Friday prayers at school or behaving more timidly as a *hijabi* girl). For some of the girls, the pressure was self-imposed; for others, it was linked to maintaining their parents’ “respect” in the community. Community perceptions were a factor in how some participants conducted their lives; however, for most, it was merely a cause for reflection.

Religious and cultural communities also provided my participants a concrete connection to their religious and cultural identities. These communities gave many of my participants a **sense of belonging, pride, and cultural and religious depth.** Their communities provided them a forum outside of school to express and explore themselves. In school, connections to these communities gave them the confidence to share these aspects of themselves with friends and teachers. My participants did this through class projects, school events, extracurricular activities, and social interactions. Curricular activities were opportunities for them to deconstruct their attachment to these communities.

Religious and cultural communities did not always have a remarkable effect on the lives of my participants. Communities could be a source of frustration if the participant disagreed with
certain religious and cultural norms, or beliefs and practices (e.g., rejection of homosexuality). At times, they played a minor role if the participant did not identify with the community. Nevertheless, these communities existed in the background as a counterpoint to various mainstream social practices and a reminder of the participants’ roots. Whether the participant felt attached to her community or not, she could not truly escape its impact on her life. The girls often understood themselves and their experiences in relation to their communities.

Political and social events also played a substantial role in the educational lives of the Muslim girls. A number of my participants were confronted with controversial events involving Muslims in the curriculum. Although discussions involving Muslims were not a regular occurrence, when topics such as honour killings, 9/11, or the headscarf ban were addressed in class, the girls were forced to respond to these issues. Very few girls were able to separate their religious identities from the educational task of deconstructing these events. For example, discussions of Islamic terrorist acts made several participants feel as if they were being judged or discussions of veiling made hijabi participants uncomfortable. This is partially because they felt connected to these issues and partially because teachers would often expect their Muslim students to be a “voice” for Muslims. As a result, such topics had a deeper impact on the girls, evoking a multitude of emotions. Depending on the topic and setting, my participants either felt embarrassed, put on the spot, critical of their people, or the need to defend their religion. Thus, these curricular events were perceived as positive by some girls and negative by others. Several participants acknowledged the importance of having their religion included in the curriculum. Yet, most were not pleased that inclusion usually existed in the form of provocative topics that often left them feeling uncomfortable. It was up to each girl to find effective ways to deal with such occurrences.
The girls could not escape the issues of being a Muslim in the West. If anything, it was in school where they most directly had to face this phenomena. For example, school was where they were confronted with stereotypical comments and jokes about Muslims. Their decision to ignore or respond to these remarks was a function of their attitude and the setting. All of the girls approached these incidents as isolated experiences instead of a general way Muslims were treated in Canada. My participants were aware of the negative views of Muslims in the West, and they were also attuned to the struggles many Muslims were facing as a result of these views. When considering how these perceptions affected Muslim females, the girls in my study felt they were relatively sheltered from the impact. The non-*hijabi* participants felt more sympathetic toward *hijabi* girls, expressing to me that perhaps they were the ones who had to deal with societal stereotypes. However, the three *hijabi* participants shared with me that they did not feel marginalized and were more concerned about others, for example those that wore the *burqa* or *niqab*. Although, they had experienced certain challenges in their observance of the *hijab*, they still felt accepted and validated in their schooling environment.

The participants in my study were not oblivious to the trials of being a Muslim, yet they were extremely positive about the opportunities available to them as Muslim females in Canada. Some of the girls compared their lives in Canada to that in their country of origin. They felt that they had more freedom and possibility in the West than they potentially would have had back home. This resulted in a great attachment to their life in Canada. Despite this attachment, almost all explained that culturally they did not feel “Canadian.” They drew a distinction between being nationally Canadian and culturally Canadian. They were Canadian citizens and felt a deep affinity with the Canadian way of life, but culturally they were more connected to their country of origin and religious backgrounds. Ultimately, the participants were aware that the
religious and cultural values they had been taught did not always align with Canadian secular values. However, through their curricular/schooling experiences they had found ways to reconcile the two worlds in a manner that worked for each one of them. School provided them a forum to discover how to be both Canadian and Muslim.

3. What role do the various academic and social interactions that take place in public school play in the lives of Muslim girls?

The curriculum/schooling experiences of my participants consisted of various academic and social interactions (e.g., interactions with classmates, teachers, and friends). These interactions were meaningful encounters that shaped their learning experiences. Their academic experiences, which consisted of interactions both inside and outside of the classroom (e.g., interactions with the teacher and classmates during curricular activities and discussion with friends at lunch about topics studied in class), were most significant in helping form their views about their society and the world around them. For example, the girls shared their beliefs about the value of diversity and living in a multicultural society. These views were a function of ideas taught in class and expressed in school policy. For the most part, their parents, religion, and culture supported these concepts; however, it was often in school that these concepts gained more form and depth.

Academic and social experiences also played a large role in how the girls understood the differences and similarities between their religious and secular worlds. For some of the girls, school exacerbated the tensions between their religious beliefs and mainstream Canadian values. As a result, these girls had to reconsider what they believed and either modify it or reject one set of beliefs over another (e.g., “respect” homosexuality even if their parent said it was un-Islamic or recognize the “value” in wearing the hijab, but state that it was not “necessary” in this
society). Other times, school provided a space for the participants to work through the differences and identify the similarities. Many of the girls felt inspired by the possibilities for a Muslim girl. Though they recognized that certain issues would perhaps always be at odds, such as dating or drinking, they shared that many aspects of being a Muslim girl were compatible with secular Canadian life.

Perhaps most importantly, their academic experiences are what provided them a platform to explore their intellectual interests and pursuits. For some of the girls, this was a more straightforward and matter of fact process. Classes needed to be taken to fulfill credit requirements, and school was merely one step in the process of getting an education. For many of the other participants, school was an opportunity to determine what they had the aptitude for and what they were passionate about. Not every class provided the opportunity for such intellectual discovery and growth, but several classes and teachers did. Participants most often loved courses in the humanities (e.g., history, world issues, and world religions), as these gave them the freedom to explore new concepts and discuss interesting and provocative topics that related to their life. Their favourite teachers were the ones who were passionate about their profession. It was in these classes and through interactions with these teachers that participants had some of their key learning experiences.

The social interactions of the girls in my study also had various effects on their lives. Friendships with students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds taught them to respect diversity and to learn about the differences between their values and their friends’ values. At times, these interactions challenged their beliefs and forced them to deconstruct the differences. Many of the girls had to come to terms with certain restrictions on their social activities that their friends did not have to deal with. In order to accept certain boundaries on their behaviour, the
Some of the girls quietly challenged their parents’ rules. They knew that what they were doing was “wrong” in their religion’s eye or that their parents would be upset if they found out; however, most were comfortable with this degree of tension. These girls felt that on some level this was part of growing up and figuring out to what extent they agreed with their religion and parents. They believed that they were individuals, separate from their parents, with their own thoughts and beliefs about life. However, balancing their individuality with their religious teachings and parents’ values and beliefs about how their children should live their lives was not always an easy process. My participants’ social and academic interactions influenced how they understood their educational experiences and the decisions they made regarding their personal and academic lives.

