BUILDING SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES: A CASE OF MUSLIM PARENTS

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements For the Graduate Degree of Masters of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Muslim parents in the Greater Toronto Area are engaged in their children’s education and the challenges they face in trying to engage with the public school system. The public schools in Ontario are secular by law and free from any religious affiliation. They are however encouraged to find ways to accommodate the religious practices of students and parents of the Islamic faith and other faiths. Using a qualitative methodology, twelve Muslim parents selected from ethnically diverse backgrounds were interviewed. Data was collected and analyzed utilizing constant comparative method. Four major themes emerged from the data which focused on the centrality of religion in these parents’ households. Implications point towards the need for a culturally responsive policy that integrate Muslim values, cultural and religious beliefs in schools, which will make Ontario a stronger province that encourages people of all cultures and diversities to succeed and thrive.
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents both of whom provided me the inspiration to learn and have spent from their resources to build the educational foundation which made it possible for me to acquire knowledge in my field of interest I need to succeed in life.
Chapter 1

NATURE OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

In the past decades, schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) have seen their student populations grow exponentially with a demographic makeup of diverse ethnicities, linguistic and religious affiliations. What was once referred to as visible minorities have now become a visible majority in the GTA (Kymlicka, 2008). Hence the calls are made from different quarters, pressing the need to address the issues of making the schooling experiences for parents and students more compatible with their lived cultural patterns (Azmi, 2001).

This need is even more crucial for Muslims whose unique cultures and identities are widely distorted by the media and often surrounded by misconceptions and misrepresentations of the facts (Faruqi, 2011). This issue around continued misconceptions and misrepresentation of non-dominant cultures in hegemonic institutions of education is not limited to Muslim students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Critical and indigenous scholars have argued for the importance of culturally responsive teachings for African and Aboriginal students in rural and urban communities (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Guo, 2011; Nielsen, Nicol, & Owuor, 2008). Each of these studies calls for an understanding of the cultural backgrounds of parents and families as a basis for appreciating the lives of students representing our Canadian cultural mosaic. Moreover, recent evidence from multicultural education research, suggests that the one culture that needs to be explored further in teacher education and professional development is the Islamic culture (Berkson, 2005; Esposito, 1995; Khamela & Wannas-Jones, 2003; Mastrilli & Sardo-Brown, 2002; Subedi, 2008; Zine, 2000, 2001). All these studies have demonstrated the many attempts by opponents of Islam and Muslims to deliberately misrepresent with persistent fallacies and
Stereotypes about Muslims and Islam around the world (Saunders, 2012; Bullock, 2002).

Negative stereotyping of Muslims or “Islamophobia” in Canada arguably became increasingly evident following the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the United States in September 2001. A number of studies from Islamic community organizations have charted this discrimination. From 2000-2004, the Canadian Islamic Congress CIC conducted Media Research on Islamophobia, the reports examine anti-Islamic content in the country’s eight largest daily newspapers, noting the widespread use of terms like “Muslim extremist” and “Islamic militant” in reporting on conflicts in Muslim-majority countries (CIC, 2001, 2002, 2003). In 2002, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women sponsored a participatory research project investigating the effects of the September 11, 2001 incident in New York. The research was conducted with fourteen focus groups across the country. The result of the survey revealed a sense of horror at the terrorist attacks as well as distress about unfair negative stereotyping of Muslims. This situation has given rise to difficulties in travel by Muslims and cast Muslims as the least trusted in Canada (Hill, 2012; James, 2007; McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005).

In 2004, the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR CAN) published its own report, “Presumption of Guilt: A National survey on Security Visitations of Canadian Muslims” concluded that 8% of their 467 respondents were surveyed randomly. The survey forms were distributed in mosques, Islamic Centres, at Muslim community events across the country; electronic forms were also made available and individuals were encouraged to complete the on line version. The writers of the report suggest that the 8% figure may be underreported as 43% of their respondents knew of at least one other Canadian Muslim who had been questioned by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) or the local police. A disproportionately high number of those who reported being questioned
were of Arab ethnicity and male. Another study of the CAIRCAN entitled “Canadian Muslims One Year After 9-11”, similarly revealed that 56% of their respondents experienced anti-Muslim “incidents” on at least one occasion since 9/11 (CAIR CAN, 2005).


We can draw from the above narrative, reasons why Muslim parent engagement is critical to confront incidents of Islamophobia in schools. The following case is a blatant example of how Islamophobia has been acted out in a public school by those who claim to defend mainstream secular values.

Valley Park a public middle school in the east end of Toronto has been embroiled in controversy for allowing Muslim prayers in the school. The school is 80% to 90% Muslim and some 400 Muslim students have been praying on Friday afternoons for 40 minutes for the past years (Educhatter’s Blog, 2012; Gallinger, 2014). It started three years back, when large numbers of Valley Park students began missing Friday afternoon classes to attend a nearby mosque. The school principal Nick Stefanoff, with the best of intentions, devised a solution: an in-school service, offered for free by a local imam and supervised by parents. The school service was seen
as a way to save the lost instructional time and address safety concerns in response to the permission for religious accommodation granted by the principal (Gallinger, 2014).

For the three years preceding, prayer services in the school have been going on without complaint, until Hindu parents raised an objection, complaining that such services carried the potential for “inflammatory preaching” (David, 2012; Friesen & Hammer, 2011). Even though there is no evidence of such activity. The Muslim Canadian Congress also threatened legal action to force the board to comply with the Education Act. This issue hit The Toronto Sun and News Talk Radio — and sparked a firestorm of controversy (David, 2012; Friesen & Hammer, 2011; Agar, 2011; Kalinowski, 2011).

On July 8, 2011, the Toronto District School Board issued an official statement that the Muslim students attending Valley Park Middle School in Toronto’s North York, have a “constitutional right” to pray during school hours. Since that time, Valley Park Middle School has become the lightning rod in the long simmering public debate over the place of religion in publicly-funded district schools (TDSB, 2000a).

Religious accommodation according to critics and education experts is running afoul of Ontario’s Education Act. The board disagrees. The board argues that freedom of religion under the Charter of Rights trumps the Education Act. “As a public school board, we have a responsibility and an obligation to accommodate faith needs”, the former TDSB education director Chris Spence made this statement in a press release aimed at quelling the tension that was rising over this issue. It is clear from this discuss that even a modest concession made to Muslims in this case by the Toronto District school Board is bound to spark controversy (David, 2012; Friesen & Hammer, 2011; Gallinger, 2014; Kalinowski, 2011). Veiling their Islamophobic agenda as a “violation” of the Ontario Education Act, opponents of school prayers have
succeeded in spreading xenophobia towards Canada’s minority Muslim population (Kymlicka, 2011).

In his contribution to the debate around the issue of school prayers, a prominent Toronto lawyer and law professor Faisal Kutty ([no date] n.d.) argues that this issue has been deliberately exploited by these special interest groups to fuel the growing epidemic of Islamophobia in the West. The campaign against Islam exposes these hate groups for their lack of understanding of Muslims’ daily lives. The hostility they showed towards Muslim students and their parents at Valley Park public schools was unnecessary and divisive. Statistics Canada reported in (2008) the alarming statistics associated with hate crimes committed against Muslims and other visible faith groups. An earlier Statistics Canada (2001) report states that one third of the hate crimes committed in Canada were carried out by youth age 12 to 17 years. The report indicates that this is higher than the proportion of non-hate crimes committed by the same age cohort. The report also noted that the motive for these hate crimes were clearly attributed to race, ethnicity or religion.

Since students within the age group that was the focus of the Statistics Canada (2001) study attend both elementary and secondary schools in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), it is important that the school environment is cleansed of these acts of intolerance, intimidation and bullying coming from such a young age group (TDSB, 2013a). The school boards in the GTA have a duty to act against Islamophobia and to do so by facilitating an understanding of various cultures within their family of schools. All members of the school community in particular Muslim students and their parents need to be assured that they will be safe. They will be treated with respect and would be accepted regardless of who they are or where they came from (TDSB, 2013a). Muslim students who are facing threats to their safety
should be assured that they would be accorded the same level of empathy, love and kindness that is given to every student in school systems (TDSB, 2013a).

Over the past century, Canada has played host to large numbers of immigrants from different parts of the world, with the majority choosing to settle in the GTA (Kymlicka, 2010). As these immigrant families move into neighborhoods, one of the public institutions that is immediately impacted is schools. Muslim communities are by far the largest and the most recognizable among the newcomers in many neighborhoods in the GTA and their children have a significant presence in public schools (Jordan Press, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2013).

This Muslim phenomenon has not gone unnoticed in academic circles. It has generated an interest amongst researchers who have conducted studies in recent times and published their findings. The studies noted the experiences of Muslim students and their parents. The studies documented the challenges many Muslim parents face in their quest towards engagement with the public school system, in their quest to avoid pressures of assimilation, and in their quest to share the challenges they encounter while trying to fit into the main stream culture (Berns-McGown, 1999; Guo, 2011 & 2012; Hoodfar, 2003; Jamil, 2012; Rezai-Rashti, 2005; Shah, 2012 & 2014).

These research studies used ethnographic approaches to conduct interviews in order to understand the nature of Muslim parents and Muslim students from various ethnic backgrounds. However, the researchers noted that there is an absence of what they refer to as “culturally responsive pedagogy” (Gay, 2002). Culturally responsive pedagogy is a student-centered approach to teaching in which the students' unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student's cultural place in the world (Gay & Howard, 2000; Gay & Kirkland, 2003). It is based on the assumption that
when academic knowledge and skills are situated within lived experiences and frames of references of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly (Gay & Howard, 2000; Gay, 2002 & Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Given the wealth of diversity in our public schools, it is surprising to note that in spite of the significant presence of Muslims in public school (statistics Canada, 2003), their cultural and household experiences are rarely addressed in studies about Muslim children and their parents. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Other disciplines in the behavioural sciences such as psychology of minorities and cultural counseling are recognizing the impacts of social inequalities and injustices that have been directed towards Muslims due largely to a lack of understanding of this population group. Many of the research studies are calling for host communities and public institutions such as schools to become culturally responsive to Muslims (Bullis, 2001; Guo, 2011; Hodge & Nadir, 2008; Irving & Barker, 2004; Nadir & Dziegielewski, 2001).

However, integrating certain aspects of Muslim knowledge within existing curriculum in subjects such as music, drama, physical education as part of the classroom experience for Muslim students is not considered feasible in a secular system, but negotiable on the merit of each request for accommodation (TDSB 2000a).

As noted earlier, the focus of my study is the Muslim parents in the geographical space called the Greater Toronto Area. This area consist of the school districts of Toronto, Peel, York and Durham. Muslim students in the GTA public schools are growing in significant numbers. The majority of Canadian Muslims live in the province of Ontario, and especially in and around the Greater Toronto Area. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, there were
424,925 Muslims living in the Greater Toronto Area equaling 7.7% of the total metro population (Ried, 2011; Jordan Press, 2013).

In each of the district school boards in the GTA, you will find many public primary and secondary schools where Muslim students are in the majority. The level of attendance in each school is also a reflection of the growing population distribution in each school district. This study is aiming to explore the extent to which Muslim parents as supporters of public schools are engaged or not engaged in the schools their children attend. I would explore further, the extent to which Muslim cultural practices can be accommodated while maintaining the secular nature of the public school system (TDSB 2000a).

The results of this study would hopefully convince policy makers and school boards of the need to develop programs with exclusive contents for Muslims students in order to create an inclusive learning environment that integrate the Islamic culture in the Canadian educational and social fabric (Guo, 2011; Shah, 2012 & 2014). The study is guided by what Muslim parents would like to see addressed in a culturally responsive pedagogical model, where the community would be fully integrated with its special needs taken into consideration (Howard, 2003).

This need is even more crucial for Muslims whose unique cultures and identities are widely distorted by the media and often surrounded by misconceptions and misrepresentations of the facts (Faruqi, 2011). History attests and research has confirmed as is the case of the various practices of culturally responsive teachings of African and Aboriginal students cited in the literature of (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Guo, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nielsen, Nicol, & Owuor, 2008).
1.2 Rationale

Today Canadians are extremely proud of their public education system that is designed to provide free access to all elementary and secondary age children until they have graduated from secondary school. Consequently, a complex system has evolved, intended to accommodate children from diverse backgrounds (Christenson & Reshly, 2010). This is more obvious in the school Boards in the Greater Toronto Area, school districts that are both very large and very diverse (learningpartnership.ca; settlement.org).

In 2010, the Ontario Ministry of Education recognized and announced its commitment to improve parent engagement and admitted that the needs and contributions of parents have been undervalued and the education system needs to create several new points of reinforcement in order for the “parent factor” to realize its potential (Ontario Ministry of Education [MOE], 2010). This shift in policy has also contributed to a change in how educators perceive parental engagement among diverse groups of parents. As a result, there is some controversy around this issue as according to Ryan (2003) for culturally diverse parents, active parental involvement not only helps to establish an orchestrated home and school partnership to facilitate quality learning and long term success for their children, but also facilitates their own empowerment, active citizenship and integration into Canadian society. But in the opinion of Kim, (2009) culturally diverse parents currently have only limited roles, and are underrepresented among the ranks of parents involved with schools (Khalema, & Wannas-Jones, 2003; Poynting, & Perry, 2007).

There may be valid reasons for this apathy, especially among many Muslims whose experience of rising Islamophobia has been negative. Muslim parents in particular have been driven into a state of fear for themselves and their children and are avoiding public events where
they are more likely to draw attention to themselves (Allen, 2010, 2011; Bullock, & Jafri, 2000; Conte, 2009; Elmasry, 2002; Elghobashy, 2009; Hill, 2012; Jamil, 2012; Jamil & Rousseau, 2010; Khalema & Wannas-Jones, 2003; Poynting & Perry, 2007; Razack, 2008; Rousseau, Jamil, Bhui & Boudjarane, 2013; Zine, 2003). Many Muslim parents feel intimidated by the system (Razack, 2008; Rousseau, Jamil, Bhui, & Boudjarane, 2013; Warner & Azmi, 2011) whose limited understanding of the Islamic culture and practices render it inadequate to fully appreciate and accommodate the unique needs of Muslims. There is ignorance on both sides, but it is more profound for Muslim parents, whose lack of familiarity with the Ontario school system limit their ability to get involved and actively participate in the affairs of their neighbourhood schools. This is especially the case of Muslim immigrants who have come to Canada from countries with large Muslim populations (Rousseau, Ferradji, Mekki-Berrada, & Jamil, 2013). The citizens of these countries to name a few examples are Indian, Pakistani, Egyptians/Arab, Middle Eastern descent, others from Guyanese, Somali, Central Asian, the Balkans and many other others from across the world (Reid, 2011).

Most of the children of these parents attend public schools and were born and raised in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). The parents as already noted have come to Canada for a variety of reasons. These include: a desire to seek education for themselves and their children, security, employment, and family re-unification (Husaini, 1990). Others have come for religious and political freedom, safety and security, leaving behind civil wars, persecution, and other forms of civil and ethnic strife (Statistics Canada, 2011). We can see from this narrative, why the role of the public school system becomes so crucial in fostering a sense of belonging for all parents and especially so for those who have endured suffering, trauma and discrimination in their dealings with public institutions. It is real that Muslims do face discrimination (Yusuf, 1993; Guo, 211,
2012). Some of the acts of discrimination have already been mentioned in previous sections and there are more to follow. There are more research studies that are available for example Moghissi (2007) points out that racism has taken a turn towards Muslims which is the community that is nowadays the target of hate groups for all kinds of reasons some having to do with the Muslim way of life which is perceived to be different from mainstream Canadian values. It is in this regard that out of fear, many Muslims have kept a low profile and are segregating themselves from the rest of society. Haddad (2002) believes that Canadians see Islam as an “alien” religion. Since the attack on the World Trade Centre on 9/11 and subsequent acts of terrorism carried out in Canada by people who claim to be Muslims, the backlash provided yet another reason for some Muslim parents to avoid engaging with mainstream society (Froschauer, Seager & Netherton, 2005; Jamil & Rousseau, 2012; Rousseau & Jamil, 2010).

Being included and accepted in their local schools are essential steps to make Muslim parents feel welcomed, building their confidence to take on roles and responsibilities within schools. In such an environment, differences are masked as parents begin to feel a greater sense of belonging in such diverse school climate (Beaman, 2012; He, Phillion, Chan, & Xu, 2008; Maestas & Vaquera, Zehr, 2007; Guo, 2012). These parents considered public schools to be one of the most important factors affecting their sense of belonging. For them public schools systems act either as focus for inclusion and a means of fostering a deeper sense of belonging to Canada, or a force of exclusion, alienation, and even at times of oppression (Adams, 2009; Rousseau, Hassan, Moreau, & Thombs, 2011). Public schools are often considered places where Muslim students are engaged in a struggle for cultural or religious survival. The environment of schools have the tendency to put pressure on students to conform to certain norms.
The main thrust in this regard is to shift the onus on decision-makers to create the conditions for parents’ engagement in their children’s education to take place by way of the right environment, supports and attitudes (Parents’ Voice in Education, 2005). An equitable, inclusive education system is fundamental to achieve these priorities. Citizens including Muslims are being called upon to respond to this challenge of working to create a harmonious and equitable environment (MOE, 2009).

My study centres on this particular question. It explores how Muslim parents are engaged in their children’s formal education in public schools, what strategies do they employ? What challenges do they encounter? And what supports do they require to develop and sustain this engagement?

This research contributes to an understanding of the strategies Muslim parents may employ to get engaged in the education of their children in public schools. The results of the study call into question the viability of current policies around parent engagement by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The study reveals some concrete results of success in getting minority parents like those in the Muslim community fully engaged in the school system as required in the Ministry’s policy document on Inclusive schooling or whether there has been no visible evidence of engagement to the degree required in policy on parent engagement.

Additionally, given that many studies on parent engagement and parent leadership remained either general in nature or confined to the American context, this study supplements the limited pool of current literature on parent engagement in Canada, in particular as I present empirical evidence of the pattern of engagement of parents in the Muslim Community in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in Ontario. The policy documents on Equity and Inclusive
Education in Ontario Schools (MOE, 2009a & 2009b) and the Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools (2010) guided this study.

This study was carried out, by looking at the challenges that prevent parent engagement programs from being established or to meet their objectives. Recent studies which focus on the shifting nature of educational policies and practices towards an inclusive model of involvement for minority parents make the case for a greater need to focus on strategies which promote a more participatory framework (Delhi, 1994).

The role of parents as primary stakeholders in education is fundamental in defining their place within our educational institutions. For many minority parents however, particularly those new to the Canadian system, interacting within their children’s schools can often be an alienating experience just as students can become “disengaged” from a system they feel does not represent their cultures, history and needs (Barton, 2007; Dei, 1997 & 2000).

Parents can feel similarly distanced by the school system that is predominantly structured according to Euro-centered norms and conventions (Dei, et. al., 1997 & 2000; Parents’ Voice in Education, 2005).

1.3 Road Map

The motivation for doing this study rose out of a desire to follow-up on a training I participated in as co-facilitator, organized for parent leaders at an elementary school in York Region, with funds provided by the Ministry of Education, Parent Reaching out Grant and facilitated by MENTORS (Muslim Education Network, Training and Community Outreach Service) a community organization).

The parents had been invited to attend the training as part of a “train the trainer” model geared to facilitate inclusive education workshops for building sustainable leadership skills and
the training required to qualify as a parent leader. The parents were provided with information about the education system, so that they may become effective leaders in their communities.

The goal was to train parent leaders, so that they would not only gain valuable knowledge of the education system in Ontario, but they would also acquire valuable leadership skills, the skills that would build their self-confidence to venture out and assist other parents to gain access to the education system and become advocates for their children in their children’s schools. The trained parents were to transfer to other parents in the community, the skills they have learnt. In this way many more parents will become involved in school based activities of their choice.