Contributions to the Field

This study made several humble contributions to the field of research on Muslim girls. Some of these contributions were more pronounced and significant, while others were more nuanced and subtle. In this section I discuss these concepts in greater detail.

Listening to the voices: Hijabi and non-hijabi girls.

This study was unique in that it looked at the lived experience of various types of Muslim girls. The majority of studies on Muslim girls focus heavily on hijabi girls or give precedence to the experiences of hijabi girls (Alvi, 2009; Bigelow, 2008; Diab, 2009; Kassam, 2007; Sarroub, 2005; Zine, 2008). While I believe it is extremely important to research the particular experiences of this group, my study sought to broaden the field by explicitly considering the
voices of both girls that veiled and those that did not. In doing so, I was able to highlight the complexities associated with being either type of Muslim girl and to engage the two groups in dialogue and conversation.

It became clear through my interviews that both hijabi and non-hijabi girls had many of their own stereotypes and misconceptions about girls that veiled. In addition, the decision to veil or not to veil was not one the girls took lightly. To be sure, wearing the hijab was not the main determinate of how religious a girl was. Many of the non-hijabi participants were quite devout. Naturally, the experiences of my participants who chose to veil were different from those that did not, and that is why it was also important to include their voices. This study successfully conveyed that non-hijabi Muslim girls also have meaningful experiences as Muslim females and that their voices need to be heard. By having such diversity in my sample, I was able to understand how various Muslim girls experienced public schooling and the unique way their curriculum/schooling experiences affected them. This is an important contribution, as there is a great deal of religious diversity present among Muslims. Educators need to understand that

Muslims are not a homogenous group. This awareness can have implications for how teachers approach their Muslim student population, recognizing that the beliefs and needs vary from girl to girl.

Muslim girls actively define their schooling experiences.

How Muslim girls mediated between their religious and secular worlds was another major topic in this research study. Many studies have indicated that the challenges of being a Muslim girl or student, whether it is conflicts with parents, issues of identity, or difficulties observing Islam at school, are to a certain degree a function of the schooling environment (Abukhattala, 2004; Alvi, 2009; Azmi, 2001; Basit, 1995; Bigelow, 2008; Gunel, 2007; Haw
et al., 1998; Orgocka, 2004; Zine, 2001; Zine, 2008). Living life on the “hyphen” is difficult, and girls are often frustrated with their schooling experiences (Mir, 2006; Sirin & Fine, 2008). There is a sense that Muslim girls are struggling to feel “normal” and to be accepted by their peers. Several studies, including a few mentioned above, have also pointed to small successes and the positive aspects of being in public school (Collet, 2007; Diab, 2009; Kassam, 2007; Niyozov, 2010; Sarroub, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008). For example, Collet (2007) shares how the participants in his study were actively negotiating their schooling experiences, determining what was the best way to observe their religious ideals in public school. These students were not victims but decision-makers. There are fewer studies that have come to similar conclusions, and in most studies these conclusions are often overshadowed by a more critical view of public schools.

This study is a significant addition to this field of research as it highlights the voices of Muslim girls who are actively and positively defining their public schooling experiences. The participants in my study liked many of their teachers, enjoyed certain courses, were taking active part in extracurricular activities, and had many friends. Though several of the girls voiced frustrations, such as the lack of halal food options or challenges with praying and fasting during the school day, these frustrations did not overshadow their positive experiences. Issues did not occur regularly enough for them to have a lasting negative impact on their schooling experience. They also indicated that being understanding of why certain accommodations did not exist was part of the reality of being a student in a multicultural environment. If the schools were to meet all the needs of their Muslim students, the same rule should be applied for students of other religions.
Some of their frustrations were the same as those of any high school student: uninspiring teachers, boring classes, and confusion about future careers. It is important not to forget that Muslim girls are also just students that experience many of the same growing pains as other high school students. Although the participants experienced some challenges with being Muslim females in a public, secular environment, these girls were optimistic and hopeful about their opportunities. They were also comfortable to a certain degree with “living life on the hyphen” (Sirin & Fine, 2008). They were willing to live with certain contradictions and accepted the fact that not everything in their lives made perfect sense.

My emphasis on these findings is not to negate the difficult experiences of other Muslim girls (Abbas, 2002; Azmi, 2001; Sarroub, 2005; Zine, 2001). It is absolutely true that many students have had to deal with certain hardships and that hijabi girls in particular have a much more difficult time feeling and being accepted than other girls (Alvi, 2001; Zine, 2008). This was evident in my research as well. However, based on my data analysis, **schools can also be a safe and welcoming space for Muslim girls, hijabi and non-hijabi**, and that a lot of good happens there as well. The Muslim girls in my study did not feel alienated or disenfranchised. Perhaps there has been a shift or a small improvement in the treatment of Muslim students in certain areas, such as the ones my study focused on. It may be fair to argue that this study has highlighted an improvement in how Muslim girls are being treated. Though there are still many changes that need to occur, this study shows that things seem to be slowly moving in a more positive direction.

**Expressing choice and independence.**

This study adds more depth and dimension to the emerging themes of choice, agency, and independence among Muslim students in recent studies (Collet, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2008). These
studies are a counterpoint to stereotypical conceptions of the “oppressed” Muslim female who has no voice. Though we still see very real instances of girls from highly conservative families who are forced into wearing the hijab or getting married against their will (Sarroub, 2005), these instances are overshadowed by studies that display the varying degrees of independence and choice given to many girls by their parents (Sirin & Fine, 2008). For example, in my study, parents played a significant role in guiding the girls and providing boundaries; however, the participants were mostly free to choose who they were friends with, what they were going to study, and ultimately what they wanted to become. Areas where there were strict rules were dating and drinking. However, none of the participants expressed an outward desire to drink, only one admitted to having tried alcohol, and the majority felt that dating platonically was something their parents would accept when they were a little older.

There was also a marked emphasis among the participants on the importance of being independent. The girls shared this value in their conversations. They wanted to choose what courses to take, who to be friends with, and what values to embrace. Being independent and “free” while respecting their parents’ values and their religion was a natural way to be for most of the girls. They recognized that they did not have the same level of freedom as many of their non-Muslim peers, particularly White students. To a certain degree, they would always have certain limitations and restrictions on their behaviour. However, this was a natural part of life.

Being “free” meant freedom within religious and cultural parameters. This was an acceptable way to live for most of the participants. Only a couple participants struggled with conflicts between religious and secular values, and even then, their struggles were not all encompassing. These girls had figured out how to push back when they disagreed or were in conflict with their religion.
Value of multiculturalism.

Another interesting contribution of this study is the importance Muslim girls placed on multicultural values. The girls consistently stated their appreciation of diversity and the importance of interacting in a respectful manner with people from diverse backgrounds. Time and time again, the girls shared that one of the main reasons they preferred public school to Islamic school was the diversity of religions and cultures present in public school. The participants had many diverse friends and expressed the value these friendships had in their life. A few of the participants did find that their closest friends were those that were most similar in religion or culture, though this was most definitely not the norm.

This emphasis on multiculturalism is one of the unique aspects of this study. It indicates the impact and influence of school policies on equity and the general school ethos on the participants’ views on diversity. The majority of the girls were born in countries with relatively homogenous racial or religious populations. This exposure to various religions and cultures through life in public school was perceived as one the major benefits of life in Canada. The girls truly appreciated the religious and cultural richness in their schools. It shaped their views about the nature of how a society should exist and how schools should be run. This value would have long lasting implications on their decisions regarding friendships, relationships, and careers.

The influence of school demographics.

Another important contribution of my study was identifying the role school demographics played in influencing the experiences of Muslim girls. I designed this study to look at the experiences of Muslim girls in two regions in the Greater Toronto Area. The most significant difference between the two areas was that Region B had approximately double the
Muslim population of Region A. I was curious to learn how differences in diversity would influence the school atmospheres and, by extension, the experiences of the participants.

Interestingly, I found that each school within each region had a unique makeup of diverse groups. For example, one school in Region B had an extremely large South Asian and Arab Muslim student population, while another school in the same region had a large South Asian population, but the majority were Hindu or Sikh, not Muslim. I realized it was more important to look at the specific demographics of the particular school each girl attended, instead of the population statistics of the areas in general. These social dynamics played a significant role in how the girls experienced their education, though it was not always in predictable ways. For example, one of my Pakistani participants went to a school with a large Muslim and Pakistani population in Region B but had no close Pakistani, Muslim friends. There were many other unpredictable examples such as this one. What these findings indicate to me is that school demographics and the social dynamic of a schooling environment did play a role in how the participants experienced their curriculum/schooling experiences, but how they made sense of their surroundings was a function of various factors, such as their own religiosity, personal beliefs, interests, and family values. Certain aspects were quite obvious, such as schools in Region B, an area with a greater concentration of Muslims, having more halal options, or schools with more diverse populations being more prone to explicitly recognizing diverse religious and cultural holidays. Other than such obvious examples, the unique way a Muslim girl interacted with her social environment was based on the interplay between the social dynamic of the school and her personal identity.
The central role of parents.

The substantial role of parents on the curriculum/schooling experiences of Muslim girls was another important addition to the field. While some studies on immigrant youth and Muslim students have discussed parents (Basit, 1995; Cristillo, 2008; Diab, 2009; Moghissi et al., 2009; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998; Orgocka, 2004; Sarroub, 2005; Sarwar Sharif, 1996), many studies have not considered this important external factor in shaping the educational experiences of Muslim girls. I found it almost impossible to have a conversation about school without the participants somehow discussing their parents and the influence they had on their personal and educational lives. As mentioned previously, parents were central to many aspects of what occurred in school. This study highlighted that parents were quite supportive of their daughters’ educational endeavours. As for personal matters, many parents were often open to discussion and compromise, as well as to adapting some of their religious and cultural views to accommodate their daughters’ desires.

The majority of my participants viewed their parents as the ultimate religious standard at this point in their life, considering religious matters in terms of their parents’ views. Though other factors, such as their friends’ views and religious teachings at their mosque, definitely influenced their thoughts, their parents’ religious beliefs and cultural values were the standard against which they considered what they believed. The importance here is the central role parents played in the lives of Muslim girls, which has not always been highlighted in educational research on this group. Parents were at the heart of many of the girls’ issues and, without understanding the nuances of this relationship, it is difficult to comprehend the total phenomena of being a Muslim girl.
Cross-cultural research: The intersection of culture and Islam.

This research also makes some contributions to the field of cross-cultural research. The study was designed to include the voices of Muslim girls from diverse backgrounds. Islam is not a monolithic religion (Kinzeloe et al., 2010, p. 23), and it was important to me that I represent this reality in my sample group. Six different cultures were included in the study’s sample group: Afghani, Ethiopian, Guyanese, Indian, Nigerian, and Pakistani. This design provided an opportunity for the cultural backgrounds of Muslim girls to be highlighted and deconstructed.

Culture shifted the experience of being a Muslim. For some it was related to immigration and the motivation to be successful as a student or a daughter. These girls reflected on the realities of life “back home” for the majority of people from their culture (e.g., Afghani or Pakistani). Even if they were from a higher socioeconomic class and thus would have had access to high-quality education and personal freedom in their home countries, they explained that they felt much better off in Canada, a view common among voluntary immigrants (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

For other participants, culture changed their interpretation of Islam. At times, it superseded religion. For example, Ameera, a Nigerian-Canadian, explained that beautifying one’s hair was such an important part of her Nigerian culture, and thus wearing the hijab just did not fit with certain cultural practices. It was also often hard for several participants to separate religion from culture. Keeping a distance from boys or dressing modestly was as much a cultural value as a religious one. On the other hand, culture and religion were at times dichotomized. Discussions about the lack of women’s rights in some Muslim countries were at times relegated to culture or misinterpretations of Islam. Since some of the girls felt that they were “free” to choose their paths, girls who were not allowed were, in their opinion, a result of misguided cultural practices or patriarchal interpretations of Islam. Many girls rarely questioned whether
Islam had any part to play. That being said, a couple of the girls were critical of certain religious practices and limitations on girls’ behaviour (e.g., going to parties or dating). Some girls were at times more in touch with their culture than their religion.

There is much that can be learned by looking at research through a cross-cultural lens. It allowed for my study to both investigate the differences that resulted from varying cultural backgrounds and focus on the commonalities that superseded culture. My participants shared that **much of their life was dominated by cross-cultural experiences** (e.g., immigration, relationships with friends, school environment, and curriculum content). The ways they dealt with these experiences provides insight into how schools can foster cross-cultural dialogue and harmony.

**Comparative education: Differences between U.S. and Canadian experiences.**

Finally, this study makes contributions to the field of comparative education. Comparative education allows for a greater understanding of how experience shifts based on factors such as a society’s demographics, policies, national values and attitudes, and social and political events. In comparing the experiences of Muslim girls across communities, regions, and countries, insights were gained into why certain differences and similarities exist, understanding certain behaviours and how to improve the educational system.

This study is contextualized within the experiences of Muslim girls in Canada and the U.S. In comparison to studies conducted in the U.S. (Bigelow, 2008; Cristillo, 2008; Gunel, 2007; Hanson, 2009; Sirin & Fine, 2008), my participants seemed less likely to deal with issues of racism and discrimination. **Notions of citizenship** also varied greatly. Most of the participants separated the concepts of citizenship and culture. Being accepted as a Canadian citizen was not a great source of concern for the participants. However, studies conducted in the U.S. indicate a
preoccupation among researchers with citizenship and frustrations among Muslim students of never feeling American enough (Cristillo, 2008; Sirin & Fine, 2008). This preoccupation with citizenship points to a marked difference in how each society treats immigrants and minorities. For some of the participants in my study, being accepted as a Canadian was an attainable goal; for others it was a non-issue and their greater concern was how to balance their nationality with their religion and culture. Contending with the intersection of the two worlds was a more individual experience than a collective identity problem.

**Implications of the Study**

In this section I address the implications of this study for the various stakeholders and for related fields of research.

**Implications for Muslim girls.**

This study has highlighted many implications for Muslim girls attending public schools in Ontario. Most importantly, Muslim girls need to be more **vocal about their needs and issues of concern.** The participants often opted to say or do nothing when they could or should have spoken up. This attitude of complacency or trepidation was quite problematic in many instances and needs to change if Muslim girls want to help improve their learning environments.