This cyclical practice of on-going parent leader training at the community level was the reason why the project was called building sustainable leadership for inclusive school communities.

During the course of training I observed that there were fewer Muslim parents participating in that workshop even though I learnt that the area where the school was located was a Muslim majority area and this triggered my interest to know why the Muslim parents’ participation is so low. It was out of the experience of attending this training of parent leaders that I became curious to explore Muslim Parents Involvement in their children’s education in public schools in the GTA in Ontario. The following research questions will guide my study.

1.4 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between Muslim Parents and public schools in relation to their engagement in their children’s formal education within the GTA in Ontario, challenges they encounter in the course of their engagement and supports they require within a framework of equity and inclusion. This investigation was carried out by looking at the challenges that prevent parent engagement programs from being established or meet their objectives. Research shows that some of the challenges might include a lack of
commitment from staff and administration, family barriers, inadequate resources, cultural and language barriers (Timmons & Alur, 2009; Guo, 211 & 2012).

The study is informed by the literature on parent involvement / engagement and by a review of policy documents on Equity and Inclusion and Parent Engagement of the Ontario Ministry of Education. I explored this phenomenon by addressing a key question and several sub-questions:

How are Muslim parents involved in their children’s education within public schools?

The following sub-questions drove the study:

1. What are Muslim parents’ attitudes towards engagement in their children’s education?
2. What challenges do Muslim parents encounter in the quest of their engagement in their children’s school?
3. What supports do Muslim parents require to be more fully engaged and sustain this engagement in their children’s education/school?
4. What strategies do Muslim parents employ to be engaged in their children’s education?

Also, aspects of the policy on parental engagement were investigated to include: a) what “counts” as parental engagement? (Does it happen at school or at home?); b) what is its purpose? (Improve a child’s learning, or to share governance?); c) who is best positioned to describe whether or not parents are engaged/involved (Parents? Community leaders/educators? Teachers? Principals? District or Ministry officials?); d) how is parent engagement measured?; e) how are parents informed about being engaged?

1.5 Definitions

1.5.1 Parents: The term “parents” therefore is used here to mean any adult who is engaged in child rearing.
1.5.2 Parental Involvement and Engagement: These are used interchangeably with engagement as the intended concept: This is a broad term and includes such things as good parenting, helping with homework, serving on school council and board committees, communicating and meeting with teachers and volunteering in the classroom or on school trips (Epstein, 1995, 1997, 2001; Parents’ Voice in Education, 2005; Parents in Action in Education, 2001; Patrikakou, 2008; Pushor, 2007, 2012, 2013).

1.5.3 Muslims: Muslims believe in One Unique, Incomparable God Allah; in the Angels created by Him; in the Prophets through whom His revelations were brought to mankind; in the Day of Judgment and individual accountability for actions; in Allah’s complete authority over human destiny and in life after death. Muslims believe in a chain of Prophets starting with Adam and including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elias, Jonah, John the Baptist, and Jesus, peace be upon them. But God’s final message to humanity, is a reconfirmation of the eternal message and a summing-up of all that has gone before was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him through Angel Gabriel (Haneef, 2003).

Although Muslims identify themselves as one community called “Ummah,” yet there is diversity within this Ummah in terms of where people come from, the language they speak, the food they eat and clothing they wear. These differences are meant for people to know and appreciate one another not to discriminate against one another. As mentioned in the Quran, Allah says, “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted” (Quran 49:13).
1.5.4 Islam: The Arabic word ‘Islam’ simply means ‘submission’, and derives from a word meaning ‘peace’. In a religious context it means complete submission to the will of God Almighty (Allah) (Haneef, 1997). Islam may seem exotic or even extreme in the modern world. Perhaps this is because religion does not dominate everyday life in the West today, whereas Muslims have religion always uppermost in their minds, and make no division between secular and sacred. They believe that the Divine Law, the Shari'a, should be taken very seriously, which is why issues related to religion are still so important (Johnson & Sergie, 2014).

1.5.4.1 The Theology of Islam: Muslims summarize their doctrine in six articles of faith:

1. Belief in one Allah: Muslims believe Allah is one, eternal, creator, and sovereign.
2. Belief in the angels
3. Belief in the prophets: The prophets include the biblical prophets but end with Muhammad as Allah’s final prophet.
4. Belief in the revelations of Allah: Muslims accept certain portions of the Bible, such as the Torah and the Gospels. They believe the Qur'an is the preexistent, perfect word of Allah.
5. Belief in the last Day of Judgment and the hereafter: Everyone will be resurrected for judgment into either paradise or hell.
6. Belief in predestination: Muslims believe Allah has decreed everything that will happen. Muslims testify to Allah’s sovereignty with their frequent phrase, Insha’Allah, meaning, “if God wills” (Haneef, 1999).

1.5.4.2 The Five Pillars of Islam: These five tenets compose the framework of obedience for Muslims:
1. The testimony of faith (shahada): “la ilaha illa Allah. Muhammad rasul Allah.” This means, “There is no deity but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.” A person can convert to Islam by stating this creed. The shahada shows that a Muslim believes in Allah alone as deity and believes that Muhammad reveals Allah.

2. Prayer (Salat): Five ritual prayers must be performed every day.

3. Giving (Zakat): This almsgiving is a certain percentage given once a year.

4. Fasting (Sawm): Muslims fast during Ramadan in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. They must not eat or drink from dawn until sunset.

5. Pilgrimage (Hajj): If physically and financially possible, a Muslim must make the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once. The hajj is performed in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar (Haneef, 1997).

1.5.5 Sociological Features of Islam

The salient sociological features are briefly explained below.

1.5.5.1 Equality of People

Islam teaches that all human beings are equal. That the differences in race, ethnicity, culture and language are meant for us to know, appreciate and to validate each other’s uniqueness. The way we judge each other is not on the basis of material wealth, lineage, skin color, beauty or geographical location. We judge each other on the basis of how we treat others, our love and compassion for each other and how we care for the environment in which we live. In short Islam sees this earth as a global village, and all there is in it are global citizens, in need of preservation and protection and not destruction. Islam teaches about establishing justice on the land and justice must be administered according to the law, fairly and without prejudice. The belief is that injustice would prevail when good people fail to do nothing or when the law is administered to
favour a small segment of society who happened to be rich and powerful at the expense of the poor and disadvantage members of society. The social welfare system of Islam is based on sharing and caring for the needy. Islam imposes what is general refer to as the “poor due”. An amount levied on the rich at 2.5% of annual savings and are transferred from the have to the have not. Islam disapproves of the prejudices which have arisen among humankind because of differences in race, color, language and nationality. Islam says that if there is any real difference among people, it cannot be one of race, color, country or language, but only on the basis of moral conduct (Quran 49:13).

1.5.5.2 Institution of the Family: Islam devotes much attention to the issues relating to the family and strives to establish it on the healthiest and strongest possible foundations. According to Islam the correct relationship between man and woman is marriage, a relationship in which social responsibilities are fully accepted and which results in the emergence of a family. According to Islam the real spirit of marital life is love, understanding and mutual respect. Although Islam places great emphasis on the marital bond, it only wants it to remain intact as long as it is founded on the sweetness of love or there exists at least the possibility of lasting companionship (The message of Islam.org).

1.5.5.3 Relatives and Neighbours Relatives: After the limited circle of the family, the next social sphere is that of kinship and blood relationship. Islam wants all those who are related through common parents, common brothers and sisters or marriage to be affectionate, cooperative and helpful to each other. In particular the status of the mother is elevated to a level only below that of God. The mother and all relatives are deserving of sympathy, affection, kindness and fair treatment. Islam, calls on Muslims to be kind to their neighbors to be loving and helpful and to share each other’s sorrows and happiness. It enjoins them to establish social
relations in which one can depend upon the other and have regard for the sacredness of life, property and be at peace and safe among neighbours (Haneef, 2005). Next to these come the wider relationships covering the whole of society. The broad principles on which Islam wants Muslims to structure their social lives so that they become productive members of society and working for the common good to the best of their abilities (Haneef, 1999).

1.5.6 Islamophobia

According to Canadian Race Relations Foundation CRRF (2013) Islamophobia “is a term recently coined to refer to expressions of fear and negative stereotypes, bias or acts of hostility towards the religion of Islam and individual Muslims” (CRRF, 2013).
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is generally agreed that the involvement of parents in the education system of their children has a positive effect in enhancing the efforts of the schools and the educational process (Epstein, 2001). Parental involvement is a crucial ingredient of effective public education. The research shows that children do better in school when parents are involved in their education. They have better attendance, lower dropout rates and higher rates of achievement (Cotton, & Wikelund, 2001). An impressive body of research literature has established the many benefits of active parental engagement including enhanced student achievement, improved attitudes toward learning, healthy development of psychosocial well-being of students and positive impact on school staff and service delivery (Becher, 1984; Berger, 2000; Coleman, 2001; Davies et al., 1992; Epstein 2001; Henderson, 1988; Jeynes, 2011; Sheridan, 2001; Schaeffer & Betz, 1992; Stallworth, 1982; Williams & Chavakin, 1986).

2.1 Equity and Inclusion

Educators and policy makers are attempting to meet the challenge. Buzz words such as “Diversity” “inclusive”, “equitable,” and “partnership” have gained currency among educators, (TDSB, 2000). Policies have been written and programs (Parent Reaching out Grant) are being initiated to promote “an atmosphere of acceptance for people of all cultures, faiths, languages and the full range of Canadian heritages” (Zagelbaum & Carlson, 2011). However, many parents are indifferent or unaware when it comes to getting engaged in the education system (Kim, 2009).
This indifference can be seen by the abysmal attendance at most parent-teacher nights, school councils meetings or community involvement conferences (Kerr, 2004). These parents may further experience institutional barriers in schools, including assumptions about culturally diverse parents’ lack of interest or inability to help with their children’s schooling, an unwelcoming school environment, a lack of linguistic, cultural and social support for parents, inadequate diversity training for staff, including supervisory officers (Kim, 2009; Kim, 2004).

Some communities have recognized that moving beyond a “reactive mindset and throwing off communal apathy is what is necessary to create a more inclusive education system. One can see this in the Black community (Brown, 2008) and Tamil community (Ladky, Peterson & Shelly, 2008) communities, which have made concerted efforts to build awareness and foster involvement among their own people to help create a system for their children. There have been attempts by school boards to build capacity of parents who will help fill the leadership gap by providing them training and resources to conduct inclusive education training to members of their communities (MENTORS, 2011).

The Ministry of Education through its Parent Reaching out Grant provided funding to support the parent leader training mentioned above in the hope that by building the capacity of parents to take on leadership positions in their local schools, the ministry would be demonstrating a willingness to make the schools more inclusive, accountable and responsive to the demographic changes in school communities (MOE, 2009a, 2009b & 2010; TDSB, 2000a & 2000b).

Much contemporary research on parental involvement has drawn on the work of Joyce Epstein, the Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns
Hopkins University. Epstein, (2001) has drawn up six types of parental involvement. What follows are direct quotations pertaining to types of parent involvement in their children’s education from pp.43-44 of her book (School, Family and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools):

- **Type 1. Parenting:** Assisting families with Parent and child-rearing skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level.

- **Type 2-Communicating:** Communicate with families about school programs and student progress with school-to-home communications.

- **Type 3- Volunteering:** Improve recruitment, training, work and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support student and school programs.

- **Type 4- Learning at Home:** Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curricular-linked activities and decisions.

- **Type 5- Decision Making:** Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through PTA, committees, councils, and other parent organizations.

- **Type 6- Collaborating with the Community:** Coordinate the work and resources of community business, agencies, colleges or universities, and other groups to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Evidence for some of these types of involvement (volunteering, for example, or decision-making) is easily found in schools; evidence for other types of involvement (parenting,
say, or collaborating with the community) is more likely found outside of the school (Epstein, 2001).

Traditionally, parent involvement has been in the area of helping with homework or fundraising, usually through a parent organization at the school. Engagement is expanding including helping in the classroom and sitting on committees that decide policy and curriculum issues. However, the general agreement on the importance of involving parents in the educational process tends to breakdown at the point of implementation. Williams & Chavkin (1986) found that parents and educators disagree about the value of different parental roles. Many principals and teachers favour increased parental involvement in the traditional ways such as holding bake sales Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy (2009), but many parents feel all roles are important.

Research supports parents’ opinion as Henderson (1988) states, “….Parent involvement works better when parents are given a variety of roles to play” (p.150) and “for the wheel to turn, parents must play all the roles”. Becher (1984) concurs, “All forms of parent involvement strategies seem to be useful. However, those that “Offer more types of roles for parents to play, and occur over an extended period of time appear to be more effective” (p.18).

2.2 Parent Involvement to Parent Engagement

In her research on Parent Engagement, Debbie Pushor uses the term parent engagement consciously to differentiate it from the notion of parent involvement or parent partnerships. Both concepts are widely used in the literature pertaining to educators' relationships with parents and family members of the children they teach. In exploring established assumptions, Pushor defines what parent engagement is, analyzes how notions of parent engagement have been enlarged and
expanded over the past decade and a half to give us the breakdown I have synthesized below (Pushor, 2007, 2012 & 2013; Patrikakou, 2008) in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Comparison</th>
<th>Parent Involvement</th>
<th>Parent Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement vs Engagement</td>
<td>Involvement (School Agenda)</td>
<td>Engagement (Parent Agenda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Hierarchical organization-power is with educators (e.g. teachers, principals)</td>
<td>Flat organizational structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Just serving the school with fundraising -not to engagement and not advising</td>
<td>Partnership by and with parents and educators. It is an integral part of the process and with care and commitment Core work of teaching and learning Create an educationally oriented ambience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-Making</td>
<td>Welcoming into the school in a hierarchical way-but not welcoming into process or decision-making</td>
<td>Welcoming into the school-decision-making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Cerebral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Advocacy is limited and is perceived as negative.</td>
<td>Advisory and advocacy Advocate for parent role. Advocacy is greater and perceived as positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School–Agenda vs Parent- Agenda</td>
<td>School agenda-activities such as fundraising, photocopying</td>
<td>Focus on parents’ dreams and hopes FOR their children/parents’ agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Contrary process to engagement e.g.: late notices invitation (repeated and timely for involvement/ engagement through year)</td>
<td>Engagement is welcomed repeatedly. Invitation Environment that welcomes participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>One-way communications</td>
<td>Reciprocal communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Sharing</td>
<td>Power directing</td>
<td>Power sharing by parents with school authorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Personalized</td>
<td>Global</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td>Non-equality/uneven partnership</td>
<td>Parents as “hosts” as well</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
parents “guests” not “hosts” in schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Involved vs Engaged</th>
<th>Involved</th>
<th>Engaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Go along with status quo</td>
<td>Parents “allowed” to only be involved but not engaged</td>
<td>Parents may challenge status quo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Invitation | No invitation-parents only allowed to be involved to a certain degree | It is up to the parents to be involved or engaged |
| Understanding Power | Parents don't understand their power or role | Parents have an understanding that they are partners/stakeholders |
| Parent Knowledge | Teacher knowledge | Recognition of teacher and parent knowledge (mutual respect) Teachers can learn from parents |
| Parallels | Standing over parents | Standing alongside parents. Standing with parents and teachers. |
| Paradigm Shift | Involvement can be pathway to Engagement | New view of the school (new paradigm) |

| Adaptation | Needed to accommodate parents | Adapts to the reality of parents (accommodating-know your audience) know your audience - adapt lifestyles |
| Real Inclusion | N/A | Close connection by and with partners. Relationships and co-ownership of facility leads to real inclusion. |
| Sustainability | N/A | Requires capacity building (training) that can lead to -Sustainable parent leadership to -Build inclusive school communities |

2.3 Classifications of Models of Parent Engagement

Several models of classification of parental engagement have been developed. Henderson, Marburger & Ooms (1986) provide one typology of parent roles in education: a) parent as partners; b) parents as collaborators and problem solvers; c) parents as audience; d) parents as supporters and; e) parents as advisors and /or co-decision makers.

2.4 Approaches to Parent Engagement

Henderson (1988) delineates three broad approaches in the research of parental involvement, namely: a) improving the parent-child relationship in the context of the family; b)
integrating parents into school programs; and, c) building strong relationships between school, family, and the larger community.

### 2.5 Essential Element of Parent Engagement

Williams & Chavkin (1989) describe seven essential elements of strong parent involvement program: a) written policies; b) administrative support; c) training; d) partnership approach; e) two-way communication; f) networking and; g) evaluation.

Keesling (1980) found that legislation and regulation can provide powerful motivation for the fostering and support for parental involvement.

According to Schaeffer & Betz (1992) the elements of effective programs include: a) considering parents’ needs; b) creating an active teachers’ role; c) including varied innovative activities; d) communicating; e) training (for both teachers and parents); and f) developing policy and commitment.

Schaeffer & Betz (1992) also point out that programs should be centred on parents’ interests rather than the school’s needs. They state that the roles which parents are interested in filling fall along a continuum from basic support to leadership positions, and schools should offer opportunities for involvement across the continuum in order to meet the needs of all parents.

### 2.6 Barriers/Challenges to Parental Engagement

Research has described the barriers to involvement. Becher (1984) cautions that a number of problems of parental involvement have been reported that there is a disparity between commitment and practice. Williams & Chavkin (1986) reports that, while educators generally consider it useful to have parents involved in education, educators appear to be more supportive of the traditional ways in which parents have participated. This includes supporting school
homework. Many parents on the other hand are interested in helping with school governance matters. Stallworth (1982) says barriers to traditional types of involvement are more likely to be related to lack of resources or lack of knowledge or skills whereas barriers to parent involvement decision making seem to be more extensive and may be in conflict with policies and procedures and attitudes of teachers and principal. Table 2. Below presents some strategies to reach out parents who find engagement challenging.