Examples of when Muslim girls need to voice their needs and concerns are in regards to accommodations during periods such as *Ramadhan* or religious holidays, unease with having to be the spokesperson for their religion, ignorant comments or jokes made by peers, and rare instances of discrimination. Depending on the issue, girls need to speak to the appropriate person. It may be a guidance counselor or administrator if the issue is discrimination, or it may be a peer directly if the issue is a stereotypical comment. The desire not to ruffle any feathers is
problematic as it has allowed certain behaviours or administrative oversights to continue. Lack of *halal* food options at school is another example where Muslim girls must express their needs.

Without voicing their dietary restrictions, the task of respecting their needs falls on teachers and administrators. Though there is nothing wrong with expecting that these individuals should respect the needs and values of Muslim girls, this does not always occur. Being more confident in vocalizing such issues is a powerful step in supporting the inclusiveness of Muslim students in public schools.

Muslim girls must also take more **leadership in supporting equity initiatives** in their schools. As a minority group, it is important for them to be at the forefront of advocating for announcements, assemblies, school events, and extracurricular initiatives that recognize the diversity in the school environment. Some of the participants were actively doing this by establishing MSAs in their school and joining interfaith clubs; however, there was still a level of apathy among the girls related to multicultural initiatives. For example, a lack of announcements that recognized important religious holidays was met with a shrug instead of an effort to find out who was responsible for announcements and why holidays were not being acknowledged. Though these are small issues, they have an impact on the overall school culture. When efforts are made to recognize the religious and cultural backgrounds of the student population in various ways, small and large, the overall effect is a student population that understands that it is not just the values of one group that are being validated and celebrated. It also opens up a forum for critical discussions on equity and diversity issues. This respect for and awareness of diversity permeates all aspects of what happens in schools and has long lasting positive implications.

Finally, Muslim girls need to continue to **find healthy ways of bridging their religious and secular worlds**. For many of the participants, a degree of conflict or tension was addressed
by pushing the issues aside instead of trying to understand what was the best way to make sense of the situation. Muslim girls must continue to seek out the support of their friends, teachers, parents, and community members in discerning how to make sense of personal conflicts. Muslim girls should also spend more time getting to the heart of issues related to Islam instead of depending on the words of others. Some of the participants were well versed on their religion, but several were not. Some girls knew about one Islamic topic, but not about another. Greater knowledge about Islam would give them more confidence in making personal decisions about their religious values and speaking to others at school about their religion. Many of the participants’ comments about Islam began with some apprehension or quotes from others (e.g., parents, religious leaders, or friends). In finding answers to their own questions, I believe a significant degree of the tension or confusion related to bridging their religious and secular worlds would be alleviated.

**Implications for curriculum.**

Curriculum is the cornerstone of what happens in the classroom. To address the dearth of content on Muslims in the classroom lessons, there needs to be a larger amount and an improvement of teaching materials on Muslims and Islam. These teaching materials should be critical in nature and should serve the purpose of opening up a forum for discussion. They should not essentialize the lives of Muslims; instead they should serve to demystify stereotypes and Islamophobic notions and tendencies (Zine, 2004, p. 115). This does not mean that the more thorny aspects of Islam should be left by the wayside. Topics such as controversial forms of veiling and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism can be included in the curriculum, but in a manner that considers these topics from various lenses and perspectives.
More effort also needs to be put into critically engaging Muslim students in the classroom with content that speaks to their lived realities. Opportunities for deconstruction of personal, cultural, and religious ideas and beliefs are powerful tools to help Muslim girls understand their experiences and the larger forces that shape their behaviour. I recommend that this be done on a more individual level, such as individual projects and reflection papers, so that students do not feel self-conscious or put on the spot. We must recognize our students’ sensitivities, as it is most important for each student to feel safe. **If a student does not feel safe, they cannot learn.**

Finally, more focus needs to be put on turning the concept of multicultural curriculum on its head. Gorski (2008) poses some pointed questions that serve as a good basis for considering a more critical form of multicultural curriculum. He asks, “Do we advocate and practice intercultural education so long as it does not disturb the existing social order? … so long as we can celebrate diversity, meanwhile excusing ourselves from the messy work of social reconstruction?” (p. 516). Such questions force educators to genuinely examine the type of multicultural education we subscribe to and perhaps consider a more authentic and challenging form of multicultural education. Though we have seen that teachers are making efforts to use multicultural curriculum as means to address concepts such as discrimination, prejudice, racism, culture, sexism, and homophobia, more needs to be done to use this framework as a pedagogical tool to critically examine our society. For Muslim girls, critical multicultural practices can encourage classroom engagement and help them to examine their experience as Muslims in relation to larger social and political forces. Such practices also have the potential to help the girls deconstruct personal experiences.
Implications for teachers.

Teachers have a significant role to play in the education of Muslim girls. On a general level, teachers need to continue to support inclusive education strategies in the classroom. Ontario’s equity strategy, “Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation” (2009) defines inclusion as, “Education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are accepted” (p. 4). This means including the voices of diverse groups, fostering critical discussion of topics related to diversity and equity, drawing on varied centres of knowledge and promoting multiculturalism both inside and outside of the classroom (Banks, 2001; Dei et al., 2000; Gay, 1994; Gay, 2003). Teachers must also continue to build critical awareness about the religious and cultural backgrounds of the students in their classes. In doing so, they will be better equipped to meet the needs of their diverse students. Moreover, they will be able to better design curriculum that speaks to the realities of their student body.

When addressing topics related to Islam (e.g., study of the religion, 9/11, and hijab), teachers must be careful not to inadvertently elect Muslim students to be the spokesperson for their religion or culture. A greater understanding of the religious and cultural diversity present in Islam might help address this impulse. My findings showed that teachers often innocently expected that Muslim girls would want to speak for their religion during a related lesson. This was certainly not the case, as girls often felt uncomfortable or put on the spot. If a teacher wants to study a topic in class, such as the Danish cartoons controversy, and wants to hear the voices of their Muslim students, it would be wise to ask the student prior to the class whether they would...
feel comfortable being called upon to speak about their experiences or thoughts on the topic. Teachers must be aware that there are various sensitivities associated with being a Muslim in today’s society, especially when the topic being discussed is controversial. It is their job as teachers to make their students feel safe in the classroom environment. It would be helpful to discuss with Muslim students their level of comfort to alleviate the discomfort some Muslim students may feel. Moreover, making an effort to find out more about the particular religious and cultural backgrounds of their students, without overstepping personal boundaries, would make teachers better equipped to engage Muslim students in the classroom.

My research also indicated that at the heart of meaningful educational experiences were teachers who felt passionately about their profession and were in tune with their students. Teachers must continue to find ways to make curricular content and activities engaging and relevant. Inspiring and enlivening educational experiences are what students remember from their classroom interactions. Teachers who couple this with genuine care and concern for their students are the ones that students remember the most. Ultimately, Muslim girls are similar to other students who want to attend classes where they feel recognized and validated. Without this element in one’s teaching practice, much of what occurs in the classroom falls short of penetrating the hearts and minds of students.

Implications for administrators.

Administrators play a leadership role in schools. They must continue to ensure that the religions and cultures of students in the schools are not being sidelined for other initiatives. Though multiculturalism is a part of a larger equity discussion, it is still a very real and important issue. It should be given its due consideration and attention. An example of ways administrators can do this is by supporting in-service days and professional development activities related to equity.
Administrators must encourage teachers to continue to build **awareness** related to diverse topics and groups, particularly those present in the school population.

Islamophobic comments is another issue that administrators need to address. The student body needs to know that the school will not tolerate such behaviour and that there are repercussions. Muslim girls should feel confident bringing these issues to their teachers, guidance counselors, or administrators. Administrators need to find effective ways to communicate to their Muslim students that they will support them in addressing these issues. Naturally, the same standard applies for all diverse groups. Students should not feel that there is no consequence for stereotypical jokes and racist behaviour. More needs to be done to educate students on the appropriate ways to interact with diverse groups. As leaders, it is the administrator’s job to encourage school clubs, activities, and events that **critically look at issues related to diversity and multiculturalism**. Only by such continued efforts will students learn how to treat one another in a respectful manner.

**Implications for policy-makers.**

Policy-makers are responsible for drawing up equity policies. Though equity policies are in place, not all schools are doing an effective job in ensuring that all aspects of the policy are being followed. Particularly in schools where the student population is less diverse, multicultural initiatives are at times sidelined. An improved mechanism needs to be put in place that supports multicultural and equity initiatives in schools. In addition, it is necessary to have a set forum where members of equity school committees from different schools and boards can come together to discuss issues and learn about new research.

In regards to Muslim students, I recommend that issues related to **Islamophobia be made explicit in equity policies**. This explicit mention will ensure that teachers and
administrators are aware that addressing Islamophobic comments and behaviour is necessary. Being a teacher myself, I am aware of the massive workload teachers contend with on a daily basis. If an issue is not made explicit and clear, it often falls by the wayside. However, my interviews show that though instances of ignorant comments, stereotyping, and discrimination do not occur very often in school, they are still very real issues and need to be dealt with actively by educators. Policy-makers have the responsibility of putting this into writing to begin the process of raising awareness about the issues experienced by Muslim students.

**Implications for parents of Muslim girls.**

The findings of this study clearly indicate the integral role parents play in the lives of Muslim girls. In regards to school, parents should take a more active role in being involved in their daughters’ schooling environment if they notice any issues (e.g., lack of vegetarian or *halal* options or missing a test because of religious holiday). This may occur through involvement in Parent Teacher Associations or through contact with their daughters’ teachers. By doing this, parents can express the needs of their daughters, such as accommodations that need to be made or issues that have arisen in the classroom. Of course, the parents should take into consideration whether their daughter wants their parents involved or not. This is a discussion that needs to occur between the student and the parent. However, I believe that being present in their daughters’ educational lives will continue to ensure that the specific needs of Muslim girls are being met. This type of presence makes teachers and administrators aware of the diverse groups present in their school and makes their needs explicit.

Parents must also continue to find ways to address the tensions and conflicts that girls experience as a result of the intersection between their religious and secular worlds. This can be achieved with increased open dialogue between parents and daughters about the conflicts
between home culture and school culture. My research shows that girls who felt that they could speak to their parents, particularly mothers, about questions they had and challenges they were facing experienced the least amount of tension. These girls felt they had an outlet and an understanding parent who respected their experience, but also had the wisdom to convey why there were certain boundaries in their religion. This type of dialogue provided opportunities for compromise and relationship building between the girls and their parents. These daughters did not feel at odds with their parents. Instead, they were more deeply connected to them. Such relations with their children are healthy and should be the goal of Muslim parents. This behaviour is an important step in supporting Muslim girls through their educational experiences in public schools.

**Implications for the researcher.**

My personal experiences as an immigrant, a Muslim female, and an educator brought me to this research. This study has granted me insight into an issue that is both close to my heart and significant given the current sociopolitical climate. It is not clear how to “successfully” be a Muslim female in today’s society. Islamic values are ostensibly at odds with mainstream Western secular values and there is no lack of opinions on how a Muslim girl should live her life. Each one of the participants in my study was an inspiration to me. I saw such grace and beauty in the way each girl sought to define herself in the context of public school. I remembered myself in Yasmeen’s fear of entering public school for the first time mid-year as a hijabi; I was reminded of my own behaviour in Nadia’s calm acceptance of conflicting Islamic and secular concepts.

Their comments about school and their teachers was also an opportunity for self-reflection. I realized that I have a certain responsibility, as a Muslim women and teacher, to take more of a leadership role in equity issues. My awareness of the needs of these students makes me responsible
for educating others. I know that when I return to the profession, I will make significant effort to engage students, teachers, and administrators in a dialogue regarding these topics.

The experience of Muslim girls also reflects the experiences of other diverse and minority groups. It has opened up a space for me to explore and address these issues. My interest in the education of diverse students in a multicultural society has now become a lifelong passion. This research has given me the intellectual scaffolding to pursue these issues in the educational sector.

The particularities of each girl’s experience highlighted the heterogeneity in being a Muslim girl. However, as unique as each participant’s experience was, they also had much in common. When we all came together for the focus group discussion, it was a truly rewarding moment. To see the girls discuss these issues and share their own experiences displayed the power of collectivity. Many of them shared that the focus group was one of the main reasons they wanted to be a part of the study. The opportunity to have an open and safe discussion about their identities in relation to public school was rare. They wanted desperately to connect with each other and me as much as I did with them. My research has shown me the power of human connection. It has shaped my personal beliefs about how educators need to learn and evolve. I look forward to designing more research to address various issues in relation to equity, diversity, and critical multiculturalism.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of this study. First, my study only looked at the experiences of nine Muslim girls. By no means is this study generalizable to the entire population of Muslim girls or students. However, the experiences of these girls framed within and connected with other
research on Muslim girls displays important new knowledge about how Muslim girls are experiencing public education.

Second, this study only looks at the issues from the point of view of Muslim girls. In order to gain a full understanding of their educational experiences, one would also have to engage the voices of teachers, parents, and non-Muslim peers. This would provide more context to their educational experiences.

Third, this study approached the issue through interviews with the participants. Ethnographic research would be an effective manner in which to further explore the experiences of Muslim girls in public school. However, due to the scope of this study, it was not possible to couple the interviews with ethnographic research. Furthermore, the emphasis of this study was on the perspectives of Muslim girls. This was successfully achieved through one-on-one interviews and the focus group discussion.

Fourth, there were certain time limitations on my research. Since this study is in fulfillment of a Master’s degree, I had to work within a certain time frame. This limited my ability to interview more participants and devote additional time to interviewing each girl more than once.

**Areas for Further Research**

I would like to recommend a couple of areas for further research. One would be a study bringing together Muslim students and teachers. I believe it would be a powerful experience to have teachers hear the voices of Muslim students and understand the particular experiences of this group. While Niyozov (2010) conducted a study of teacher perspectives on the education of Muslim students, what is lacking is a dialogue between the two groups. As of yet, I have only
come across one study in Canada that has engaged the voices of both students and teachers in public school (Gunel, 2007). While Gunel’s (2007) study is a step in the right direction, it is limited to the voices of four White male teachers and five immigrant, refugee girls. More needs to be done to engage the two groups in meaningful conversation.