**Table 2. Sample Strategies to Reach Out Parents Who May Find Engagement Challenging:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>PI Type</th>
<th>Supporting Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em><em>Provide information</em> about:</em>*</td>
<td>Parenting, Communicating, Community Collaboration</td>
<td>Moore &amp; Lasky (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Parenting and child rearing at each age and grade level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Selecting schools or courses, programs, activities within schools, school policies, programs, reforms and transitions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Homework policies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Community health, cultural, recreational, social support and other programs or services</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including Summer programs for students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methods may include:</strong> handbook in print and available on web, recorded phone messages, newsletters, workshops at school or other accessible location in the community, video</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information should be available in languages reflecting those of the school community</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Arrange parent education and other courses or training for parents (e.g., CPR, First Aid)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>Epstein (1995, 2001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Training, Nutrition, Child Development

**Provide training about:**
- How to monitor and discuss school work at home
- How to assist children to improve skills on various class and school assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parenting Learning at home</td>
<td>Hampton, Mumford &amp; Bond (1998); Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez &amp; Kayzar (2002); Starkey &amp; Klein (2000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Provide Literacy training for parents**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy training</td>
<td>Rodriguez-Brown, Li &amp; Albom (1999); Lopez &amp; Cole (1999)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Coordinate home visits or meetings at transition points to preschool, elementary, middle, and high school**

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<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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</table>

**Enable families to share information with schools about culture, background, children’s talents and needs**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
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</table>

**Provide language translation to assist families as needed (at meetings, in newsletters, printed materials)**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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</table>

**Implement regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters and other communications**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>Epstein (1995)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Homework Hotlines**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning at home</td>
<td>Moore &amp; Laskey (1999)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Create flexible Volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, students and other parents at home or in school or community. Home activities may include making phone calls or partnering with other parents in languages other than English if necessary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>Epstein (1995); Fager and Brewster (1999)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Create parent room or Family Centre for volunteer work, meetings and resources for families located in school or community**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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</table>

**Design parent patrols or other activities to aid safety and operation of school programs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>Epstein (1995, 2001)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Reach out through community organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outreach and Advocacy</td>
<td>Moore &amp; Laskey (1999)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Provide child care to enable participation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
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</table>

**Distribute learning packages or activities to support school learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning at home</td>
<td>Epstein (1995, 2001)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Decision making opportunities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>Fager &amp; Brewster (1999); Sanders, (2008);</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address social, economic, physical needs of immigrant families</td>
<td>Settlement Related Needs</td>
<td>Lopez, Scribner &amp; Mahitivanichcha (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create networks to link all families with parent representatives</td>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>Epstein (1995, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite parents to join parent organizations, attend school events; volunteer, contribute to newsletters in first language</td>
<td>Volunteering, Decision making</td>
<td>Epstein, (1995, 2001); Moore &amp; Laskey (1999); Levine &amp; Tricket, (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize and celebrate volunteers</td>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>Decker &amp; Decker (1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop service integration through partnership involving schools; civic counseling, cultural, health, recreation and other agencies and organizations and businesses</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Corter &amp; Pelletier, (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize initiatives that provide service to the community by students, families and schools (e.g. recycling, art, music, drama and other activities for seniors or others)</td>
<td>Community Collaboration</td>
<td>Epstein, J.,(1995, 2001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.7 Attitude of Staff and Administration

The key role of the principal and teachers in fostering involvement is often mentioned. Davies et al (1992) mentioned the dominant role of the principal, “We observed that the backing of the principal appears to be essential in reaching out strategies because they require extra work on the part of school staffs and they represent clear deviation from the standard operating procedures in traditional schools” (p.137). Schaeffer & Betz (1992) state “a warm climate” where parents were made to feel welcome and were treated, as vital part of the program was present in schools with successful programs. Likewise, “the staff of these schools was committed to have parents involved” (p14). According to Becher (1984) “the more positive the attitudes of the teachers towards parent involvement as expressed on an attitudinal survey, the more parent involvement” and “parents are very willing and interested in becoming involved. However,
research indicates that in many cases teachers initiate contact with parents only when a problem or crises situation has developed” (p.22).

Becher (1984) lists teacher attitude as a barrier to parental involvement. Teachers may have various grounds for opposition such as: a) a wish to maintain the role of specialized experts; b) a belief that planning for parental involvement takes too much time; c) a fear that parents will try to take over teaching responsibilities.

Furthermore, teachers may stereotype minority parents and form perceptions about their involvement shaped by culture, history and schooling experiences. Such stereotypes may hinder home-school linkages even more (Berger, 2012) and not follow teacher’s instructions and school regulations; d) a fear that parents would discuss confidential information; and e) a fear that parents would be too critical of teachers. Schaeffer & Betz (1992) comment, “The key to removing the barriers, as is the key to all effective parent involvement is the teacher” (p. 25). Schaeffer & Betz (1992) separate barriers into three categories, namely: a) human nature factors which include parent and teacher fear of failure, fear of criticism or fear of each other’s differences; b) communication factors (an inability to communicate a real need for parent support); and c) external factors which include lack of time (on the part of both teachers and parents), personal problems, administrative policies, busy policy schedules, busy lifestyles.

According to Schaeffer & Betz (1992), a major reason for lack of involvement in secondary schools is that children do not want their parents involved.

The research indicates that the major barrier to parental and community involvement is the attitude of staff and administration (Patrikakou, 2008). When staff and administration genuinely want parents to be involved and convey this desire through communication, consideration of parents’ needs, and other means, involvement increases. Most other barriers can
be minimized by a change in attitude of staff and administration (Turner-Vorbeck, Tammy, Miller, Marsh & Monica, 2008).

2.8 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study stems from the need to create inclusive communities of partnership and learning between schools, minority parents and communities.

2.8.1 Participative System Leadership

While school councils have become a part of the education palate in Ontario, we find that they focus on whole schools issues, and that there is still a very important role to be played, in the education of a child, through the development of what (Mascall, 2007) referred to as “participative leadership” and parent mentor advocacy which if sustained (Glasgow, 2009; Wepner, 2011;) would ultimately lead to changes in the way our schools are run (Auerbah, 2010; Gordon & Wikelund, 2004; Sharon, 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002)).

2.8.2 Building Capacity for Leadership

By building the capacity of parents to take on leadership positions in their local schools, the boards would be demonstrating a willingness to make the schools more inclusive, accountable and responsive to the demographic changes in school communities (Frank, 2011; Fullan, 1993; Linda, 1998).

2.8.3 Sustainable Parent Leadership

The Royal Commission on learning (1995) recognized this fact and recommended the establishment of school-community councils to increase the effectiveness of education within a school community. In 2009 the government passed Bill 177, Regulation 612/00 requiring each school board to have a Parent Involvement Committee to support parent engagement and provide a direct link between parents and the directors of education (Canadian Education Association,
Alison & Liethwood, 2004; Rothwell, 1995) and school trustees (MOE, 2010, P.15). Parents are Partners: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools (2010) was published by the Ontario Ministry of Education. This document recognizes the role parents can play as leaders, mentors and the impact parents have on their children’s education and academic achievement.

2.8.4 Building Inclusive School Communities

Recent studies which focus on the shifting nature of educational policies and practices towards an inclusive model of involvement for minority parents make the case for greater need to focus on strategies which promote a more participatory framework (Ballard, 1999; Delhi, 1994; Gajardo, Wadron & Dei, 2000; Dyson, 2001; Kim, 2004; Kugelmass, 2004; MOE, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Pushor, 2013; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Thomas et al., 1998).

The educational establishment has a responsibility to facilitate the development of inclusive policies, practices, and programs, which will lead to greater social justice and equity in both schools and society (Ryan, 2006). For immigrant and minority parents, this involves acquiring the “cultural capital” necessary to make successful use of public institutions, as well as to be able to participate in a meaningful way (MOE, 2010, p.9).

2.8.5 Muslims in the GTA/Canada

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) comprising cities such as Scarborough, downtown Toronto, Etobicoke, Pickering, Mississauga, Brampton and Oakville have become part of a vibrant mosaic of people from around the world that make these cities exciting places to live (Ornstein Report, 2006). The schools in these cities reflect this changing reality with school population that speak many languages, practice different religions, and come from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, living, working and learning together in harmony are a challenge for educators, students and families (Ornstein Report , 2006). Muslim parents and their children are a significant cultural group with a noticeable presence in our public school system, having
unique needs primarily due to the nature of their faith and religious practices (Hamdani, 1990). There are indeed some aspects of the Islamic faith and practices that have often run into conflicts with the secular education system and the implementation of curriculum expectations in the daily routine of school (Friesen & Hammer, 2011; Kalinowski, 2011; TDSB, 2000a; Yousif, 2008).

For many teachers, the task of working with Muslim parents, as it is the case with most minority groups involves communities distinguishable by their cultural distance from the mainstream culture (Dei et al., 1997; Zine, 2000, 2001; Hill, 2012). This dilemma, however, has intensified for the Muslim population in the past few years since Muslims and Islam have been linked with terrorism (Zine, 2003, 2004). There are many barriers to full participation of Muslim parents in the education of their children such as language barriers and a lack of experience with how the Canadian education system works and their role within it. Muslims represents a broad category which connects religious, cultural, ethnic, racialized forms of identification. These multiple forms of identification are categories of social differences which can contribute to marginalization of the Muslim community and create barriers to parent involvement in schools as well as difficulties for Muslim youth within the public school system (Reza-Rashti 1994, 2005; Yousif, 2008).

Religion remains the central focus for Muslims and is fundamental to how they identify themselves. Islam is also central in the Muslim families’ daily life. The message the educational system is sending to communities of faith has a significant impact on the Muslim parents’ participation and integration (Reza-Rashti, 1994; Gallinger, 2014). If the message is inviting, respectful and inclusive there is hope Muslim parents would become more confident to be involved. On the contrary if the message is condescending and exclusive fewer parents would see themselves as partners in the education of their children.
2.8.6 The Interrelationship of Different Parts of Conceptual Framework

As illustrated in figure 1.1 below (see page 37) the development of policies on equity and inclusive education began from the boardrooms of the Ontario Ministry of Education to the chambers of the school boards and eventually to the implementation stage at the level of schools. The school boards across the province were to implement the policy by using the Ontario Ministry of Education’s template to design policies of their own. The school boards have also been given directives and timelines to complete the implementation process over a four-year period. The policy is a commitment by the government of Ontario to address the inequities inherent in the treatment of parents and their children from equity seeking groups. A practice which the policy document recognized has become prevalent in the education system. Thereby privileging some members of school communities, while others have not benefitted as much. Hence this policy document is geared to making sure that all equity-seeking groups are provided with opportunities to grow, thrive and become successful in the public school system. At the board level, system leaders with the endorsement of directors of education are required to design programs and activities geared towards the recruitment and training of parent leaders (MOE, 2009a).

At the school level, principals with the assistance of teachers and support workers identify and recruit parents from amongst the diverse representation in the school community. The select groups of parents undertake to attend training over a seven week period or more depending on the arrangement each school board chooses. At the venues where the trainings are conducted, topics covering a wide spectrum of the education system are taught in workshop format. Upon completion of their training, the parent leaders are encouraged to do outreach to other parents in their communities, providing information about the education system and
signing up new recruits for the next round of training. In this way, more parents would become involved in their children’s school and through this involvement parents would become fully engaged in the education of their children within public school. Over time, it is hoped that all parents would be involved in their neighborhood schools and through this involvement, students of all backgrounds would achieve a measure of success in their education both in the present and in the future (MOE, 2009a, 2009b).

A community which is badly in need of the training just mentioned are Muslim parents. However Muslim parents have held back from attending such leadership training and other activities due in part to the unique religious obligations they are to abide by, which include five daily prayers during the day and in the evening. Any involvement by these parents in school activities would require accommodation by schools on religious grounds (TDSB, 2000a). The other areas of constraints inhibiting Muslim parents’ involvement, involve the raising of their children and maintaining the home. These combine obligations pose a great challenge on Muslim parents. It is therefore important that greater sensitivity be observed and all efforts made by school officials to exercise flexibility in meeting the needs of these parents.

Besides the reasons just mentioned, another important factor that makes the engagement of this category of parents so important is the negative attacks directed towards Muslim icons; symbols, institutions and even individuals by hate groups and Islamophobes. The effect this has had on the community has been devastating and has driven fear in many Muslims especially women, who are the visible face of the community. Muslim parents for reasons of negative publicity about Islam are avoiding active involvement with mainstream institutions including public schools (Bullock, 2002; Chung, 2011; David, 2012; Hill, 2012; Jedwab, 2008; Kalinowski, 2011; Morey, & Yaqin, 2011; Nussbaum, 2012; Saunders, 2012; Sheridan, 2006).
2.8.7 Need for Revising/Developing New Conceptual Framework

With the underlying assumptions in the framework articulated above, I embarked on a journey of exploration to discover the real phenomena at play in the arena of action. As it is evident from the discussion above, I chose Muslim parents amongst the diverse group of parents in the GTA as participants of my study and later on based on the findings of the research, I realized that there is a need to revise this conceptual framework of my study which present the current realities of what is happening in relation to the efforts of Muslim parents in getting engaged in the education of their children despite the challenges they face in the quest of their involvement. The revised version of the conceptual framework can be found in figure 2, chapter 4, and p. 56.
Building Capacity for Parent Leadership

Parent Leadership Training Workshops

Parent Leaders with Enhanced Leadership & Communication Skills

Identification of Leadership Practices & Strategies related to Parental Involvement

Connections to an Existing Network of Committed Parents & Community Leaders

Building Sustainable Parent Leadership

Building Inclusive School Communities

Policies & Practices on Parent Engagement

Participative Educational System Leadership

POLICIES ON EQUITY & INCLUSIVE EDUCATION & PARENT ENGAGEMENT

MUSLIM PARENTS

Multivariate Identities Racial, Religious, Ethnic, Social, Cultural, Linguistic

Diverse Groups of Parents with Diverse Cultural Capital

(Figure 1. Conceptual Framework) Relationship between Participative Educational System Leadership and Building Sustainable Parent Leadership
Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHOD

This chapter explains the research design used in the research including the details of research methodology, selection and screening of research participants, process of their recruitment, details about instrument for data collection and procedures for data analysis.

In this study I implemented a qualitative research methodology to explore in depth understanding of Muslim parents in relation to their engagement in their children’s education in public schools. Qualitative research seeks to dig out “the essence and the underlying structure of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009). It allows the researcher to organize conversations in a way where participants feel relaxed, comfortable and are willing to share information and concerns in an honest and trusting manner, knowing that whatever they say would be confidential and will never be used against them (Creswell, 2012, 2007, 2003; McMillan & Wergin, 2010). The following research instruments and analysis procedures were used in this study:

1. Selecting data (as reference) from Policy Documents
2. Collecting data from the participants by using two instruments: a) Demographic information sheet (please see Appendix B); b) Semi-structured interviews (please see Appendix A)
3. Analyzing data through utilizing Constant Comparative method

3.1 Data Selection

I selected policy documents from the Ontario Ministry of Education, and from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) to review and use as reference materials during literature review. These public documents were used as primary source of information to assist me in having better understanding of how government policies on parental engagement have
implication for parent engagement. The following documents were used as reference:


3.2 Sampling of Participants and Eligibility Criteria

In qualitative study, there is no hard or fast criterion for the accurate sample size. What is important is to generate meaningful information from the participants and through the observational and analytical skills of the researcher (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 1987). I used purposeful sampling to collect sufficient data in order to answer my research questions and to allow a set of patterns, themes and typologies to emerge (Creswell, 2012; Locke, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Participants in this study were drawn from Muslim parents representing the diverse mosaic within the Muslim community. I interviewed 12 participants selected purposely from amongst Muslim parents whose children are currently attending public schools in the GTA. The selection criteria was used to ensure that parents selected have experience with the school system
and have been engaged in their children’s schooling. The parents must be of first or second
generation and have been living in Canada either for a long time or are Canadians by birth and
can express themselves in English.

Additionally, I also gave consideration to participants’ gender, education level, ethnic
backgrounds and their length of stay in Canada as these factors may render some variations in
their attitudes and strategies towards involvement in their children’s schooling.

3.3 Data Collection Process

The following instrument/measures were used to collect data from the participants:

3.3.1 Demographic Information Sheet (see Appendix -B)

Demographic Information Questionnaire was used to collect demographic information
about participants which included: pseudonym (chosen by the participants), gender, age,
education, socio-economic status (income range), number of children in public school
(Secondary/High), Ethnicity/race, number of years living in Canada, length of experience being
engaged as parent in their child/children’s education. The demographic questions helped me to
study in detail how Muslim parents are engaged in their children’s education within the public
school system.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interview (see Appendix –A)

I utilized one- on-one interviews with a semi-structured and open-ended approach (45-60
minutes) to collect information from the Muslims parents about their experiences in relation to
their engagement in their children’s education within the public school system living in the GTA.
The potential participants were provided the details of the interview in the form of information
and consent letter (McNamara, 2009). Further information if required by the participants about
the use of the data or purpose of the study was made accessible for the participants.
This open-endedness allowed the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allowed me to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up by allowing the participants to fully express their viewpoints and experiences (Creswell, 2007). The semi-structured and open-ended interview also let participants to be fully engaged to provide answers that capture all matters of relevance to the subject and this was conducted in a way that facilitates comparison in responses. The data provided by participants through semi-structured interviews is generally rich and thick and it reduces researcher’s biases within the study (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). One -on -one interview provides opportunity to respondents to explain their points of view with no hesitation of expression by those who are very articulate and feel comfortable in sharing ideas (Creswell, 2012; Kvale, 2007).

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Consent Process

This study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines set out by the office of Research Ethics of the University of Toronto because this includes human subjects. There had been no foreseen risks for participants in this study, nor was it expected that they would feel or experience discomfort or stress. I used a snowball technique to approach the participants for my study. First, I handed out the recruitment email and information consent letter (please see Appendix C & D) to my colleagues at OISE/UT and MENTORS (Muslim Education Network, Training and Outreach Service) and other work-related contacts and have them pass it around on my behalf so that the participants can contact me directly if they are interested in participating. Once I got the first one or two potential participants, I asked these participants to share my contact information and email/letter around to inform other parents about the study and ask if they are interested in participating. I also sent email to interested parents with the information letter that outlines my study questions to be asked and confidentiality issues related to the study. I
requested them to review the letter and contact me to let me know if they are interested in participating. If I did not hear from them, I followed up after two weeks to see if they have any further questions or can recommend anyone else for the study. At the second point of contact, I set up an appointment for the interview at a time and location that met the participants’ convenience.

Each participant was provided with Informed Consent (please see Appendix D) in which the participants were informed about the nature of the study and the assurance of confidentiality and that they have the liberty to withdraw at any time prior to or during the interview or not to answer any question they are not comfortable with. They were also assured that they are under no obligation to answer a question (s) they do not like. The participants were further assured that in the event they withdraw, any information they have provided or whatever they have contributed to the discussion would be erased or destroyed. I asked the participants to read the information consent letter and sign and return it prior to their participation. I also reviewed the letter with them orally prior to beginning the interview.

All interviews were voluntary and took place outside of participants’ working hours and at a location comfortable to them. At no time were the participants judged or evaluated or at risk of harm. At no time was value judgment placed on their responses.

All interviews were audio recorded on my iPad. I stored all recorded interviews, transcripts on my personal computer, signed consent forms by the participants and other data related to notes securely at my residence under lock and key. I assured the participants that data collected will be kept confidential and will be destroyed after five years. No name will be mentioned in the write up instead pseudonyms will be used for all participants to protect privacy and confidentiality.
Interview responses that may become identifiable of participant’s name and status or any other information were removed from the responses. The participants were informed and told that the final report of the study will be shared with them and copies will be distributed to those who indicate interest in receiving a copy. The participants were also informed that the final report will be shared with colleagues, will be used for public presentations and will be available for publication. The copy of the thesis will also be available at OISE/UT library on T-Space.

Any electronic data/information will be stored on a password-protected computer. The data will be destroyed after five years of completion of the study according to the guidelines provided in the in the document in the following link by Research Ethics, University of Toronto. http://www.research.utoronto.ca/ethics/pdf/human/nonspecific/datasecurity.pdf and http://www.utoronto.ca/security/UTORprotect/encryption_guidelines.htm. All this was also stated in the informed consent letter for the participants (please see Appendix D).

3.5 Recruitment of Participants

After the approval from the University of Toronto, Office of Research Ethics, I started the recruitment process for my study. I used purposive sampling to include participants according to the eligibility criteria mentioned above through the use of snowball technique to approach the participants for my study. First, I handed out the recruitment email and information letter (please see Appendix C & D) to my colleagues at OISE/UT and MENTORS (Muslim Education Network and Community Outreach Service) and other work-related contacts and have them pass it around on my behalf so that the participants can contact me directly if they are interested in participating. Once I got the first one or two potential participants, I told these participants to share my contact information and email/letter around to inform other parents about the study and ask if they are interested in participating. The interested ones contacted me directly and then I
also emailed parents the information letter, which outlines the study questions they are going to be asked, and the confidentiality issues related to the study.

I requested that they review the letter and to contact me if they are interested in participating. If I didn’t hear from them, I followed up after two weeks to see if they have any further questions. I asked them to continue to send out my letter and contact information so that more participants could contact me or could recommend anyone else for the study. At the second point of contact, those who were interested in participating and/or needed more information were provide with the detailed information of the research study which included: the purpose of the study, criteria of (voluntary) participation, confidentiality issues, and implications of participation in the study, such as risks and benefits of participation (see Appendix C). Those who met the recruitment criteria and were interested in participating in the study after collecting detailed information were included in the next step of the recruitment process. I set up an appointment for the interview at a time and location that meets the participants’ convenience. Following each interview, I also asked each participant to refer me to other participants so that more participants could contact me for the study. I followed the same process above with each new referral. All interviews and contact were made in English, as I selected parents who can express themselves well in English language.

3.6 Conducting Interviews

McNamara (2009) has suggested the importance of the preparation stage in order to maintain an unambiguous focus as to how the interviews should be erected in order to provide maximum benefit to the proposed research study.

Interviews with open-ended interview questions were conducted to elicit thoughts and comments from each participant at the place convenient to each of them. The interview was also negotiated to work around the schedules of the participants. The interviews were recorded
digitally with their consent, and transcribed right after each interview and timely follow-up clarification or verification was made on any unclear responses. McNamara (2009) makes some excellent recommendations for the implementation stage of the interview process. So I followed the steps as described in implementing interviews and I: a) occasionally verified that my iPad recorder is working; b) asked one question at a time; b) attempted to remain as neutral as possible (that is, not to show strong emotional reactions to their responses; c) encouraged responses with occasional nods of the head, "uh huh" etc.; d) was careful about the appearance when taking notes (that is, if I jumped to take a note, it might appear as if I was surprised or very pleased about an answer, which may influence answers to future questions); e) provided transition between major topics, e.g., "we had been talking about (some topic) and then I liked to move on to (another topic)" ; f) tried not to lose control of the interview (this can occur when respondents stray to another topic, take so long to answer a question that time begins to run out, or even begin asking questions to the interviewer.

3.7 Data Analysis

The following data analysis processes are used:

3.7.1 Analysis of Themes obtained from Data Using Constant Comparative Method

I used Constant Comparative data analysis method to enable me to analyze the data I collected through interviews with 12 Muslim parents in the GTA. I used this method of data analysis with an inductive component. In the constant comparative method, the data analysis focuses on the identification of regularities or patterns of interview transcripts and interview notes through an interactive process during which the data are constantly compared (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994).
I carefully reviewed the content of the data in order to make sense of the information that has been provided. My analysis involved taking the data apart in order to sort out individual responses and putting them back in order to summarize the responses as in the case of data collected through interviews (Creswell, 2012). The results of the interviews were coded, then the data was organized into “chunks” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, cited in Creswell, 2003; Saldana, 2009). Data was organized according to participant responses, based on the research questions, highlighting what I considered as relevant information to discuss as themes and quotes. The major themes that emerged from the data were employed to clarify and elaborate the findings of my study.

In the initial process I: a) read through the data a few times and highlighted significant parts as well as made marginal comments; b) read and reread the raw data to develop knowledge of the content and see the patterns that emerged in order to get a larger picture of where the responses are pointing to; c) scrutinized the repetitions and relationships to assign codes on individual themes or sub-themes. At the same time, I tried to figure out what was important about those themes that are similar to warrant further analysis; d) identified responses, important to what I was studying; e) created a list of tentative categories (nodes) and coded the data using the initial set; f) sorted the raw data under coded themes; g) noted how well the material fits the coded themes, if the data was not compatible then I combined and renamed the themes and sub-themes; h) reviewed the results to look for any overlap and redundancy; i) laid out the codes in a way to see the relation of one another and facilitate developing explanations; j) selected a few instances of verbatim narrative from the data for the elaboration of each theme; k) assembled the best examples and described the themes and sub-themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Gibbs, 2002; Glaser, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).
3.7.2 Role of Researcher as an Instrument

In qualitative research the researcher assumes the dual role of collecting data and at the same time becoming the lens through which a clear logical-methodical process is established for the interpretation and analysis of data. Qualitative research provides the researcher the tools for collecting data and by the same token allow for deeper involvement in the process. By the extent of their involvement the researcher may have a hard time remaining detached from the process. His/her subjective role may have potential elements of bias when discussing outcomes.

While reflecting on my role in data collection, I was equally aware of what this methodological dilemma could pose. My personal knowledge and experience of working with the participant in the community involved in the study and by virtue of being Muslim, opened doors for me and facilitated my acceptance as just another “Muslim sister”. It was difficult for the participants who see me first as a Muslim and not someone in search of knowledge of the subject of the research. This was displayed several times in the interviews were participants would be seeking confirmation for certain statements they were making, expecting me to understand and agree with their line of thinking about whatever the issue was in the conversation, hoping that I myself may have experienced what they were talking about.

While I anticipated that this was going to happen, I tried during the interviews to direct the conversations by asking supplementary questions to clarify or expand on the answers given. The other challenge to my situation was how to maintain an arm’s length relationship with my participants, so that I am able to write about any conflicting positions I detected in the course of the interviews.

Yet, while I was conscious of the possibility that this was going to happen even before
the start of the interviews, I made a conscious effort to frame the questions in such a way as to allow for follow up questions to seek clarification or expansion of conflicting points the participants have made. The nature of the interviews was one of conversation making the research process an exercise of collaboration between participants and researcher. All of the participants were pleased that such a study is being done allowing for parental input on a topic as relevant and vital to their involvement in the school system. They expressed an interest in seeing the final product, which is the thesis. This request is an affirmation of the participants’ desire to take ownership of the research and be accountable for the truthfulness of the data that was collected.

3.7.3 Triangulation/Expert Review of Data

To deal with the abovementioned biases and to ensure triangulation I used the following strategies within the results to verify the strengths and/or accuracy of the data gathered.

3.7.3.1 Taking Notes

I also kept notes about my observation and thoughts regarding what came out from the interviews. In particular I recorded the participants’ body language, and the intensity of their passion as demonstrated in facial expressions, movements of hands and tone of voice. These observations are important as they helped me to examine my research findings in light of my own biases during the process of data collection.

3.7.3.2 Consulting with the Policy Documents, Literature and My Thesis Supervisor Against Interview Responses

In order to reduce any biases in the present study I used more than one sources to analyze and review the results of my research after I generated codes. I consulted with my thesis supervisor and discussed my data and the themes and patterns that emerged from the responses
provided by the participants because she has methodological expertise and professional knowledge around research analysis. After analyzing the data, I developed themes and sub-themes which I submitted to my supervisor for further review.

I also consulted research literature of minority parents of Islamic persuasion and policy documents by the Ministry of Education and TDSB related to parent engagement. This approach was very useful for me to have an awareness of my biases and I was able to reduce and eliminate the negative impact on the findings of the study. I was cognizant of the fact that I share the same culture and religion as the participants, but I have one positive point that I am not a parent and have no children. So, I held an outsider status. After analyzing the data and developed themes, I submitted to supervisor for further review.

3.8 Limitations of the Study

A qualitative study has its limitations. The following limitations of this research design are recognized while interpreting the findings of the present study.

a) Data set i.e. number of participants of the present study. Therefore, the finding cannot be generalized to all Muslim parents in Canada.

b) Focus on one community that has great diversity within it, so not all the diversities could be covered within the sample of 12 participants.

c) Lack of literature on parental engagement of minoritized communities

d) Data collection was limited to available policy documents and willing participants.

e) The accuracy of qualitative interview data is limited to the knowledge and honesty of the participant.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

The present study explored the relationship between Muslim Parents and the public school system in the GTA. Constant Comparative method was used to analyze data in order to explore answers to the research questions: a) how are Muslim parents engaged in their children’s education within the public school system?; b) What challenges do they face?; c) What supports do they require to be more engaged?; d) What strategies do they employ to be engaged in their children’s education in the public school systems? In this chapter, I explain the characteristics of sample of my study and present the research findings from the interviews conducted with the participants of my study.

4.1 Characteristics of Participants

The participants who met the eligibility criteria were included in the study (see Table 3.). They were first or second generation Muslim parents who have been living in Canada for more than 10 years and have made their residence in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The details of demographic description of individual participants are described as follows:

1. Ahmed is a 45-years old male who has been in Canada for 17 years and is a first generation parent. He has three children in public schools, two daughters are in grades 6 and 8 in elementary school and a son in grade 10 in high school. He has a PhD, his annual family income is less than $24,999 and he is an Egyptian Arab by ethnicity.

2. Seema is a 35-years old female who was born and raised in Canada. She is second generation parent who has a son in grade 5 and two daughters in grade 2 and SK, all three of them are in elementary school. She has a Masters’ degree, her annual income is $45,000 – $54,999 and she is a South Asian Pakistani by her ethnicity.
3. Imam is a 49-years old male participant who has been living in Canada for the last 37 years. He is a first generation parent who has a son in grade two, a daughter in grade 4 in elementary school and another daughter is in grade 9 in High school. He has a Masters’ degree, his annual income is less than $24,999 and he is a Canadian African by ethnicity.

4. Ammara is a 40-years old female who has been living in Canada for 16 years. She is a first generation parent who has a son in grade 9 in high school and a daughter in grade 8 in elementary school. She has a Masters’ degree in computer science, her annual family income is around $54,999 and she is Egyptian Arab by ethnicity.

5. Khaula is a 45-years old female participant who has been in Canada for 19 years and she is a first generation parent. She has four children, two daughters are in grade 9 and 11 in high school and her two sons are in grade 5 and 7 in elementary school. She has an undergraduate degree, her annual family income is $45,000 – $54,999 and she is African Eritrean by ethnicity.

6. Fauzia is a 47-years old female participant and she has been in Canada for 21 years. She is a first generation parent and has a son in grade 8 and a daughter in grade 10 in high school. She has a PhD degree her annual family income is more than $75,000 and she is South Asian Pakistani by ethnicity.

7. Maria is a 42-year-old female participant who has been in Canada for 18 years. She is a first generation parent and has four children, a son in grade 7 in elementary and three daughters in grades 9, 11 and 12 in high school. She has an undergraduate degree, her annual family income is $45,000 – $54,999 and she is Egyptian by ethnicity.

8. Haleem is a 41-year-old male participant who has been in Canada for 28 years. He is a first generation parent. He has three daughters, one in grade 8 in elementary and two are in grade
10 and 12 in high school. He has Masters’ degree, his annual family income is $45,000-$54,999 and he is Guyanese by ethnicity.

9. Nasreen is a 28-year old female, who was born and raised in Canada. She is a second generation parent. She has two children: a son in grade 4 and a daughter in grade 1. She has an undergraduate degree, her annual family income is $55,000-$75,000 and she is South African by Ethnicity with Indian background.

10. Rehan is a 39-year-old male participant who has been living in Canada for 10 years. He is a first generation parent and he has two children: a daughter in grade 6 and a son in grade 2. He has an undergraduate degree, his annual family income is $45,000-$54,999 and he is Algerian Arab by ethnicity.

11. Zeenat is a 40-year-old female who has been living in Canada for 33 years. She is a second generation parent. She has two daughters in grade 9 and 11 and a son in grade 7. She has a High school diploma, her annual family income is less than $24,999 and she is Guyanese by ethnicity.

12. Khawaja is a 41-year-old male who has been living in Canada for 13 years. He is a first generation parent. He has three children: a daughter in grade 12, a son in grade 10 and a daughter in grade 8. He has a Masters’ degree, his annual family income is more than $75,000 and he is South Asian Pakistani by ethnicity.

A summary of participants’ demographic information is available below in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Demographic Information of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>Participant Pseudo Name &amp; Generation of Parents</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Annual Family Income</th>
<th>Children’s grade level &amp; age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Length of Stay in Canada</th>
<th>Years of Exp. being Engaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Ahmed</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Less than $24,999</td>
<td>7.8 &amp; 10 graders</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>17 yrs.</td>
<td>More than</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. **Seema**  Female  35  Masters  $45,000–$54,999  JK, 2, & 5 graders 11, 7 & 4 yrs.  South Asian Pakistani  Canadian by birth  More than 8yrs.

3. **Imam**  Male  49  Masters  Less than $24,999  2, 4 & 9 graders 7, 9, & 15 yrs.  West African  37yrs.  More than 11yrs.

4. **Ammara**  Female  40  Masters  $45,000–$54,999  8 & 9 graders 14 & 15  Arab Egyptian  16yrs.  More than 12yrs.

5. **Khaulal**  Female  45  Bachelors  $45,000–$54,999  5,7,9,11 graders 11,13,15 & 16yrs.  African Eritrean  19yrs.  More than 12yrs.


7. **Maria**  Female  42  Bachelors  $45,000–$54,999  7,9,11,12 graders 13, 15, 17 & 19yrs.  Arab Egyptian  18yrs.  More than 14yrs.


9. **Nasreen**  Female  28  Bachelors  $55,000–$75,000  1 & 4 graders 6 & 9yrs.  South African Indian  Canadian by birth  More than 5yrs.


11. **Zeenat**  Female  40  High School Diploma  Less than $24,999  7,9 & 11 graders 13,15 & 17yrs.  South American Guyanese  33yrs.  More than 14 years

12. **Khawaja**  Male  41  Masters  More than $75000  8,10&12 graders 14,16,17 years  South Asian Pakistani  13yrs.  More than 14 years

### 4.2 Developing a New Version of Conceptual Framework based on the Findings

Before I delve into the details of the findings, I would like to reiterate what I mentioned earlier at the end of chapter 2 regarding the revision and development of a new version of conceptual framework based on the findings of my study. The data and the findings of the study makes me think
and rethink of the fact what I assumed is not what is happening in reality. Based upon the findings of my study I reached the conclusion to develop a new version of conceptual framework that should illustrate the real happenings on the ground (see figure 2. below).

The new conceptual framework shows that after I collected my data, I found out contrary to policy pronouncements regarding the steps that are required for boards to engage parents, that there was an absence of parents’ knowledge in regard to policies developed to support their engagement with the school system. Most of the Parents even have no clue what policies are in place for them. They have never been in-serviced on any of the documents especially for Muslims the policy document on “Guidelines and Procedures for the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices and Observances, Toronto District School Board, (2000). The policies are a mandate by the MOE to school boards and schools, requiring them to implement the policies on equity in the true spirit of inclusion. What I found out is a lack of action by school boards in following the timelines and benchmarks set out by the MOE (MOE, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). When it comes to the implementation of these policies by schools, there were inconsistencies in regard to the engagement of parents as real partners in education (MOE, 2010).

The modified version of my conceptual framework, I believe still has a connection and relevance to the framework created in the beginning, because the new conceptual framework serves as illustration of the findings of the exploration of the factual process for building sustainable parent leadership to build inclusive school communities and the supports it requires on the part of “participative system leadership” (Mascal, 2007). This is obvious especially in the form of themes, sub-themes and categories related to “supports required to be fully engaged and sustain engagement” generated from the data.
The new conceptual framework further mirrors the real happenings of the day-to-day experiences of Muslim parents in the arena of action (school and home) as manifested in the findings in the form of themes, sub-themes and categories, generated from the data I collected through interviewing parents. I discuss further details in the coming sections i.e. findings, conclusions and implications.
By exploring engagement of one of the diverse parent group i.e. Muslim Parents in their children’s education

**Figure 2. Revised Conceptual Framework/Process for Building Sustainable Leadership for Inclusive School Communities in the GTA**
4.3 Findings

This section is comprised of the findings of this study based on the responses of the participants. The responses are in regard to parents’ attitudes towards engagement in their children’s education. The participants also provided information on the challenges they face in the quest of their engagement with the school system. They discussed the supports they require from the school system to engage with them in a spirit of respect and appreciation of their concerns. They shared the strategies they employed towards engagement. These are measures parents have employed to gain the attention of school staff, so that they would see a need to engage these parents through a process of mutual consultation and joint decision making in the education of their children.

I have used Constant Comparative method for the analysis of my data. This method of analysis requires the researcher to take one piece of data (e.g. one interview, or one theme) and compare it to all other pieces of data that are either similar or different. During this process, the researcher begins to look at what makes this piece of data different and/or similar to other pieces of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Gibbs, 2002; Glaser, 1965).

Participants’ responses were categorized into four key areas: Muslim parents’ attitudes toward engagement with the education system, challenges encountered in the quest of their engagement, supports they required to sustain their engagement and strategies they employed to be engaged regardless of the challenges they face. These four key areas are further divided into themes, sub-themes and categories (see Figure 2. above). Themes, sub-themes and categories are developed based on the conceptual and experiential similarities of most of the parent participants’ responses which are further categorized and elaborated by participants’ quotes. Quotes used in the findings in most cases reflect the experiences or perceptions of the majority of
participants. There are however few instances where the views of one or two participants are used because they reflected and answered some of my research questions which other participants did not respond to or have an opinion about.

4.3.1 Attitudes towards Engagement

The first theme that emerged is attitudes towards engagement. For this theme, religion becomes an issue which parents considered important in determining the extent to which they are involved in their children’s schooling both at home and in school. The sub-themes derived from attitudes focus around religious obligations, religious practices and religion as medium for empowering children. Data from the interviews would be used to analyze each of the sub-themes, to explain the importance of religion in the lives of the parents in this study.

Figure 3. Themes Related to Attitudes towards Engagement

Ideological diversity exists within the Muslim Community. Just as Muslims are not monolithic in terms of nationality, culture and language, the same is true when it comes to modes
of thought and degree of practice. In the Muslim community, you will find groups that hold liberal views such that their choice of practice is influenced by their secular orientation in which religion is kept separate from the affairs of the state and from the actions of individuals.

The Traditional Muslim parents are those who combine culture and religion in their practice and are guided by Qur’an and prophetic traditions. They see religion as a way of life and they try to conduct their affairs in accordance with their religious obligations.

Practicing Muslim Parents are those who adhere to the fundamentals of the religion which include performance of the five daily prayers, fasting in the month of Ramadhan and paying charity to support the poor out of their excess wealth.

Participants shared their understanding of what is involved in being engaged with the school system. According to Zeenat, a mother of three children, religious obligation becomes one of the key determinants for getting involved with the school system and she says,

“"Yes, In Islam, we are supposed to “seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave”, that is a statement we frequently quote from our beloved Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Knowledge in Islam has a high standing and as the saying goes, “knowledge is power and seeking knowledge is obligatory for each Muslim, men and women” When you have knowledge it’s not equal to anything else in this world. Knowledge oversees everything else, it is that important and it is mentioned in the Quran, in the book of Allah, our Lord”.

For this parent there is no separation between her belief and what she expects the school to teach to her children. Another participant Ammara also expressed the same attitude about her involvement which she says is motivated by a desire to see her religion represented in school discussions. She shared the importance her religion plays in educational matters. Speaking on this issue, she notes,

“"My religion is very important to me. To learn is the first thing that our prophet Muhammad (May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) taught us and he encourages us to learn more. Learning is not only academic, but it involves lots of other
things plus having good values and morals. It’s a foundation of our religion to learn and to teach each other. My wish is that Allah (GOD) accepts my good deeds. We should support the younger ones in their education both in the present and in the years ahead”.

For this parent attitude towards involvement is to be tied to religious obligations. The school is asked to become a moral compass for students as well as dispenser of values favourable to parents as prescribed in their religious call. The belief is that education can never be neutral. It has to be taught from a particular point of view, belief or ideology (Freire, 1972). The Islamic faith does not separate the religious from the temporal. Therefore the attitude a Muslim parent holds toward engagement with the education system is one which require accommodation of religious observances.

Another parent Haleem defined his attitude towards engagement with the education system to include his responsibilities at home and school with religion playing a central role in defining how home and school interact to achieve student success. Here is how he explains his attitude towards engagement:

“Yeah! As parents, I think it is not only just important for us to provide sustenance for our children, we must make sure that they have the right education. We have to be involved in their education by encouraging, motivating and supporting them. We’ve got to be concerned about ethics and we must ensure that certain religious accommodations are provided in order to create a space for our children to fully integrate in the education system. We’ve got to have a say in decision making at the school level, especially in the selection of courses in the curriculum. We should be able to volunteer in school and be invited to attend events on special occasions at our children’s schools, parents meetings etc. So yeah, for me I will sacrifice sometime to attend a meeting or take time off from my job to be part of my child’s school activity”.