Another area for further research is a study focused solely on Muslim boys. As important as it is to study the experiences of Muslim girls, it is equally important to look at the experiences of Muslim boys. Each gender has its unique particularities, and nothing has been done as of yet that focuses solely on the schooling experience of Muslim boys in Ontario.

Concluding Remarks

This study sheds light on the rich, complex, and unique experience of being a Muslim girl in Ontario public schools. However, while culture and religion add depth and colour to a student’s educational life, they also complicate it. This study looks at the experiences of Muslim girls, yet in doing so, it also speaks to the experiences of diverse immigrant and minority groups. The triumphs and failures, joys and heartbreaks, and achievements and setbacks experienced by my participants are indicative of the realities of other diverse high school students. As educators we need to remember this and make concerted efforts to critically engage our diverse students. I hope this study enlightens educators about the experience of being a diverse student in public school and inspires them to continue to broaden their horizons.
References


Appendix A:
Recruitment Email Draft – Peers and Colleagues

Dear (peer, colleague, friend),

I hope this finds you well. As you may know, I am currently working toward a Master’s degree in Education at OISE/UofT. My Master’s thesis will be looking at how Muslim girls understand their experiences with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in two Greater Toronto Area regions. I am recruiting a sample of ten participants, five girls from each area. The criteria for inclusion are:

1. The girls must be currently attending public secondary school in one of the two regions, or have attended or graduated from public secondary school in either region within the last two years.
2. The girls must identify themselves as Muslim.

The girls will be asked to participate in a semi-structured, one-on-one interview and a focus group discussion with participants from the same area as them. They will be asked to share their thoughts on topics such as the influence of curriculum on their identity and outlook, the nature of their social and academic interactions, and the opportunities and challenges that come with being a Muslim girl. If they do not feel comfortable participating in the focus group discussion, the girls will have the choice of only participating in the one-on-one interview. Also, they can withdraw from the study at any point with no negative consequences. They will be compensated for their participation and the study will be completely confidential.

This is a great opportunity for Muslim girls to share their experiences with the larger educational community. Not only is it empowering for students to voice their thoughts and opinions, it is also valuable for researchers, teachers and administrators to learn how students from diverse backgrounds experience public schooling, what students believe are some of the opportunities and challenges, and how we as educators can continue to design curriculum and foster school cultures that engages with diversity in a critical and relevant manner.
If you know someone who could be a potential participant, please share details regarding this study with them. If they are comfortable with you forwarding their contact information, I will be in touch with them and answer any and all questions they may have. You may also forward my contact information to them.

Any help you can provide with this research study is much appreciated. Thank you very much in advance for your support.

Sincerely,

Sana

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Appendix B:
Recruitment Poster

** On official OISE letterhead

OISE/University of Toronto

Experiences of Muslim Girls with Curriculum/Schooling in Ontario Public Secondary Schools

Participants Wanted for Research Study

• Do you identify yourself as a Muslim female?
• Are you currently in a (Region A) or (Region B) high school, or have attended or graduated from a (Region A) or (Region B) high school in the last two years?

If yes, you are eligible to participate. As a participant in this study you will be asked to be involved in a semi-structured, one-on-one interview and focus group discussion. The study will be completely confidential and compensation will be provided.

For more information or to volunteer for this study please contact Sana Ali
Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development (OISE/UofT)
Mobile: (647) 287-2437
Email: sana.aliqureshi@gmail.com

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto
Appendix C:
Recruitment Email Draft – Participants

Dear Participant,

Thanks so much for your interest in the study! My name is Sana Ali and I’m a Masters student at the University of Toronto. (Insert name of person who referred the student) mentioned that you were interested in participating in the research study. Just to explain again, the focus of my research is the experiences of Muslim girls with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in two regions in the Greater Toronto Area. The study is very open and the point is to hear your experiences as a Muslim girl on topics such as curriculum, interactions with peers and teachers, and in general the opportunities and challenges that come with being a Muslim girl in public school. Though I have general questions in regards to these topics, the main point is for me to listen to you share your thoughts, opinions, and feelings. The interview would occur at a time and place that works for you. For example, we can meet at a coffee shop, the local library, or even your home if you prefer that. Also, it will be completely confidential. There will also be a focus group discussion with participants from each region (approximately five girls), which will be an amazing opportunity to discuss similar topics with your peers.

Please let me know if you are interested. If you are, let’s schedule a time to speak on the phone so I can explain the study in more detail and answer any questions or concerns that you may have. If you are still interested following our talk, we’ll move forward with the study.

I really look forward to speaking with you!

Take care,

Sana Ali
Appendix D:
Participant Recruitment Phone Script

Below is a general script for speaking to potential participants.

• Hi (name), it’s so great to speak to you. So, let me explain the study to you again and feel free to interrupt me if anything is confusing or if you have any questions.

• Like I mentioned in my email, I’m a Master’s student at OISE at the University of Toronto. I’m actually on leave right now from teaching high school. The focus of my research is the experiences of Muslim girls with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in Region A and Region B. To be part of the study you have to either be attending or have attended public secondary school in either area within the last 2 years, and identify yourself as a Muslim girl. Don’t worry about how religious you are or are not. As long as you would call yourself a Muslim you can be part of the study. Your participation is completely voluntary, but this is an excellent opportunity to share your voice with others. I will be recruiting approximately five girls from each region so the study will have approximately ten participants in total.

• The study is very open and the point is to hear your experiences as a Muslim girl on topics such as curriculum, what role school plays in how you perceive yourself and the world around you, interactions with peers and teachers, and in general the opportunities and challenges that come with being a Muslim girl in public school. Though I have general questions in regards to these topics, the main point is for me to listen to you share your thoughts, opinions, and feelings. You also do not have to answer any questions you don’t want to. It is very important to me that you feel completely comfortable in the interview and share only what you would like to.

• The interview would take place at time and place that works for you. For example, we can meet at a coffee shop, the local library, or even your home if you prefer that. Also, it will be completely confidential. Your interview will be audio recorded based on your consent. The only people who will have access to this are my thesis supervisor, a professional transcriber who will have signed a confidentiality agreement, and me. Your name and any other names
of places or people you share will be changed for the thesis. The interview is completely confidential.

- Once I have completed the interviews, I will be running two focus groups, one focus group for each area. If you don’t know what a focus group interview is, it is essentially a group interview. You would be involved in a focus group with other Muslim girls from your area. In the focus group we will talk about similar topics to the one-on-one interview, but this time you’ll get to hear the thoughts and opinions of your peers. Focus groups are an amazing opportunity to learn from others. The focus group interviews will be audio and video recorded based on your consent. The video recording is only to help better transcribe the interview because sometimes it’s hard to tell who said what in a group interview when you only have an audio recording. The group interview will be confidential, just like the one-on-one interview. All personally identifiable data will be given fictitious names and reported in such a way that it cannot be identified. However, because it is a group interview, I cannot guarantee that everyone will keep it confidential. I will make sure to emphasize the importance of maintaining privacy and confidentiality before and after we conduct the focus group to ensure that the participants respect this aspect of the process.