From this parent’s response, it is clear that he has a positive attitude towards his children’s education. Parents with such favourable attitude towards schooling would most likely enhance their involvement with schools and would work towards higher academic achievement of their children in present and future studies.
4.3.1.1 Religious Obligation

For each of the participants in this study, Qur’anic injunctions and prophetic practices are important factors that influence their involvement in their children’s education. For example Haleem a father of four daughters had this to say:

“Yes the overarching principle of religion very much plays a role in my involvement in my children’s education. I see education as a vehicle for character change, change of ideas and values. The purpose of education is about change, but change, which is geared to character building and responsible citizenship. My religious beliefs also informed me that I have to be involved in my children’s education to ensure that when issues come up we talk about them openly and honestly. For example we discuss openly about sexuality, homosexuality, Bill 13 and any other controversial topic that is important to talk about. My religion informs me that I have to be involved to ensure that my children have a successful academic education. On the other hand religious right requires that I have to ensure that academic education does not contradict the religious values of my children. It pushes in both ways to be involved regardless of whether it relates to value or other aspects of mainstream practices which may have some academic value”.

The attitude of this parent is liberal and is more open to discuss controversial issues in the curriculum such as sexuality and sexual preferences and how to deal with differences. This parent sees himself as an activist parent who likes to get involved in school based activities and very much engaged in the home front as well. However like other parents in this study he holds firm to his religious beliefs and would not compromise when curriculum content contradicts his religious beliefs.

Another parent Ahmed with three children in elementary schools also shared his attitude towards engagement and like the others he place his religious obligation as priority when it comes to the education of his children in following words:

“Besides academic work, I also teach my children how to be good persons. The Quran is an important source of guidance for Muslims; it’s our holy book. My children have to know about Islam, while they are still young. I make my children listen to Quran stories. I send them to learn Arabic three days in a week. I teach them good values so that they can benefit our country, community and themselves. It’s our religious duty to be a good
person, you have to raise kids in a good way. Academic is good but we also need to know about other values. We need to know what happens to our children every day. When parents are aware of their responsibilities they should do what is right and beneficial to their children”.

This parent explains his role as that of a teacher as well as a parent. This position gives him the opportunity to teach moral values from a religious standpoint. He believes when children are given the correct education, it is society that benefits. These children would grow up to become good citizens and positive role models to others.

Another parent Fauzia expressed her opinion in regard to religious obligations for the Muslims. She spoke of the guidance she derives from her reading and understanding of the Qur’an, the prophetic sayings that explains the meaning of the Qur’anic text. The Qur’an emphasizes the importance of seeking knowledge, which includes reading, writing and acting on the knowledge gained.

“I think my religion has a huge impact on me as well as in designing and developing the path for my children. There is a lot of emphasis in Islam on education, learning, getting out to the world like thinking, deeply thinking about things, seeking education, be open-minded, be creative so all these things are one of the basic fundamentals for Islamic teachings and these impact my thinking to support my children and look for their educational preferences. Then many holy verses, there are Ahadith (the sayings of Prophet May Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him) for example “if you want to seek education you can go up to China” and there is another Surah Al Qalam in Quran (chapter the Pen in Quran) which talks about the importance of education and reading and writing. So definitely, this is not only worldly belief that you go into this profession or that profession but it also a religious responsibility, some morals, some ethics, which profession they are taking whether they’re taking into consideration humanity and human service or not”.

Imam’s attitude to engaging the education system zero in, on what he considers as his religious responsibility to educate the school about the concerns Muslim parents have on a number of issues ranging from moral values to social interaction and dietary needs which he expressed in the following statement:
“Yes my religion plays a very important role in the decisions I make about my involvement in my children’s school. I believe I have a duty and responsibility to educate the school board about the values that define who we are as Muslims. The schools need to know what we consider lawful and unlawful behaviour and practices acceptable to Islam. The schools need to know about our dietary requirements, how we interact with family, friends, acquaintance and strangers both same and of the opposite sex, our dress code, festivities, prayers, health issues, physical education and recreation. When each of the practices mentioned are understood and put into practice in accordance with our belief, then our community will feel appreciated and valued as an equal partner in education.”

From this narrative it is obvious that there is a clash of civilizations between a parent whose world view is defined by religious belief on the one hand and a secular liberal system which gives responsibility to the individual to express him/herself in a manner consistent with secular values of equity and inclusiveness within the limit of the law. Accommodation is possible within limits and this has to be negotiated on a case by case basis.

4.3.1.2 Religious Practices

Religious practices for the participants are expressed in various forms: some through prayers several times a day. For Muslim students, the noon prayer is expected to be offered during school hours. Female students wear the head cover called the hijab and long dress as a demonstration of modesty, chastity and piety. Other practices require all Muslim students to follow rules that guide their interactions with the opposite gender. The consumption of food that has not been blessed according to Islamic law is forbidden. Other reasons for observing their religious practices are given by Zeenat who shared her views on this issue:

“My nieces and nephew are practicing Muslims; when I say practicing I mean one who establishes prayers at school, is wearing Hijab and expresses herself in a way that others would know that they are Muslims.”
This parent’s attitude is pointing to the Islamic dress code in particular that of the female. There does not seem to be any issue except to inform school community about the meaning of the Muslim female dress, which is worn for modesty and for identity.

While Haleem’s attitude towards engagement with his children’s school is demonstrated by his active participation in class based activities. In the following narrative he shared a particular moment when he visited his child’s class:

“I remembered being invited to my child’s classroom during Ramadhan and Eid and the hijab came up for discussion and the teacher was very cordial and respectful. While I was there the teacher to my surprise asked the students to make a drawing of the hijab and color it and they did and each student posted their picture of the hijab on the wall. I was elated and moved by this act of appreciation by the teacher and students of an important symbol of our Islamic faith. Yes the overarching principal of religion very much play a role in my involvement in my children’s education and my visit to the school to share our religious culture is an example of how as a Muslim parent could engage with the school. I see education as a vehicle for character change, change of ideas and values. The purpose of education is about change, but change which is geared to character building and responsible citizenship”.

The foregone narrative about a parent’s attitude towards engagement, explains how it is possible for parents and school to work collaboratively. The teacher in this narrative is willing to let a parent share his religion with her students and the teacher in turn demonstrated her appreciation of an important and identifiable artifact of the Muslim dress the hijab by asking her students to draw and colour a picture of the hijab. This level of accommodation only goes to show that while secularism is the raison d’etre of the public school system on a case by case basis individual religious request can be viewed favourably and accepted as a necessary input in classroom discuss. If this kind of sharing is allowed to take place on a regular basis, Muslim students would be motivated to advocate for themselves and gain confidence to speak about their faith. Similarly their non-Muslim friends would gain valuable knowledge about the Islamic faith
and use this knowledge to counter any negative information that they hear about Muslims and Islam.

4.3.1.3 Empowerment of Children

Muslim children have been the objects of ridicule by their friends in the schoolyard especially after 911. There have been incidents involving Muslims students in and out of school that have been documented by organizations such as the National Council for Canadian Muslims (NCCM, 2005). Parents in this study believe that the best way to protect their children from harm is to teach them how to avoid incidents that will draw them into unnecessary conflicts and to remind them that they are to maintain peace where ever they are and not allow themselves to be provoked. These parents also believe that the school has a duty to protect their children and their safety should be a matter of top priority for the school authorities especially during these times when Islamophobia has become rampant and a matter of concern for Muslims like Haleem who says:

“Yes indeed I believe safety should be paramount in the school yard and school authorities are mindful of this fact. So I am not overly worried about the security of my children in school. I know as Muslims we are very vulnerable these days and any crazy person out to play mischief can hurt us”.

In spite of the random acts of violence and threat to the safety of Muslims, there are tangible solutions Muslims can adopt such as the one this parent believe would work. A hand of friendship extended to non-Muslims would send a positive message that as Canadians we are one people with a common purpose to make Canada the best country to live in and not to allow our differences to diminish this belief. Hence he continues:

“This explains why we should be out there and integrate with the rest of society so that our fellow Canadians would know we are one of them. There is no better place to begin this journey than in our neighbourhood schools”.

The words just expressed above draw attention to the kind of attitude that would produce result in the parents’ effort to engage school staff and their own children. Teachers need to be educated about the cultural backgrounds of their students, their needs and concerns. Parents need to learn the complexity of the education systems so that they would understand why things are done a certain way. Students need to be given choices with guidance to follow paths that are consistent with their abilities and interests. Parents need to respect choices made by their children and support them on the journey to achieve their goals. Therefore this parent has spoken well when he says that:

“My interest is to engage my children and their teachers in conversations about their progress and future. I am doing so by making them realize that I am not of the opinion that I should be telling them what career choices they should be making. Whatever they want to be it is up to them. If they want to go into law or medicine or whatever the choice, it is for them to decide and in my conversation with them I made it known what my position is in this regard. Whatever they want to choose as a career, they are free to do that”.

The above statement is about whose interest is to be served. Parents who wish for the success of their children, prepare them to make their own choices, even if the choices go against their own personal preferences. It is seen from the foregone discussion about parent attitude towards engagement and with religion playing such a pivotal role, we know where these parents’ priorities lie.

Religion for these parents is everything and the school system must pay attention to this fact. In their minds, the real solution to the current conflict about religion in public schools is the implementation of the choices for accommodation that are already provided in the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (OMOE, 2009a & 2009b) and the Guidelines and Procedures for the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices and Observances, Toronto District School Board (TDSB, 2000a). These policies make provisions for
activities that “fit the parents’ and children’s’ religious values” rather than the secular values of
the education system.

Accommodating the range of religious choices, especially in Toronto’s multicultural
faith communities, would ensure that schools are putting the needs of children and families first
(TDSB 2000a & 2000b). Above and beyond basic curricula, schools should include other
elements of parents’ choosing, including faith-based lessons and discussions that were once the
hallmark of a true liberal education (Guo, 2011).

The belief is that defenders of the educational status quo (secular public education) will
eventually come to accept the will of communities of faith for more religious accommodation by
allowing Muslims to express their faith such as allowing them to pray in school. This makes
good sense especially in neighbourhoods’ schools in the GTA with predominantly religious
families (Guo, 2011).

One of the philosophical position of a secular public school systems is the claim that it is
open, liberal, and tolerant of individual rights and cultural differences. On the contrary, this
philosophical thinking fall short at the implementation phase where personal interests may be in
jeopardy if policies are implemented (Guo, 2011).

4.3.2 Challenges Encountered by Parents in the Quest of their Engagement

Challenges encountered by parents in the quest of their engagement was another theme
that emerged from the interviews. Parents expressed the obstacles they are facing in their
ttempts to deal with the school system. The participants mentioned curriculum controversy as
being a major challenge to their effective engagement with the school system.
Figure 4. Themes Related to Challenges Encountered in the Quest of Engagement
The challenges faced by parents in their quest to engage with the education system are expressed by each parent on the basis of their personal experiences in dealing with schools. One parent is frustrated that his child’s special needs are ignored and help was not forthcoming. He is forced to find help for his daughter outside the school system. Another parent felt there is a condescending attitude the teachers show towards professionals like herself. She thinks this is done out of ignorance, with little effort by teachers to learn about the educational backgrounds and cultural differences of parents.

These parents think that teachers have very little knowledge about their countries of origin and culture. Not knowing the backgrounds of the parents and students in their schools, as noted by one parent above may limit the amount of communication and interactions that can take place between parents and school authorities. A lack of familiarity of the cultures and traditions of the other (parents and teachers), will definitely put teachers and school administrators at a disadvantage in their dealings with their school communities. The teachers may not have enough resources to include in their teaching units of activities that mirror the lived experiences of their students. These limitations in dealing with faith and cultural parents, challenges school authorities to be mindful of the reality of a changed population in their institutions than they are used to (McDonough, S., & Hoodfar, 2005; Nimer, 2002). The narratives that follow further amplify the kind of challenges these parents face in trying to engage with the education system starting with Rehan who says:

“The School system is challenging to understand when you are a newcomer parent. If your child is slow as mine is you would think there is help at hand to deal with my daughter’s disability. Unfortunately this was not the case. I had a hard time communicating with the school regarding my daughter and her disability. When I realized that the school system was unable to help deal with my daughter’s situation I was left with the choice of having to take care of my children. I don’t want to rely on
school anymore. My daughter has some difficulties with learning. She is a slow learner. I didn’t find the help I wanted so I had to take care of my daughter myself”.

The frustration of not getting help when it is badly needed for a child who require special care can be heart wrenching for a parent. The approach school staff have used to communicate with parents has put a distance between them and parents. As these narratives have showed, it is obvious that communication is not flowing very well between home and school. There is no desire in the above case by school authorities to deal with a critical situation especially one that involves a child with special needs.

What is of utmost importance is that systems adopt greater sensitivity in their dealings with people of non-European cultures. Other incidents of misunderstanding of cultural differences is the devaluing of professional training parents acquired abroad. There are also incidents of gender bias and insensitivity to individual feelings. This was shared by another parent named Ammara.

“For me, from the time I arrived in Canada I knew things were not going to be easy. Teachers weren’t aware of the countries where we had come from or the circumstances that led to our coming here. For example I am Egyptian, other parents are from Afghanistan, Sri-Lanka, India and so on.

The comment above is bringing to light the demographic make-up of the parent community and why schools should endeavor to know about the countries where parents have come from. A knowledge of parent’s country, their education system and culture would work to the advantage of schools. Schools and teachers would be enriched by the sources of knowledge parents bring with them from their country of origin. The parents would be willing to share their knowledge as units of study in the classroom and share valuable resources from their countries to
the schools’ resource bank. This parent’s narrative continues with a personal story of how she was treated when she tries to volunteer in her children’s school.

“I have a Computer Science degree, but no one knows about this. I remembered working as a volunteer in the school where my children attended. One time I was in the staff room and there were some teachers in the room also having a conversation among themselves and I am sure the subject of their conversation had something to do with me, thinking perhaps I do not understand English enough to understand what they were talking about. The conversation was about computers and the computer teacher was unable to fix the computer and was concerned that the next class would not have access to the computers. I stood up and in very clear English I told them that I am a computer engineer and I would help him. First they were shocked and even embarrassed that I spoke English and secondly that my knowledge of computers was at level higher than the computer teacher and this was demonstrated by the work I did to fix the computers”.

This story is very moving and again demonstrates how assumptions get made without checking the facts. Assumptions which are influenced by stereotypes without giving a chance to a parent to demonstrate her professional skills. What follows is a continuation of other challenges that this parent faced and how she went about dealing with her situation. She says:

“Finally I debunked their preconceived and stereotypical assumptions about immigrant women like myself, in religious attire. Whereas at first contact they were treating me like a child who knows nothing, once I opened my mouth and spoke they realized that indeed I do have brains and they are working. I did not understand mainstream Canadian life at first. I am learning a lot of things, and understood lot about the school, community, and cultures of the diverse ethnicities in our school. As chair of the school council, I started to ask questions about things I do not understand about the school system. I tried to bring more people, different nationalities; my passion was to bring more people. Now it has change”.

The challenges of engaging a system that is immune to change could be daunting. For parents who were not brought up in the Canadian system, being asked to become partner in their children’s education takes a lot of learning and adjustment. This parent has proven that it can be
done and her effort in taking on a leadership role in the school proves that where there is a will there is a way.

She ran and won the school council chairpersonship, which is a personal achievement and more so an example for other parents to follow. She won accolades and respect from the very school staff that have looked down on her. She has become an engaged parent and a role model to other parents. She has proven to the authorities that when parents are given a chance they would rise to the challenge. Not all the parents have the same experience with their school, others like Haleem faces challenges such as: a) paying for extra-curricular activities; b) the timing of the activities conflicts with parent’s work times; and c) school staff are oblivious to Muslim cultures and concerns. School activities which require parental attendance are often organized to occur during one or two of the five daily prayers. Observant Muslim parents are inhibited from attending school functions due to their commitment to observe their prayers during the times the meetings are being held. In his words Haleem states that his,

“Challenges are financial. The public schools do not fund extra-curricular activities like field trips and camps. The parents have to take care of the cost as much as they can afford. So the more informed you are about upcoming school activities the more you can plan to meet the financial cost associated with upcoming extra-curricular activities. In terms of personal involvement in planned activities, time wise activities that happened during Jumu’a prayers or Eid or any of the five daily prayers might pose some problems and limit the ability of parents to participate. The people who plan these activities have no idea what the Muslim culture is when they embark on these activities”.

There was a time in the past when many co-curricular activities were fully funded. However cut backs by school boards have imposed extra burden on parents, forcing them to take on the added responsibility of having to pay from their meagre income the cost of after school
activities. These funds could otherwise be used to provide nutritious meals and clothing for their children.

Another parent named Imam has a different take to the kind of challenges he is facing in his dealings with the schools. Parents’ request to observe their children in the classroom is a right that is understood by teachers, but not so much by parents themselves. Despite the schools’ willingness to allow visits of parents, to observe their children in class parents complained that often they encounter resistance from some teachers. These are the teachers who would prefer that they do not visit as they might feel uncomfortable having a parent sit in class while they teach. This poses a challenge for activist parents who want to be involved in their children’s education. Parents are willing to spend more time in school to contribute towards the school program but the schools prefer limited presence. Imam says:

“The challenges are related to not having custody of my children. I do not get to see them often as I would like to because their mother is holding them and refusing to allow the children to visit. Nevertheless I do see them when I go to their school and I get to help the teacher as a volunteer in their classes. I would love to spend more time in helping in the classroom but teachers do not appreciate lengthy parental presence in the classroom and often are uncomfortable having parent make frequent visits. This limitation diminishes the letter and spirit behind the policy on Parents as Partners in Education”.

The contradiction is clear. The schools say parents are welcome to visit their children’s class and share their knowledge, but hope that they do not come. Partnership becomes meaningful when partners share mutual responsibilities and equal contribution in knowledge construction leading to student success.

Khawaja is another parent who wanted to get involved in the school because he had some time to spare but was disappointed that a hand of invitation was not extended to her. He shares his experience in the following statement:
“I think, sometimes people do have time or I have time but there was no encouragement, they were not clear where they needed help from parents. I could be more productive because at that time I had time, my kids were growing up, I had more time off from work, and I could have spent more time. But the question is, do they really need me there? I cannot just go over there and sit on the bench, no. I need to know what exactly and where exactly they need my help.”

There is great value in having parent knowledge infused in what is being taught in the class. So many parents have years of experience and professional training in different fields. When combine with their cultural knowledge, a wealth of information can be tapped to enrich the discussion in the classroom. Children may not see the need for their parents to visit their school let alone their classrooms for selfish reasons as we will see in the statement that follows.

Challenges for Maria are not what is happening in her children’s school life, but the children’s attempts at discouraging her from getting involved with the school system. She says that her….

“Basic challenge is, I think, my children don’t want me to be involved because they know if they tell me a certain thing, I will go and get involved and they don’t want that kind of attention. So, they say, we know what’s right or wrong. We might hear or be exposed to something that is wrong but we really don’t want you to get involved and make a big fuss out of it.” So, my challenge is to get my children to actually speak up”.

This is a case of children who know best and can take care of matters that arise in school and would involve parents when they feel there is a need to involve them. Otherwise they feel parents have no business in school. Here we see the challenge is coming from the children and not from the school staff. However parent advocacy is still needed and parents have responsibility to speak up when injustice is being done to their children as the following statement by Zeenat indicates.

Zeenat thinks that the schools are not doing enough to support kids who face different challenges. The teachers she thinks are only concerned about their pay cheques and offer little or no help to students who may need special attention. She says:
“People that work in my child’s school not all of them but majority of them there really are more concerned about their pay cheques and about doing their 9-to-5. They tend to concentrate their efforts on kids who are doing well and are succeeding. The teachers do mostly what is easy for them. Even if that means a child will be suffering in the long run. They don’t care. I don’t find that they realize that by not so much caring making this child to be a successful student in this grade because if they did, they would be telling that child how you can improve your mark. First thing, they going to tell you I have a class of 30 kids which is what they are famous for, they always say I have a classroom of 30 kids, do you think I have time to address this issue that your son is having or your daughter is having?”

The idea of “no child left behind” and “Reach each and every child” would apply here. Teachers play a very important role in facilitating a child’s success and to use every possible tool to make that happened. When this responsibility is not fulfilled to assist the child, for whatever the reason(s) the child may not benefit from the education he is being provided with. If schools are lacking in meeting the needs of some student then student success becomes difficult to achieve.

4.3.2.1 Curriculum Controversies

School boards often bear the brunt of curriculum controversy. The debate can be particularly intense and challenging when the issues involve discussions around controversial topics like sex education, creation versus evolution and requests for religious accommodation or exemption. In 2010, parent supporters of public schools got word of impending changes to the curriculum. A campaign effort in opposition to the government’s plan, galvanized parents groups across the Greater Toronto Area to resist proposed changes to the curriculum around sex education and health. Although the government backed down, parents have remained on the watch and whenever the government attempts to introduce changes into the curriculum that veers away from traditional values to something more innovative, parents react instantly each time to stop them. Maria and other parents in this study share their role in this campaign. Maria says:
“I got the new curriculum about the teaching of sexuality to our children from JK and above it. I got this information from a fellow Muslim who sent us an email to alert us about this Bill 13. It was a shock to many when they learn about (Bill 13). I confirmed the existence of this bill when I visited the Toronto District school website. I was surprised that no one actually reached out to parents to tell them about this bill”.

There is no issue that has evoked so much passion as the discussion of the proposed Bill 13, the Bill granting permission for the teaching of human sexuality and sexual diversity. Muslim parents believe that teaching such a topic is a responsibility that falls on them and no one else. They are asking the government to withdraw the Bill and to enter into a dialogue that would allow for exemptions on the basis of religious belief. This belief is shared by another parent called Ahmed who has other concerns of his own directed on certain activities in the school calendar that run contrary to Islamic teaching.

“The school calendar is organized to include activities and celebrations which Muslims cannot participate in because they run contrary to the values and beliefs which Muslims hold. The activities I am referring to are: Halloween, Valentine, Christmas and Easter. Many parents object to having their children participate in such activities that they feel go against the belief of their Muslim children”.

The public school system was created to take into account the diverse needs of all children without charge. Public education authorities whether at the Ministry of education or at the board level have described the public school system as a beacon of inclusion and diversity and schools are free from religious identity. However from the activities and celebrations Ahmed refer to above, it is obvious that such activities are rooted in the Christian traditions at the exclusion of other faiths. Where then is the separation of Church and State? What about the religious celebrations of Muslims and how could they be recognized in an environment that is surrounded by secular influence? The next section will help answer this question.
4.3.2.2 Religious Identity

Religious identity is a person’s overt expression of the religion they identify with and is manifested in various forms: such as dress codes, food choice, manner of interactions and how worship is expressed/observed Zine (2001). The participants in this study shared their commitment to their religion and discussed whether their identity enhanced or create an impediment in their level of engagement with the school system. One parent, Maria has this to say:

“Yes, of course, our religion said that we should pray five times a day and one of which falls during school time. The problem is, yes, I understand that they are allowed to pray there but the children for some reason don’t want to differ from their friends. So they are actually breaking religious rule just by being in on non-Muslim school environment that doesn't encourage praying. I know that it is allowed but it’s not encouraged”.

Every environment can influence a person’s conduct either towards a positive direction or a negative path. The school environment with its secular/ liberal orientation is ripe with diversion of thoughts and practice and in the case of Muslims the pressure to fit in with their peers often led them to slack off with their prayers or totally abandoned what defined them as Muslims. The explanation above is just one example of what might happened when religion and secularism exist side by side.

Ammara shared her view of religious identity in situations where Muslims constitute the majority in the community and school. A greater number is supposed to build strength for the Muslims and buy them influence in their neighbourhood school. Yet there is little evidence that Muslim parents are active and are included in the decision making process in the school council. Ammara explains this fact:

“The community where the school is located has a large Muslim population. This is reflected in the demographic makeup of the student population, where the majority of the students are Muslims. The school culture is diverse and accommodating of differences”.

Parents whose involvement does not represent their numbers in the school community as the Muslim parents found themselves, must be reached to correct this short fall in their involvement. They should be encouraged and given the opportunity to participate as equal partners in education with pride and respect and not in the manner Seema describes below.

“Like as I explained to you before that we are always facing a lot of hardships and difficulties because we are Muslims and more so because we are practicing Muslims. Muslims and practicing Muslims are two different categories. A Muslim may just go to school and show no sign of being a Muslim; they don’t suffer as much as Muslims who are practicing, who are covering, who want to pray their prayers at school and who are more attentive to their religion are concerned about what they can do and what they can’t do. Like for example a Muslim girl wearing Hijab and she may want to pray and she will not be given a place to pray or not given the respect”.

Identity matters a lot to young people and clothing most often is the identity marker. Muslim parents and their children value their clothing and wear it with confidence and pride. The Muslim clothing fulfills a religious obligation, a demonstration of modesty and dignity. The clothing is a constant reminder of the connection a Muslim has with his/her creator and prayers in school is how this connection is maintained. School authorities would be wise to allow Muslims to express themselves in a manner consistent with the demands of their faith and in this regard Zeenat a parent in this study elaborates what identity means to her. Zeenat is the person I would describe as a traditional Muslim who feels that her mode of expression would bar her from being accepted in the school and she expressed her frustration in this statement:

“For example, I observe the veil, and I cover my face and I would like to be working with the school as a volunteer, doing anything that is required in and around the school. Unfortunately, the school staff would not give me any volunteer position. I say this and I know that people listening to me and hearing this statement would probably say, oh that’s not true. Well it may not be true for them but it is surely true for me. I have not be given
the same opportunity as a person who is not covering their face. I am feeling disappointed because I sometimes would like to be more involved with my kids’ school, like working there, volunteering there and I feel that’s where you know I have setbacks as a Muslim. I can’t be that involved in my children’s school because I chose to cover my face, I chose certain dress code”.

Exclusion on the basis of a parent’s attire cannot be justified and is definitely contrary to the diversity and inclusive schooling and the partnership message the Ontario Ministry of Education wishes parent to believe. In a multicultural society with multiple forms of expressions, what a person wears is irrelevant to the task they are being asked to perform. What matters is whether the person is up to the task they are being assigned. Wearing the face veil definitely should not disqualify a parent from participating in school base activities. A closer look at the ministry’s policies and the implications for practice of faith will suffice in this regard.

4.3.2.3 Policy vs. Practice

The Ontario Government has released policies around parent engagement. The policy recognized parents as equal partners in the delivery of education at all levels. Parents are to be consulted in all matters to do with the education of their children and the extent to which parents are aware of the existence of policies is tested in the conversations that follow. The participants were asked about their knowledge of policies on parent engagement by the government of Ontario and school board policies that are to be derived from the ministry guidelines. These questions were meant to find out the extent to which policy on parent engagement has had an effect in encouraging or deterring parents from being engaged in their children’s school and if there are obstacles placed to their engagement, how can that can be changed? In answer to this question Khaula says:

“It depends on the school policies. Not all schools want Muslim parents to be involved. They don’t say it up front, but they give it to you like okay, “you can be here but you are not wanted here,” but thank God in my children’s school the one elementary school in the
area I live, there I was very involved and also most of the communities there, they know me because I always called them and they see me in my face veil and accepted me, I have no problem.”

As discussed in previous sections, it is easy to say parents are welcomed but traditional mentality which makes the teacher the only dispenser of education dies hard. The belief is that parents have no business in the classroom reign strong in the minds of traditional educators, but again the resilience of individual parents determined to be involved, have produced encouraging results. The statement that follows is an example of a breakthrough of a determined parent.

“Actually when the first time I requested of the teacher that I want for my kids the food called Halal, she said, “Oh can you explain, what that is? I explain to her that it is a kind of food, specific food eaten by Muslims and then she asked me if I can demonstrate that in the class. So, I did. I brought Pizza to the class with Halal meat and the student ate”.

When parents are encouraged to share an aspect of their culture as is the case of the halal Pizza, everybody benefits. It takes courage, an open mindedness and a willingness to embrace other people’s cultures that erases what divide people and validate that which is different. Sharing cultural artifacts is a further proof that parents have a lot to offer the education system with their rich collection of resources which can be added to a teaching unit with parents appearing as guest presenters. This parent’s willingness to share is demonstrated in the following statement:

“I showed them pictures of Muslims in different cultures, their places of worship and explained the meaning of the clothing and the architecture of Muslim religious buildings. So you will find in some schools, parents are allowed to be involved, but not only involve but also share with the teachers the message of Islam. Unfortunately, in other schools, authorities are not interested in learning about Islam and Muslims and they have closed their minds to the truth.”

Not showing interest in parents’ cultures and faith invalidate the call to parents to share responsibility in the education of their children. Meaningful parental engagement begins with a recognition by education authorities of the cultures and faith of parents in their system. A show
of interest would increase the possibility of participation. A willingness to accommodate the legitimate requests of parents opens up the door for dialogue and collaboration. When asked how parents understand the ministry’s policies that supports parents engagement in the schools generated the kind of discussion that follows:

Imam says,

“I understand that the Ontario policy documents on parental involvement recognized the need for religious accommodation of faith groups e.g. especially in the case of Bill 13. Each school board in Ontario is required to develop its own policies/guidelines stating how they would grant accommodation to their faith communities. At the Toronto District School Board, the board with the collaboration of the faith community has developed guidelines for the accommodation of religious observances and practices. Although these documents exist at the ministry of education, they have not been distributed widely and training has not been provided so that parents can become familiar with the content of the policy so that they can use it to advocate for themselves and their children”.

The development and release of these policy documents as described above are a positive steps in the right direction, a clear recognition by the government of the role parents are called upon to exercise as equal partners in the education of their children. However while on paper, all seems fine and the right words have been spoken, the reality fall short of what is written. Rather than doors opening for parents, the doors that are shut in the face of parents are more than those that are open. As a community of faith, they are very sensitive to any attempt by governments to introduce changes to existing policies that would affect the education of their children or introduce any new ones if such change would contradict their religious beliefs. This is an on-going struggle and one that has inflamed passion and raised the temperature especially in debates around the issue of sex education and health (Artuso, 2014). The discussion around policy on parent engagement returns again and again on the clash of civilizations how to reconcile differences and the apparent contradiction between policy making and policy implementation. The policy actors in the ministry and the boards try to demonstrate sincerity on paper but in reality they have to see the change on paper become fact on the
ground. The powerless parents can only watch with frustration when they are given the run around and what has been promised then always fall short. In this regard a lot more needs to be done for parents to feel welcomed in the schools. Further discussion on this topic continues below.

This segment of the interview discussed how policies genuinely address the practical engagement of parents in terms of whether the schools create opportunities for parents to be involved or whether parents feel welcomed in their children’s school or whether involvement relate in any way to the policies and practices of the school? Each parent in the study responded differently on the basis of their understanding of policies. When asked to give their take on this subject of policies, one of the parents Seema responds in the following statement:

“Again if we talk about the government, it is hugely influenced by politics and politics informs societal, cultural, local community agenda. I think for the Muslim community, it is essential for us to understand the education system and find ways to be involved. The majority of Muslim parents send their children to public schools and this explains more why they should be involved and for government policies to make this involvement smooth and easy. The clash normally comes when mainstream policies around life-style and values clash with religious values. I think, these differences are evident because the education system and Western society are based on individualistic principles. As an educated Muslim woman, it is very easy and important for me at least to identify why the education system would object to the Muslim way of life and we know this from history, right, from colonization. So, these are all systemic issues which show their colours in different forms”.

The discussion around policy is to encourage government and agencies of government need to be conscious of the demographic changes that are taking place in the changing make-up of Canadian society. Multicultural is what Canada has become. Canada no longer consists of native people and European settlers, the French and English, but the composition has become much wider and diverse, representing people from every country around the world, who have chosen Canada as their permanent home. Each of the communities in this multicultural
configuration have unique needs and feel comfortable expressing themselves according to the beliefs and values they hold and share within their communities. Muslims as one of the many communities which is significant part of the Canadian mosaic have their unique needs and obligations which are shaped by their religious teachings and practices.

Despite this pessimism there is hope and the continuation of this narrative below, provides reasons to be optimistic.

“Times have changed and I don’t think in our present time there is much opposition against Muslim parents becoming involved in schools”.

The challenge for Muslims in these times is to counter their demonization by media organizations such as Fox news, the Sun media corp. and other right wing think tanks in Canada and the United States, who have made it an industry to portray Muslims as terrorists. They have coined all kinds of words and phrases to define Islam and Muslims. Names such as Islamists, Islamic terrorism, Islamic radicals, Jihadist, Islamic extremist and in Harper’s words for Muslims “Islamism” (CBC, 2012) are now household names, freely used in mainstream speech to describe the actions of some Muslims who have committed acts of violence. The irony is the same standards are not applied to acts of terrorism carried out by non-Muslims as is the case with Justin Bourque’s killing of three Mounties Moncton, New Brunswick (MacDonald, 2014) and the four RCMP officers that were killed on an Alberta farm (CBC News, 2005). There is not a day past without the media having something negative to say about Islam and Muslims. The constant portrayal of Muslims as terrorists (Elmasry, 2002; Elghobashy, 2009; Poynting & Perry, 2007). The challenge for Muslims in these times is to counter their demonization by the mainstream media. There is not a day past without the media having something negative to say about Islam and Muslims. This caricature of an entire community of over a billion followers
around the world has made most of the members of the community to be less engaged and less trusting of public institutions and schools are no exception. Furthermore the slow pace in engaging with the education system for Muslim parents can be explained as having to do with not knowing how to be involved and who to go to, to get the right information. Nasreen says:

“I do believe that often times there is misinformation and parents do not know how to become involved or who to go to, to ask about involvement”.

Seema thinks the way to overcome this problem is that:

“There needs to be a personal culture shift within various Muslim communities to encourage parental involvement. One suggestion could be to have first generation students become leaders and/or role models”

Immediate concerns especially for newcomer parents is not so much about getting involved in the schools of their children but concerns about learning English and settling down with their families. Seema continues:

“In addition, there may be a sense of intimidation especially by newcomer families who may be struggling with settlement related issues and language”.

For parents who were born in Canada or have lived here for long time their concerns are of different kinds as Seema’s final remarks would attest when she says:

“Another thought why parents may feel disengaged or disappointed is in reference to the curriculum because it is different from what they grew up with back home and/or the reception they received here with the lack of acknowledgement of the credentials they do hold”.

Up until now the discussion has revolved around Muslim parents as being invited to get involved in the schools of their children. However not all parents wish to be identified with a religious label. They would rather be refer to as just a parent. The thinking is that the issue that affects one parent also affects every parent and solutions should be for the benefit of all parents. One parent who hold this view is Fauzia. She says:
“You know what I think? Okay, parents should be parents, I don't think I should be calling them religious parents. My understanding is that when you are sending your child to school, you're sending them to a school, you are not sending them to a Mosque or Church or Temple. You're sending him/her to a school. School should be equal for everyone. It's not a religious institution. So when you are a parent, you should be taken as a parent not as a Muslim parent and this is really why I do not like to be called a Muslim parent, Christian parent, Hindu parent or a Sikh parent. You should be called a parent and you should be respected equally as a parent”.

The call for this parent is to have an inclusive parent engagement process where all parents would be encouraged to be part of the solution, to meet parent concerns regardless of what the nature of the concerns are. Zeenat says:

“The treatment of Muslims in the education system is not encouraging. The rules and policies involved make no room for a child to be involved with religion in school. However as we see Muslim children are getting more and more involved in their religion and this is something school boards have to understand, they have to look at the situation and they have to realize what is truth? The truth is that we (the boards, the Canadian society) have Muslims who are practicing same, as Jews who are practicing, same as Christians who are practicing. So Muslim children also want their rights in the public system and like I said before, Christians have their Catholic schools and there are very good Christians who attend these schools and they are being respected, they don't do bad things, there are lot of them who are being respected and they have been given all of their rights. Why are our Muslim kids not being given their rights? Is it just because they are covering their heads or because they want to pray to God? Christian kids pray to God, Jewish kids pray to God, Muslim kids pray to God. Muslim kids have to pray five times a day, that's the fact”.

4.3.2.4 Aftermath of 9/11

One of the sad consequences of 9/11 was that people really suffered because of misrepresentation of Islam in the media (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005). Overboard and inaccurate portrayals of Muslims does not leave room for the nuances inherent in the followers of Islam. News coverage of Muslims often associates them with acts of violence, terrorism, and unrest or anti-Western sentiment (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005). Imam says:
“Yes indeed you will recall since the incident of 9/11 and with the media report about Muslims in a negative way, western societies have galvanized in a way that paint Muslims all of them as terrorists and this has had an effect on so many parents like myself. I would lie low and not try to ‘make waves’ and going out and getting public exposure. So I tend to be afraid because I don’t know who is going to hurt me and as a result where as previously I would be more active, I don’t know who is watching my movement. There is a high degree of suspicion and fear and this fear is for people’s safety and the safety of their children, therefore they minimized the amount of participation and involvement even in school settings. So I would minimize my involvement, but it doesn’t close the door. So when the dust settles, I would be much more involved as I did previously, but for the time being as a matter of security and safety for myself and my children it is better to just lie low and wait for an opportune time when the risk of involvement becomes less dangerous than it is in this climate”.

Imam’s fear of backlash against Muslims following the 9/11 attacks is to be expected especially in an atmosphere of pent up anger directed at a whole community for the violent actions of Muslims living in another country. For many Muslims the best strategy is to stay out of site and allow tempers to cool down and for hearts to heal with time. Imam has shared how he was personally affected by what happened post 9/11. The other parents also weigh in this discussion and shared their personal experiences as well. Fauzia narrated her own story with the following:

“All 9/11, when Muslim parents walk their children to school people would be staring at us. You can hear muttering words being expressed some of it making reference to us as extremist or terrorists. It is important that the general public listen to the problem we are facing as Muslims. People would say this person is Muslim, this person may be Pakistani, this person may be Indian or Somali or whatever, but this person is first of all a parent. The teachers and other educators need to understand what problems this person is facing with their child at school, then maybe other needs about their religion would become useful to discuss. But the problem is Canadian Muslims and Arabs are feeling the effects of discrimination in their daily lives. For example, reports of incidents involving Muslims normally begin with labelling people first and then deal with their problems later”.
The experience of parents like Fauzia refer to above is indicative of an intolerable situation driven by fear and intimidation. This has no place in a school environment where diversity and inclusion is validated and celebrated. However a cynical ploy to demonize Islam and Muslims continues through the agency of the media. The section that follows presents evidence of media bias against Muslims and how it has produced a state of bigotry and Islamophobia.

4.3.2.4.1 Negative Media Portrayal

The portrayal of Muslims in the media has been negative and stereotypical according to the Canadian Islamic Congress media-watch study of major Canadian newspapers research report. The events of September 11, 2001 thrust Islam into the global media forefront. The terms Islamic or Muslim suddenly became linked to extremism, militant, jihads, as if they belonged together inextricably and naturally (Muslim extremist, Islamic terror, Islamic war, Muslim time bomb), this media portrayals of Muslims have contributed to the formation of harmful Islamic media stereotype (Gudel, 2002; Faimau, 2013). An example of the ‘radical Muslim’ stereotype can be seen in Canadian media coverage of the Toronto 18 terrorism case. After 18 men were arrested in connection with alleged terrorist activities, media reports were uniform in portraying the same themes: terrorism was a real threat, young Canadians were being converted into Islamic radicals via mosques and the internet, and Canada’s police force had only barely averted a deadly terrorist attack (Miller & Sack, 2010, Morey & Yaqin, 2011). In 2002, The CIC anti-Islam in the media research project after carefully documenting anti-Islam terminology and assessing news and views published by eight of Canada’s top-circulation daily newspapers, concluded that The national Post scored the highest points for its recurrent use of anti-Islam
language and terminology and is the only paper in Canada to do so (Elmasry, 2002; Elghobashy, 2009; Poynting, & Perry, 2007).