- You do not have to participate in the focus group. If you only want to do the interview that is completely fine. Also, you can withdraw from the study at any point, and your part will be omitted and disposed of. You can also request that any information you shared be omitted from the project. You do receive compensation for participating. A $10 gift certificate to Indigo bookstore for participating in the interview and a $10 gift certificate to Indigo bookstore for participating in the focus group interview. These will be given at the end of each interview to express my gratitude. In total, your time commitment is about three hours.

- A few last things to mention. The findings of the study, as in what I learn from all the interviews, will only be published in academic formats, such as my thesis and presentations at conferences. All the documents and audio and video files will be secured on my password-protected computer and encrypted using FileVault. Any written documents will be locked in a drawer in my office at home. All the documents and files relating to this study will be shredded or deleted five years after collection of the data.
• If you do agree to participate, I will email you the consent form so that you can look over it. It essentially goes over in some more detail and in a more official manner almost everything we just discussed.

• Is there anyone you would like to speak to before agreeing to participate, such as your parents?

• Do you have any questions or concerns?

• Would you like to set up a time for the interview?
Appendix E: 
Informed Consent Letter

** On official OISE letterhead

To the participants in this study,

**Purpose/Rationale for the Research/Criteria**

Thank you very much for participating in this study. As part of my Master’s degree at the University of Toronto, I am focusing my research on Muslim girls in Ontario. Working under the supervision of Dr. Sarfaroz Niyozov, my thesis research is on the experiences of Muslim girls with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in two regions in the Greater Toronto Area (Region A and Region B).

I would like to invite you to participate in this study. To be part of the study you have to either be attending or have attended public secondary school in either region within the last two years and identify yourself as a Muslim girl. In total, the study will include approximately ten participants, five participants from Region A and five participants from Region B.

**Your Participation**

Participating in this study includes one interview and one focus group discussion:

1) The one-on-one interview will be approximately one hour in length. You will be asked to share your thoughts on topics such as your experiences with curriculum, the influence of schooling on your identity and outlook on society, and the opportunities and challenges that come with being a Muslim girl in public school. The interview will be audio recorded with your consent. The recording will only be used to transcribe the discussion.

2) The focus group will include all the participants from each region. In total the focus group will have about five participants plus myself as the moderator of the discussion. The focus group will discuss similar topics as the interview, but will be more of a discussion among the participants and an opportunity to hear the thoughts and experiences of other Muslim girls.
The focus group will be audio and video recorded with your consent. The audio and video recording is only to help with transcribing the discussion.

Your participation is completely voluntary, though I would encourage you to participate. This study is an opportunity for you to share your rich and diverse experiences with the educational community, as well as reflect on them. The time commitment in total is approximately three hours. The one-on-one interview is an opportunity to share your experiences in depth, while the focus group gives you the chance of listening to other Muslim girls and contributing to the discussion on the experience of being a Muslim girl.

It is important for you to know that there are no foreseeable risks to being involved in the study. At no point will you be judged or evaluated. You may choose to not answer questions and stop the interview at any point. You can withdraw from the study at any point, and your part will be omitted and disposed of. You can also request that any information you shared be omitted from the project. There will be no negative consequences for withdrawing. As gratitude for your participation, you will receive a $10 gift certificate to Indigo bookstore each time you participate at the end of the interview.

**Privacy & Confidentiality**

All information collected during this study will remain fully confidential. The one-on-one interview will be treated as fully confidential. If you choose to participate in the focus group discussion, please treat all information shared and identities of participants confidential to respect each participant’s privacy. However, it cannot be guaranteed that participants will maintain confidentiality, so please only say what you feel comfortable sharing in a public setting. All written documents will be secured in a locked drawer in my office at home. All computer files, such as audiotapes and video recording, will be secured on my password-protected computer and encrypted using FileVault. The only people who will have access to all the files relating to this study are my supervisor and I. A professional transcriber who will have signed a confidentiality agreement will have access only to the audio files from the interview. You will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your identity in all publications and presentations of this research and all identifiable information will be given fictitious names. All files will be destroyed five years after collection.
Thanks again for considering this study and feel free to email or call me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Sana Ali  
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Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development &  
Comparative, International and Development Education (OISE/UofT)  
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Dr. Sarfaroz Niyozov  
Professor, Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development (OISE/UofT)  
(416) 978-0200  
Email: sarfaroz.niyozov@utoronto.ca

Please check one of the boxes below to indicate your degree of participation. By signing below you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter and are aware of the conditions.

☐ I will participate only in the interview  
☐ I will participate in both the interview and the focus group

Name: _______________________
Date: _______________________
Signed: _______________________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion:___

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

The Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto has approved this study. If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant please contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416) 946-3273.
Appendix F:
Interview Guide

The interview will be semi-structured. The questions below will serve as a guide. At the start of the interview I will thank the participant for taking out the time to be interviewed. I will reiterate that the participant can withdraw at any point, can decline to answer a question, and may stop the interview at any point. I will explain that the interview will be audio taped for the purposes of transcription, and that only my supervisor, a professional transcriber, and I will have access to it. I will ask them if they have any other questions or concerns that they would like me to address before we start the interview. Finally, I will provide a general overview of the topics that will be discussed.

Central Question

How do Muslim girls understand their experiences with curriculum/schooling in public secondary schools in Ontario, Canada?

Opening Question

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, such as your background (e.g., religious, cultural, national, political, linguistic), when your family came to Canada, what school you attend, and what grade you are in…

Curriculum experiences.

• What courses do you enjoy taking/what are your favourite courses? Why?
• What are your least favourite courses? Why?
• What curriculum topics are you most interested in studying? Why?
• What are your thoughts on the types of topics addressed and studied in class?
• What are your favourite types of class activities (e.g., group work, debates, read aloud)
• What educational experiences inside and outside the classroom had the largest impact on you? In what way?
• What factors do you feel influence your educational experiences (e.g., parents, community, academic goals)?
• How have your curricular experiences influenced you (e.g., the way you see yourself, outlook on the society, world issues, public schooling)?
• Are topics related to Muslims addressed in curriculum content and/or class activities? If yes, how do you feel studying such topics in class?
• Are there any topics or courses you would like to see added to your curriculum?
• How do external issues related to Muslims (e.g., political events, social issues) impact your educational experiences?
• What role does the teacher play in your curriculum/schooling experience?
• Do you have any academic challenges? What are they related to? What do you excel at?
• Describe your interactions with your peers (e.g., Muslim, non-Muslim, girls, boys) inside class and outside of class.
• How do your social interactions relate to your identity as a Muslim girl?
• How does being a Muslim girl colour your day-to-day experiences both in and outside of the classroom? How do your experiences influence your sense of being a Muslim girl?
• What do you want to do once you graduate? How has school helped you achieve this? What are the obstacles?