Negative messages about Muslims have received more media attention than positive ones, new research finds (Bullock, & Jafri, 2000; Conte, 2009; McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005). In the days, weeks and months after the deadly attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, Arabs and Muslims became fixtures in western media like never before. Suspicion and negative stereotypes—the phrases “Muslim terrorist” and “Arab terrorist” became commonplace (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005) proliferated, sparked by perceptions of fear and misunderstanding about Islam and its followers. Zeenat says:

“*Well in the past, we have not been given the respect we deserve, because of our head covers, because of our Hijabs, because of our identity as Muslims, because of what the media has done to Muslims. We have not been given respect because the media has destroyed Islamic prospective, so that is the reality of our life, whether at work, whether at school, whether friends you know, outsiders, non-Muslims, being in a grocery store, or being on a bus it is the same. Wherever you go believe me you will be bombarded with negativity about Islam, because of media propaganda. Media has done major damage. Muslims have to work hard to get back our identity, not to hide behind it, not to show people that we are intimidated by them*."

Muslims must develop their own alternate media to educate friends and neighbors about their faith and culture. Spending time complaining and not doing anything to tell your own stories open the door for bigotry to persist. The media feeds on sensation, this is how they sell advertisement and make money. They care less about the consequences of their actions and very much subscribe to the notion that the end justify the means. Groups have emerged out of this media campaign with the avowed aim of making life uncomfortable for Muslims and they have picked on schools to wage their campaign. Seema relates below more incidents of this media war
against Muslims and mentioned the opposition to children being allowed to offer their prayers in school.

“There is currently a huge media campaign aimed at demonizing Islam and Muslims and deliberately distorting the Islamic message. This misrepresentation in my opinion, is seen in the amount of negative energy unleashed in opposition to children leaving class time to go and participate in communal prayers and faith based activities at nearby mosques or within school auditorium. That was a concern for me, a huge concern because I knew that in a year or two my son would also be joining the group of students going out of class to participate in prayer activities and I think it is a matter of concern for me as a parent. I know that the school is paying attention to the issue of prayers and are mindful of the strength in numbers of students who are predominantly Muslims. They did provide a space for prayer but the timing of prayer is not in conformity with regular school day activity.

The opposition to school prayers was unfounded, since the permission to pray is extended to all religious groups and no special treatment is given to Muslims. Hate groups have ignored this fact, instead they want the public to believe otherwise so that opposition to Muslims would continue and increasing in number. The Islamophobes lump every Muslims in the same light and refer to them as terrorists, fanatics and even question their loyalty (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005). The narratives continues:

“This is also an area of contention as it leads people who are uncomfortable to assume that Muslims are being given too many concessions and eventually they believe the public schools would become hotbeds for Islamic fanaticism and a base for Islamic terrorists to engage in activities that are harmful to the peaceful nature of our education institutions. I think, this kind of attitude speaks louder of how people are ill-informed and un-informed about what Islam is and are lumping everybody in the same position”.

The conclusion to be reached out of these narratives is that they are hate motivated are based on ignorance and deliberate distortion. The way to correct this mindset is through education, patience and active engagement with the system in the case of parents with the
schools but right now concerned Muslims parents need to deal with issue of their under representation and involvement in schools.

4.3.2.4.2 Feel Under Represented

Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (MOE, 2009b) recognizes the province’s growing diversity as a strength. It reaffirms the values of fairness, equity, and respect as essential principles of the publicly funded education system. The policy admitted that there are barriers in the system and these barriers may be related to the following dimensions of diversity and/or their intersection: culture, ethnicity, identity, language, race and religion etc. (MOE, 2009a).

The term "underrepresented minority" is used here to refer to the Muslim minority. While many ethnic and racial minorities are underrepresented in the professional staff of schools a fact noted in the equity and inclusive schooling document, the goal of the equity and inclusive policy is to have school structure that is representative of the multicultural fabric of the school population. Muslims are underrepresented minorities in the governance of our public school system even though their children constitute the majority in many neighbourhood schools across the GTA (Guo, 2011). As a religious minority, Muslims unlike other cultural groups have unique needs, manifested, in dress, prayers, and food and gender interactions (Barnett, 2008; Syed, 2008). This uniqueness in character and the demand for accommodation to support its religious and cultural needs have made the community a target for discrimination. Consequently, the unwillingness of public boards to fully embrace diversity and inclusion, so that accommodation can be granted to religious and cultural groups would explain why Muslim parents have been reluctant to be involved in many school activities in support of their children’s education (Neufeld, 2010 in Guo, 2011). Somehow, in spite of policy pronouncements by
politicals and bureaucrats in words and documentation, barriers to representations in school
governance continues to be an obstacle for Muslims to be engaged in school systems (Russo &
Hee, 2008). Rehan one of the parents alluded towards that by saying:

“Muslim religious practices are treated differently in public schools. It does not matter
whether it is – Ramadan, Eid or any other religious events for Muslims, it is the same,
school does not show much interests. However when it comes to Christian affiliated
events like Christmas, Easter, valentine, Halloween etc. are recognized and celebrated.
The government is trying to play it both ways. At the same time as it is promoting
secularism in public schools it is also, turning a blind eye to Christian religious events.
The government doesn’t accept our religion…..so we feel ourselves under represented.”

Notwithstanding the government’s assertion that public schools are secular and are free
from religious influence, the fact remains that public education in Ontario is not neutral. Schools
are still operating Christian oriented curriculum with the calendar organized to fit the Christian
cycle of events (Karmani & Pennycook, 2005; Spinner-Halev, 2000). This residual influence of
Christianity is also standing in the way to having a teaching staff who reflect the school
population. This is what many parents want to see happened and it is expressed in their
statements during the interviews. The parent Maria below articulated this vision clearly in her
statement:

“Our schools’ staff should reflect the communities they serve. There is an urgent need to
appoint people from different ethnicities into positions in our schools. Who are living in
certain areas of the GTA for example in There are neighbourhoods across the GTA
where you would find Muslim communities making up the majority of the residents or
where the majority of the residents are Hindus or Sikhs, Punjabis etc. in such ethnic
specific communities the school boards would be wise to make every efforts to hire
people from these communities into positions in the schools where their native language
skills would become handy and a great benefit to the school. When people or parents
from these communities see their and own kind on staff it gives them courage to approach the ethnic staff with confidence and speak with them in their language”.

The parents and children of the Muslim community have a need to see role models of people they are familiar with and inspire them in a manner others might understand and appreciate. Teachers drawn from diverse cultures have greater impact when they stand in front of students who look like them, giving instructions and hope in the classroom full of a diverse student body. The hiring of a teaching staff reflecting the diversity of school population is what will make public school truly equitable and inclusive. Feeling different should not be seen as feeling indifferent. Parents want recognition for themselves and their children; they want recognition for their belief and cultures and a willingness by the education system to genuinely embrace these differences in the curriculum and in staffing.

4.3.2.4.3 Feel Different

Since 9/11, Muslims in North America are living in fear. This fear has had the effect of a collective paralysis on the Muslim community and has made it easier for government officials and agencies to systematically dismantle the civil rights of this minority. There are three specific factors which together have fomented this fear: government action, irresponsible media, and the hate speech of some national leader (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005; Poynting, & Perry, 2007). Concerted harassment by government officials, destructive and draconian laws aimed at limiting freedoms, media indifference, hate-filled public figures, and an apathetic citizenry have all come together to build the virtual internment camps that house the North American Muslim community (Cohen, 2013). Maria Says:

“Most of the time you will always see Muslim parents feeling alienated. They do not get a lot of information sent home in their languages. So, language definitely is a huge barrier. We are always being made to feel different. The schools go out of their way to treat us
differently and they aren’t at ease with us around. So, nothing is really natural in that set up”.

The process of inclusion requires effective communication between the home and the school. The medium through which this exchange can be done is through the use of a language parents are familiar with and can respond to with confidence and ease. It is natural that parents feel much more at ease when they use their language and sharing space in ethnic neighbourhood. This does not in any way exclude the need to develop language proficiency in English. What is the way forward? Seema offers her suggestions in the following statement:

“I deliberately chose the community I live in because it has a high ratio of a population of Sikhs who also have very vivid dressing habits. In some ways, I think it is helpful so that people with various physical identifiers are more easily accepted”.

People who share a common language and ethnic identity and choose to share a common space are doing so for convenience to preserve their culture. The parent named Fauzia below has expanded in her statement what this means.

“I think there are certain needs that are unique to each ethnic group: there are needs which are unique to Hindus, needs which are important only for people who are Jews. Given this uniqueness of needs, there should be more education, more awareness for school teachers, for school administrators to know that there could be several needs in the school community. That parents should be treated with respect and kindness and their role as parents should always be dignified and validated. Parents should not be labelled or put in different boxes, respect them for the way they are and who they are”.

Canadian multiculturalism has made room for people to identify on the basis of their culture and nationality. The parents who chose to preserve their identity are just doing what is natural to all cultural groups to hold on to what make them different and to pass it on to their children. Diversity should therefore be celebrated and not discouraged.

4.3.2.4.4 Feel Alienated

Feeling alienated is a condition Muslims continue to struggle with as they strive to integrate safely and openly into Canadian society. Even Canadian-born Muslims find it difficult
to be Muslim; “growing up as a Muslim here is not always easy” one parent says. Most kids and teenagers are afraid of expressing their Islamic identity, and thus end up living a kind of double-standard life filled with psychological dilemmas and religious and moral sacrifices (Russo & Hee, 2008; Syed, 2008).

Whether it is a girl wearing a hijab, a guy praying during lunch hour at school, or simply having a name such as Osama or Jihad, Muslims are often intimidated about expressing themselves and the values they cherish (Barnett, 2008; Levy, 1997). In a survey by Léger Marketing for the Association of Canadian Studies in Montreal ACS (2011) Canadians were asked how positive they feel about different groups. Muslims received the lowest ranking 30 per cent (Boswell, 2014). The results echoed the findings of a previous survey for the association, this one marking 10 years since 9/11, (ACS, 2011) found that a majority of Canadians believe that conflicts between Western nations and the Muslim world are “irreconcilable” (Chung, 2011).

In the last few years, Canadians have been exposed to a wide range of negativity about Islam. There was a proposal to bar public services from being made available to anyone who wore a niqab in Quebec, bans on girls wearing the hijab (headscarf for women) while playing sports, and most notably, the passing of a “code of conduct” by the municipality of Hérouxville that prohibited the stoning of women (Boswell, 2014; CBC News, 2012; CAIR-CAN, 2002; Chung, 2011; Cohen, 2013; Jedwab, 2014; Michelle, 2007). More recently Ontario schools were under attack for allowing Muslims to pray at school (Agar, 2011; David, 2012; Friesen & Hammer, 2011; Gallinger, 2014; Kalinowski, 2011). One of the implications of being seen as “different” was a feeling of not belonging. One parent called Seema relates her personal experience in the following statement.
“I remember as a student, having to pray at the bottom end of stairwells during lunch hour, because the school wouldn’t provide space for this purpose not even for a few minutes, and even though all the classrooms were empty and free to use they would not make this simple concession to us Muslims.”

Seema’s experience as a Muslim student is typical with schools that hold firm belief that religion has no place in the secular nature of the public school system and have held firm against offering accommodation on religious grounds (Russo & Hee, 2008). In her response on this issue another parent Fauzia thinks that this,

“Could be partly due to religious or ethnic bias or name it whatever you wish.”

Racial mix especially amongst parents and students who do not share the same culture could create some level of discomfort. The experience of Fauzia’s daughter in a class where she felt different from the rest of the class can be traumatic experience. However the manner in which Fauzia handle her daughters discomfort was commendable for it taught the child how to get along with fellow students regardless of the skin color. She relates the story in a way which sends a message to other parents and the school that an inclusive environment welcomes everyone and there should be no room for separation or isolation. Here is the story:

“When my daughter went to school, there were only few brown people in the school, because the students were mostly White or Black. So, my daughter felt slightly strange in their midst. She used to come home feeling sad, She wants us to change her school, because there were only five or six Brown people in the school and she was crying, mom, I feel alienated, the moment I walked into the school. I feel like I am not part of that school. I have to listen to her stories, her crying and after the crying stops, she would ask to go to her grandparents, aunts or uncles. Everybody was pressurizing my husband and me, asking, Ok, why did you send this girl to this school? She is crying all the time. I said to my daughter, you know what? This is reality, welcome to the practical world. You will not be baby sat any more ok? In the real world you do not get to choose the people with whom to work with, from those you do not like to work with. The work place is as diverse as the school is so, you need to learn how to adjust and get along with everyone regardless of race or color. If students in your school are playing tricks on you, you need to learn how to play tricks on them too or learn how to respond to those tricks.”
A very inspiring story indeed with a powerful message of tolerance, equity and accommodation regardless of differences. The involvement of parents in the schools makes the lesson told by Fauzia easier to absorb and for parents to learn from but only if they make the effort to get involved or being invited to do so. This is the issue Rehan wishes to share.

“Schools need to understand the unique or diverse needs of different cultural or ethnic groups, schools should try to be more inclusive to get parents involved because what happened if you attend any of the school council meetings, you would find most of them are controlled by certain ethnic groups or culture groups at the exclusion of others. And if you see the school population, the leaders of school councils only make up around 5%. The rest of the parents making up 95%, are not represented in the school council. There is no harmony in the governance of schools, so, the school administration need to go according to the statistics of their school population, to establish a credible system of democracy. If not there are many parents especially those from ethnic groups who would be left out and may never be involved. There needs to be concerted efforts to get parents involved”.

School council representation continues to come again and again for discussion and school authorities should do something to bring everybody on board and for the parents who are currently under represented to be trained and allowed in the decision making process.

The responses to the theme on challenges Muslim parents face towards engagement with the public school is summarized in the context of inclusion of minority parents within a one-cultured-school setting. Muslim parents face many challenges, such as feelings of alienation, and the predicament of Islamophobia (Collet, 2007; Khalema & Wannas-Jones, 2003; Zine, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004). The public school system is never going to be everything that practicing Muslim parents want it to be for their children," These parents want some aspects of a school to be Islamic: its ethics, modification of the curriculum to accommodate the religious requirements of Muslim students, such as the issue of food, clothing for physical education, proms, dances and other social events. Some of these requirements have been achieved primarily through the TDSB document on Religious Accommodations (TDSB, 2000a).
A greater investment in support systems is needed for Muslims in our public schools. It was noted from the data that student success is largely dependent on parental support and engagement, something that has remained a challenge for school boards to establish (sub-themes 4.3.3.1, 4.3.3.1.1 and 4.3.3.1.2).

4.3.3 Supports required for Engagement

In a move to make parents and “all students feel welcome” in public schools in Ontario, (MOE, 2009a, 2009b), requires all school boards in the province to provide “accommodation for students’ and staffs’ religious beliefs and practices”. In light of this requirement, school boards have made reasonable efforts to accommodate individuals’ requirement for daily prayers (TDSB, 2000a). School administrators especially at secondary schools have allowed prayer space to be created.

In the next theme, parents provided their views in regard to what will enhance their effective involvement in the educational system. For example one participant said, “Religious accommodation is important and must be the yard stick through which requests must be measured.”
Figure 5. Themes Related to Supports required to be More Engaged and Sustain Engagement
4.3.3.1 Acceptance and Representation

An Effective Parent Partnership with a school, is where the school invites parents to the table to make decisions about school curriculum and programs for students (MOE, 2010). This practice of inviting parents to the table must be done with integrity and not as a superficial gesture to appease parents. Muslim parents are genuinely concerned and some are desperately seeking partners to help their children not only to succeed academically but to navigate the educational system, unfortunately this effort in finding help for their struggling children is not yielding success (Pushor & Murphy, 2004). What is required for educators, administrators and teachers is to admit that the myriad of rules in schools have created more barriers for parent involvement and less opportunities for parent engagement. Schools must utilize multiple forms of communications with Muslim parents and all parents and they can do so in person, on line, in writing and in multiple languages (MOE, 2009a, & 2009b). Teachers need to be willing to work with the parents of their students, regardless of what the level of their knowledge of the education system might be. Teacher must be willing to partner with the parent and work diligently with them to accomplish educational goals (MOE, 2010). The teachers must continue to find ways to communicate with parents and support the students’ progress in the classroom. This teacher parent connections must be “mutually determined by educators and parents to be important for children and are lived out in a respectful and reciprocal relationship” (Pushor, 2007, p. 6). This sub-theme is divided into two categories, please see below.

4.3.3.1.1 Representation in Teaching Staff

Among the challenges that the public school system in the GTA faces is meeting the needs of Muslim students and their parents in terms of hiring of teachers who represent the
diversity of their communities. There is also a need for full inclusion of the diverse and religious perspectives in curriculum content and teaching in the public education system. This lack of representation in teaching staff and curriculum has made it difficult to counteract the sensationalization of political events by the media. Misunderstanding and misconstrued information about Islam have left many Muslim students feeling isolated and unappreciated. A lack of role models in the teaching staff further increases this feeling of under representation.

The parents express their opinion as follows:

Maria says:

“I do believe that governments have huge problems trying to involve Muslim parents in school activities. As long as staff and the administration of schools are not making concerted efforts to include different ethnicities, the statuesque will remain and our schools will continue to be dominated by a minority of students, parents and teachers of European background. Everything about the school system is still mired in a Euro-centric lens. This is reflected clearly in the staffing; the students are diverse, the teachers overwhelmingly white. No newcomer parents will feel at ease ever, when those who teach their children know very little or nothing about their backgrounds”.

Caspe (2003) suggests that teacher preparation and professional development programs should actively promote understanding of diversity and appreciation of the benefit of inclusion. Today, parents are being organized into structures called school councils. These councils are designed to be proactive and a part of the decision-making process (Dukacz & McCarthy, 1995). It is the process of inclusion in decision making, rather than the resulting decision, that is important.

4.3.3.1.2 Representation in School Council

School councils play a vital role in the education system in Ontario. They provide a forum through which parents and other members of school communities can contribute to improving student achievement and school performance (Epstein, 1995). In 2000-2001, the Ontario government took significant steps to ensure that parents, through their school councils,
would have greater influence in their children’s education. Ontario research confirms school councils are not generally representative of the parent community (Parker & Leithwood, 2000; Corter, & Pelletier, 2004). The question is how much diversity is there in these parent councils? The answers to this question is provided by the parents in this study with the following statements. Khaulasays,

“First of all, we have to know how much freedom we have, to provide the kind of input that will lead to meaningful changes in the way school councils are elected and how they are run, so that we would know how we can be involved with the school council.

This requires that parents receive training so that they are able to participate in decision making and have input in areas pertaining to the running of schools. School councils in Canada tend to be advisory in nature versus “the real power”. Once parents received training, they will be able to participate in decision making, and had input in areas such as budget, scheduling, personnel, discipline and curriculum (Kannapel, 1995).

“The second thing is that school administrators have to educate parents how to be involved and provide them a menu of possibilities from which parents can choose”.

The menu could include matters such as budget, scheduling, personnel, discipline, and curriculum. A parent leader training would be the logical route to pursue and to make the training inclusive of parents who are already familiar with the governance of schools, along with new parents to the education system.

“The administrators of schools need to make adjustment to allow parents of faith to attend school council meetings and at the same time be able to attend to their religious duties especially in the performance of prayer during meetings”.