Schooling.
• What social, academic and/or extracurricular activities do you enjoy participating in and why? Does being a Muslim female limit what you can and cannot participate in?
• Is there a Muslim Student Association at your school? If yes, how do you feel about it? If no, do you think your school needs one?
• What are the challenges and opportunities that come with being a Muslim girl in a public secondary school? How do you address the challenges and understand/make use of the opportunities?
• To what extent does your school address the needs of Muslim students? Have you voiced the needs of Muslim students?
• Do you think Muslim students should stay in public school? Why or why not?
• Do you prefer public school or private religious school? What do you like/dislike about each?
• How does your school try to make accommodations for Muslim students? What suggestions would you make on how schools can continue to accommodate or better accommodate Muslim students?
• What can Muslim students do to create a positive and inclusive school environment? What can Muslim parents and the larger Muslim community do?

Conclusion

I will thank them for their participation and provide them with a $10 gift certificate to Indigo bookstore to express my gratitude for their participation. If they are going to be participating in the focus group discussion, I will let them know when I will be getting in touch with them to provide details of when and where this is taking place. If not, I will let them know that they can contact me at any point if they have any questions or concerns and that I will be providing them with a summary of my findings by the end of the summer.
Appendix G:
Focus Group Interview Guide

The focus group interview will be based on themes that emerge from the semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. It will be approximately one to one and half hours long. Below is an overview of the general structure of the interview and potential topics for discussion.

**Students who have indicated that they do not want to be videotaped will not be included in the frame.**

**Introductions**

I will warmly welcome all the participants and ask them to help themselves to the snacks and beverages I have provided. I will then provide an overview of the research study and explain the role of the focus group interview. I will go over issues such as confidentiality and privacy, time commitment, compensation, their right to withdraw at any point, and their right to abstain from answering any questions. I will stress the importance of maintaining confidentiality and privacy; however, I will also indicate that this cannot be guaranteed given the nature of focus groups.

I will ask the students to briefly go around in a circle and share their names and any other information they feel comfortable sharing.

**Stimulus**

As a way to stimulate discussion I will read out a summary of Kassam’s (2007) article. This article discusses how a teacher used curriculum to engage students on topics relating to identity. She explains how one student, a Muslim girl, felt that she was being discriminated against because of wearing the hijab. The student wrote a poem on this, which she read out loud to her class blaming Canadian society for making her feel like an outsider. Her classmates were upset by the poem, as they felt that she was reading too much into a benign everyday event. This event stimulated a healthy and critical discussion in the class on discrimination. Once I have shared this with students, I will ask them:
How do you think this activity helped the Muslim girl?
What effect do you think this activity/the discussion had on the girl, her classmates, and the teacher?
Have you ever learned something in class or school, or done something that affected or influenced how you saw or understood yourself, how others saw or understood you, or how you saw or understood the world around you?

Discussion
I will use the discussion that springs from the stimulus to segue into discussion of some significant themes and topics, such as:

- How does curriculum/schooling influence how you see or understand yourself?
- How does curriculum/schooling influence how you see or understand the world around you?
- What role do your teachers play in your life as a student?
- What are the challenges and opportunities that come with being a Muslim girl in public secondary school?

I will use several sources to stimulate discussion:

- An article profiling the case of Aqsa Parvez, to discuss topics related to veiling, honour killing, media perception of Muslim, relation to curriculum, parents and religion.

Conclusion
I will thank the girls for their participation. I will reiterate the importance of privacy and confidentiality. Following this I will provide them with their gift certificates to express my gratitude. Finally, I will remind them that they can contact me at any point if they have any questions or concerns, and that I will be sending them an overview of my findings by the end of the summer.
Appendix H:
Professional Transcriber – Confidentiality Agreement

** On official OISE letterhead

Professional transcriber – Confidentiality Agreement

Sana Ali, M.A. candidate at the University of Toronto, is undertaking this study. The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of Muslim girls with curriculum/schooling in Ontario public schools.

I, _____________________, the Transcriber, agree to:

1. Keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone at any point other than the principal researcher.
2. Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession by saving it on a password-protected computer and encrypting it.
3. Return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the researcher when I have completed transcribing the data.
4. Erase or destroy all research information in any form of format once I have completed transcribing the data.

Transcriber

Print name: _____________________ Signature: _____________________ Date: ____________

Principal Researcher

Print name: _____________________ Signature: _____________________ Date: ____________

Thesis Supervisor

Print name: _____________________ Signature: _____________________ Date: ____________

If you have any questions or concerns please contact Sana Ali at (647) 287-2437 or sana.aliqureshi@gmail.com

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto. For questions regarding participants’ rights and ethical conduct of research contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416) 946-3273.
Appendix I:
Key Terms

There are several terms used repetitively in this study. Below I provide their definitions in the context of this research. These terms are expanded on and contextualized in the study.

**Baligh:** A term used in Islam to refer to one’s coming of age, signified by reaching puberty. Once an individual is *baligh* they are responsible and held accountable for observing religious practices.

**Burqa/Niqab:** A form of veiling that covers the entire body and face, save the eyes, with a lightweight cloth, usually black.

**Culture:** There are many definitions of culture. In this thesis culture refers to the thoughts, beliefs, actions, rituals, artifacts, food, and clothing that unify a group of people. However, culture is not static. Cultures change and evolve and persist as they are exposed to other cultures (Barth, 1969, p. 38).

**Curriculum:** Eisner (2002) defines curriculum as, “A series of planned events that are intended to have educational consequences for one or more students” (p. 45). This includes the “intended” curriculum, what is planned, and the “operational” curriculum, what transpires through the interactions between the teacher and the students (p. 45).

**Diverse:** Refers to students who are from religious, ethnic, cultural, and national backgrounds that are not part of the dominant White, Christian majority.

**Fasting:** Occurs during the month of *Ramadhan*. Muslims are expected to fast after puberty, though there are several exceptions, such as pregnancy, travel, and illness. Participating Muslims are supposed to refrain from eating and drinking from sunrise to sunset.

**First Generation Canadian:** A participant whose parents immigrated to Canada but is themself born in Canada.
**Halal:** Means what is “lawful” or “permitted” in Islam. *Halal* meat refers to meat that has been slaughtered in accordance to Islamic law, as well as which foods can and cannot be eaten. For example, pork is forbidden in Islam.

**Hajj:** A holy pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia that every able-bodied Muslim is expected to make once in their lifetime.

**Hijab:** I will use the words *hijab* and veil interchangeably to signify the headscarf, a piece of cloth, that is used to cover a Muslim girl’s hair by wrapping it around the hair. It is usually coupled with a more modest form of dressing. Many Muslims debate the definition of the *hijab* and what is considered a valid form of *hijab*.

**Islam:** A monotheistic religion. The central text is the Quran, and the basis of faith is belief in one God, Allah, and Prophet Muhammad as His Messenger.

**Immigrant:** A participant who was born in a country outside of Canada.

**Mainstream:** Refers to the norm behaviour of the dominant majority.

**Muslim:** I will use the term Muslim to refer to any individual who identifies themself to be part of the Islamic faith.

**Praying:** The formal practice of praying five times a day at prescribed times based on the position of the sun.

**Schooling:** The entire experience of public education. This includes what happens inside and outside the classroom, such as social interactions with peers, extracurricular activities, school climate, and the translation of school policy into the everyday lives of students.

**Veil:** see *hijab*