School council meetings could be held during times that are convenient for all parents to attend. The schools can seek input from Muslim parents in regard to when school council meetings be held and the chances of them attending. The principal can also consult the document
called the guidelines for the accommodation of religious observances and practices to organize school events. In the case of Muslims the prayer timetable is a good point of reference.

“We also need to know what provisions are made to engage our children during school council meetings”.

The provision of child minding is important as it would serve as an incentive for parents to attend. This should be communicated prior to the meeting so that parent need not worry about paying someone to look after their children while they attend school council meeting.

All the ideas discussed above are important steps for increasing parental engagement, and if acted upon would increase the level of Muslim parents’ involvement in school organized activities including school council meetings.

The issue of parents being involved in increased decision making in education by proposing that school councils become representative of the school community is further discussed by the parent Maria.

“I believe that attending school/parents council meeting is not enough. I believe in having a parent council that is based on representation from different ethnicities; a council that represents every religion in the school. This is really important because while we might not have a problem losing our language, our native language, we will have a huge problem losing our religious beliefs. So, I believe that a parent council that is based on ethnic beliefs should be meeting every three months to tackle the religious issues in the school. The parents from different religious and ethnic backgrounds should be encouraged to work together, to support the activities and programs of the schools and to do so collaboratively.

Working collaboratively through the agency of school councils is a positive step to achieve progress. Collaboration builds a spirit of unity amongst parents, allows them to get to know each other, a forum for the exchange of ideas and a path toward solving common problems. School councils serves as a common platform for parents to share a common vision of education for their children and fosters a spirit of unity in diversity. School council meetings
should send a message to parents that says what unite them is more important than dwelling on issues that are unhelpful and unproductive. It is alright to follow the religion of choice, but it is also important to cooperate on the shared vision. A vision which can be expressed as a form of cultural capital, a culture that ties people together on the basis of identifiable cultural symbols.

4.3.3.2 Cultural Capital

Academically, cultural capital is defined as forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that a person has, which give them a higher status in society. Parents provide their children with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed to succeed in the current educational system (Bourdieu, 1973).

When this definition is applied to our present study, the connection becomes clear. When one looks at the organization of our public schools, you find that the vast majority of the school staff is comprised of teachers who have little or no knowledge of the cultural backgrounds of the students they teach. Teachers are the first to admit the inadequacy of their own cultural competency and their inability to understand and work with students and parents of diverse cultural backgrounds has often led to conflicts (Hughes, 2014; Joshi, Eberly & Konzal, 2005). A knowledge of cultural capital would help teachers and administrators to engage with parents and students in the context of their cultural and organizational settings which include amongst others, learning about their traditions, beliefs and languages (Hughes, 2014). In commenting about the importance of culture in the education of their children, parents expressed their feelings as follows:

Seema says:

“The other point I want to make about involvement in school, I think culturally speaking it really depends if you are newcomer or a local, or how much you feel comfortable in your communication with the school system. I think for me, because I was raised in
Toronto, I feel comfortable expressing myself in words that the teachers know and can relate to. The cultural nuances are well understood within the pattern of communication. Other parents who are not raised in this society may not be able to clue in to a conversation about issue to do with schooling and this is frustrating for them. So there is a cultural deficit in their knowledge of oral communication amongst mainstream Canadians. There is a need for language classes to combine placement of newcomers with mainstream host families in the hope that such combination would produce mutual production of knowledge where host and newcomer would learn from each other and both would become culturally literate of each other’s’ backgrounds”.

The acquisition of cultural capital is relevant for both parents and teachers. For newcomer parents learning English and understanding mainstream patterns of conducting business are very vital to full integration and inclusion. For teachers learning about the culture of parents and appreciating unfamiliar symbols will change their attitudes of superiority of one culture over the other. When both parents and teachers accept their limited knowledge of each other and are ready to close the knowledge gap the way is made clear for positive dialogue to take place. The parent Zeenat below wonders how she would be received by her children’s school if she appears on a face veil.

“Basically, I don’t know as a Muslim parent if I would want my child’s school to be aware that I am a Muslim and that I am covering. I cover my face and that is why I take the chance to go in and meet the school staff. I have tried to introduce myself in my face cover. I would tell them of my wish to be involved in my child's life during school time.” I would also explain to the teachers and school staff that I pose no threat by covering my face. I would explain to them that this is a cultural artifact expressed as a religious requirement. There is also a cultural importance to covering my face. It is an expression of modesty in my culture where the separation of the sexes is maintain with strict adherence and enforcement”.

No other form of cultural expression has drawn so much attention and opposition as the face veil. This parent’s effort to explain the meaning of the Muslim dress is helpful to understanding why people choose to dress the way they do and not to deny them opportunities based on their appearance but on their ability to perform the job they are given. The visibility of
the female Muslim make them easy pick for discrimination even when they voluntarily come forward and ask to participate in various duties in the schools. However, parents want their daily routine to be considered when work is being assigned to them. One of the parents Ahmed alluded to this concern when he says:

“I think Muslim parents could become more involved if their daily routine is understood and attempts are made to accommodate them. The parents who would normally be attending meetings or go to school events are the mothers. These mothers are already overwhelmed with domestic chores, like cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, shopping plus attending to the needs of their children, feeding them, getting them ready for school, assisting them with homework, taking them for recreation activities, to the library, Qur’an classes and prayers at the mosque and many more”.

The mothers in the Muslim community take multiple responsibilities in childrearing as already explained above and most often are also the parents who attend meetings and volunteer in schools.

“The father most times is away working and would come home to find the children sleeping and no time to attend or participate in school activities except on the rare occasion when he can find time to attend one event in the school”.

The division of responsibilities assigned the domestic duties to the mother while the father is primarily out there trying to make a living to support his family and hardly ever attend school meetings or activities that support student learning. For the homemaker parents a number of strategies could be used to get them involved without necessarily have them go to the school and these are mentioned below.

“There are multiple ways to work with these parents: For school council meetings use skype or phone call in, so that those who are not able to attend at the school can still participate from home. Make sure the meetings are organized at a time which does not conflict with the Muslim prayer in the evening. Consult the prayer time table. The second suggestion is for schools to be conscious of the unique needs of Muslim parents, the school board guidelines for the accommodation of religious practices and observances is
a great resource for schools to consult and pay attention to as they find ways to accommodate Muslim parents and other faith communities”.

The religious accommodation guidelines contained information to help school authorities accommodate religious requests as well as a reference to the timing of meetings. In this way maximum parent attendance can be expected. That is what the equity and inclusive schooling policy tries to promote in order to create fairness in dealing with all communities.

4.3.3.3 Equity, Fairness and Inclusion

Equity in education means: giving chance to students and their parents so that they can achieve fairness in their dealings with the public schools. Offering opportunities to students due to their personal or social circumstances is the right course to take. The decisions to accord dignity and recognition of diverse people by reasons of their gender, ethnic origin is a confirmation of the value attached to Canada’s secular liberal and democratic values of fairness, equity, and respect are being validated. The provincial government wishes to extend to all students, parents, and other members of the school community of their commitment to equity and inclusion (MOE, 2009c). There are students in our public schools facing obstacles to achieving their educational potential (fairness) and that all effort should be made to ensure that the lives and realities of our students are reflected in our public institutions especially our schools whose job it is to prepare them for their role in society as engaged, productive, and responsible citizens (Dei, 2003; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004).

A lack of inclusion and fairness fuels school failure, of which dropout is the most visible manifestation implying that personal or social circumstances are obstacles to achieving their educational potential (indicating lack of fairness) (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Harper, 1997; James,
2007; MOE, 2009d). The parents in this study share their experience in regard to issues of equity and fairness. Seema says:

“Provide equitable opportunity to allow freedom of choice when it comes to attire, time away for mandatory prayers and openness to boundaries when it comes to specific topics such as learning about sexuality, intimacy and relationships.

The champions of a secular education system have often argued that public schools are inclusive, and equitable. The system allows all stakeholders to thrive in the context of their beliefs and culture. Yet there are distinct areas of disagreement especially as they relate to values, creation versus evolution and the separation of faith and state. In these matters communities of faith have fundamental differences with mainstream values of the freedom of individuals as they please. Speaking as a graduate from public education, Seema speaks of herself,

“As an insider in the system, a parent and educator myself, I find that too often the North American style of thinking, behaving, and rules of engagement are superimposed on the parents, students and community. The education system and its leadership comprising of principals, teachers, superintendents, and trustees have continually showed a complete disregard for the feelings and wishes of their supposed partner the parents. The parents, their children and communities they belong to are the ones the education system depend on to function. These are the parents and their children who attend our neighbourhood public schools and who are from a wide spectrum of cultures, faiths and ethnicities. If we are truly working towards an inclusive education system, then we must decide by whose rules and/or whose standards our public schools are being run”.

Muslim parents and people of faith are looking for facts on the ground. That is making meaning of the concept of inclusion and equity. They are asking for policy commitment to translate into policy action, action with teeth so that everyone would feel included and their values are respected and validated and Seema says:

“We know that the family is the first socialization unit of a community and if family values are being dismissed or undervalued then what else we need to talk about? There is a difference between awareness, education, and informing”.
The values of one community may not always be the same as the values others subscribe to. The way to appreciate differences is for each community to teach the other about their values around controversial subjects and Seema says,

“I would like to suggest that consideration be given to allow a well-informed Muslim teach some hot topics especially around sexuality and interactions between boys and girls, so parents feel at ease knowing that their children are being taught and being exposed to values and ideologies which resonate with our Muslim community values”.

The point is made for parents with information to share to be allowed in the class or at teacher professional development. There is so much wealth of information which is in the repository of parents which schools and teachers would find useful to incorporate in their teaching and in their resource collection. The statement is made that “ignorance breeds contempt” so schools so teachers and schools should have open minds and welcoming hands so that the experience of the parent Zeenat would be avoided. Zeenat says,

“The teacher once told me “I’m sorry; I can’t help your child? There are no more options left. I have done everything and have exhausted all options, in my tool kit nothing seem to work for this child. Okay now this teacher is supposed to call in the parents for an interview and address the situation a child in his class is facing and tried to help that parent and that child. If he does not have the answer, he should send them somewhere else where they can get help that they need. In these times, school authorities seem too careless to pay attention to their students and parents”.

The source of frustration arises when parents feel their problems are not taken seriously or ignored living not having anyone to turn to for help, as it is the case of the story Zeenat has shared above. While schools can justify their inability to solve all special needs due to limited resources and personnel, they have to find alternate solutions even if it means going outside their system. Just saying that there are no resources to assist children in their care with special needs is unacceptable. A way must be found otherwise the spirit of inclusivity the policy seem to promote is rendered meaningless if parent cannot get the help they desperately need for their children to
succeed. The perception that teachers do not care so much for the children in their care, but cares more about their pay cheques and time on the clock is validated by their inaction. Seema holds this view strongly and thinks:

“*The teachers and their supporting staff believe they are there in school to do their jobs, which means getting in at 8:30AM leave at 3:30pm, collect their paycheck? If they have a kid that is experiencing problems, or kids that were falling behind in their school work, the teachers do not seem concerned with that kid. All the teachers are concerned about are the students that are doing well and are getting ahead. They are just concerned about the ones who can do the work, who can go ahead and they give attention to that kid because this kid is doing well, this kid wants to learn, this kid is succeeding, this kid is doing the home work, but the kid who is not doing well, they weren’t trained or counseled to have that type of experience to deal with different situations*”.

The accusation that teachers are only concerned about children who are doing well and not so much attention on those who do not do well or are having difficulty coping with school work may be valid if the help they sought is not being provided. That is why maintaining ongoing dialogue rather keeping silent when requests are made is the most realistic way to go. Parents are the first to admit that they have huge role to play to achieve success for their children but they need a partner. Seema tells below what she is doing in the home front to help her children prepare for school.

“I’m not sure if this answers your question, but you know I take an active role to know if my kid is doing the home work or not, if they’re succeeding, passing or failing. I check upon my kids’ attendance, I check up on their progress and I gave the school my email address, I asked the teacher to make a phone call to me in case there is any sign of attendance issue or falling back in their studies.”

Seema concludes her statement with a request for effective communication between the home and school using social media so that she is able to monitor her children’s progress. Not all parents are so familiar and comfortable with the education system as Seema is and for those
parents who are less involved because of limitation could be encourage to attend a parent leader training one of such projects funded by the Ontario Ministry of education.

4.3.3.4 Religious Accommodations

Guidelines and Procedures for the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices and Observances, Toronto District School Board (TDSB, 2000a) “Explains in detail the religious accommodations that are necessary in schools in the Toronto District School Board”. Many religious observances common to Muslims are represented in this document. There are guidelines on prayers, diet, attire, holidays, laws and observances are explained in order for schools to make appropriate accommodations for students and parents upon request. How this document has worked for parents will be the discussion that follows starting with the parent Zeenat.

“I would like to help select foods which are permissible for Muslims to eat. We call it (halal). I made myself available to volunteer in any capacity the school think I could be useful. However, I explained that there will be times when I would have to pray and would stop whatever I am doing at that time to offer my prayers. I further requested that meeting schedules be organized in conjunction with prayer times, otherwise I or the other Muslim parents would not be able to attend. I brought the issue of religious accommodation upfront because I wanted the school to understand where I am coming from and the need for respect as I strive to fulfil my religious duties. Fulfilling religious duties is not a matter of choice it is something we have to do. The support I need from the school is for them to have an understanding and respect for our religious needs, because if they have respect for my religion. I believe they would respect my views and they would endeavor to organize activities, and set up appointment times for interviews that are appropriate for me”.

The three issues that are important to this parent is the call for halal or religious approved food to be served in the cafeteria, accommodating prayers during meetings and creating positions for parents to volunteer in school based activities. Again the importance of religion is emphasized and schools are asked to pay attention in this important matter. The overriding
concern for parents is that their children are successful in school and for that to happen parents
would do whatever they can to help at home and engage in school based activities that support
student success. The next parent Seema also endorses the views of Zeenat when she says she
would do her part to support her child.

“When I see that there is an issue going on in my kid’s life or education, or where
they are lacking in their school work and needed any help that’s where I am focused. I do
not go looking for documents to find out about my kids progress. I'm allowed unfettered
access to information. I haven't done research to that extent, but if it involves my kids, if
it involves their education or any situation in which they are involved, I take the time to
investigate to learn about it, and to be educated about the situation”.

This parent (Seema) would go the distance or would do whatever it takes to educate
herself on any topic or subject in order to give her child the tools for success in her education.
Parents obviously have a natural drive to help their children and they use different strategies to
accomplish what they desire for their children. In the following section parents discuss the kinds
of strategies they have used to engage with the schools and to assist their children.

4.3.3.5 Parent Education and Training

Parent Education and Training is about working collaboratively with families. Schools
and communities must work together to improve opportunities for excellence for all students in
education system. Student success is achieved when all stakeholders understand their
responsibilities and are prepared to work collaboratively to make their students get the education
they need to succeed. The schools should demonstrate a commitment to reach all families, assist
them to acquire the right inform so that they can build positive futures for their children.

The parents in this study expressed their hopes for their children’s future in the responses
they gave in the interviews, I conducted with them and the following transcripts represent their
opinions about the issue of parent education. Fauzia expressed her views in the following manner:

“I think parent education is very important. There should be more seminars and education for parents to understand how the education system works. This training is not only for Muslim parents, it should be for all parents”.

The Parent Leadership Training Institute of MENTORS in Toronto helps parents become the leaders they would like to be for their children and their communities. The seven weeks workshops offer detailed information on a variety of subjects. Parent leaders learn strategies for effecting change in their neighbourhood schools so that student outcomes can be achieved and student success realized. Participants at the parent leader training vary in age, in racial background, culture and education levels. The training benefitted from representation of a diverse community of families, working together for benefit of their children and communities. Through these interactive workshops, parents develop bonding and support for each other.

Fauzia has ideas around promoting unity among parents when she says:

“We need to send this message out there that all parents should be treated as parents. I don’t like the word Muslim Parent, the reason for that when people are labeling you with different adjectives, they are discriminating against you. When I walk into the school, they should not see me as Muslim parent, they should see me as a parent with diverse needs, ok. So, I think this message should be taken to all Muslims, Muslim parents. It’s good for them to be involved in their children’s education because religiously, culturally, morally we have to be involved but at the same time, people should not be discriminating against you because of your religious beliefs. If you have certain desires, certain needs whatever you need, put them forward through different campaigns, different committees, groups whatever, but you should be seen as a parents without distinction”.

All parents share something in common with regard to their involvement. There is a slight variation to the extent of involvement as well as areas of interest each parent is committed to. They all want their children to get the education they need to succeed in life. The training would help parents become more familiar with the education system. The knowledge they gain
in the training would motivate them to become active in school and home based activities all to the benefit of their children. When parents gained knowledge about the education system they are more confident to share with others and would respond in the manner Zeenat is suggesting. Zeenat says,

“What we need to do, there should be more education, the school should be more open to listen to parents but the problem is that instead of listening to parents the school occasionally label parents as trouble makers”.

Paying attention to parents’ concerns is vital to create a positive dialogue amongst parents and with school authorities. Ignoring parents places a wedge between the school and home, frustrating any possibility of cooperation and participation in school activities. What is the way forward? The solution is provided by a parent Rehan.

“I will say we should be more familiar with public education, there should be more information materials, resources, booklets in different languages, letting people know what their rights are because people don’t know at this point in time what their rights are, ok, how things can be molded, how things can be more harmonized”.

The school can work with parents effectively when information is provided which explains how to navigate the school system translated in the languages of the parents. A parent concern protocol develop by each board would help parents follow the process for launching a complaint, navigating several levels of decision making until the matter is resolved. The myriad of information available for parents to read can be overwhelming and it would take a huge effort by school officials to get parent to understand what it is they are communicating to them. One of the parents Ahmed is suggesting that:

“There should be more conferences, there should be more seminars where parents learn about school policies. I don’t think that everybody knows about these policies. There should be more awareness about how to go about seeking solutions to a problem that arise from the school or the classroom and between a teacher and student”.
The need for clarity of all issues is demanded so that policies and procedures are better understood and parents would not be in doubt about the meaning of the information sent home. Policy document should also be made available to parents. The particular document which is vital for Muslim parents to have in their possession is the religious accommodation guidelines, which is the next theme coming up for discussion.

4.3.4 Strategies Employed towards Engagement

During the interview with my research participants, parents identified and mentioned different ways in which they have been involved with the schools their children attend. The approaches employed by the parents are similar for some of them while others have mentioned unique ways of their involvement. The figure below is a presentation of the themes that emerged from the data describing the strategies of Muslim parents towards their engagement with schools.
Figure 6. Themes Related to Strategies Employed towards Engagement
Strategies in this context refer to the ways, approaches and methods the parents have used to get involved in their children’s education at home and in their schools. I present now the data using the three main sub-themes: Home based involvement, school based involvement and community based involvement.

4.3.4.1 Home-Based Engagement

There are many reasons for believing that what parents do at home plays an important role in shaping children’s school-related skills. Home-based activities and attitudes, such as having high expectations, talking together about school, building work habits and a positive approach to learning, or reading together or monitoring homework all contribute to create chances for student success. The parents in this study share similar beliefs and are providing insights in the strategies they employ with the statements that follow starting with that of Seema:

“Yeah, at the end of the day and on regular basis, me and the kids would engage in physical exercises such as skipping, doing a learning circle, in our faith, it is called Taaleem or Halaqa. It is a physical and mental exercise involving, listening, understanding, comprehending our holy book the Quran and contemplating it verses. It is family time and spiritual time for the children a special moment to connect with their faith. We all would sit down in a circle to learn and discuss prophetic sayings and actions and discuss how we can apply lessons from the sayings and actions of our prophet to our lives. I think if you transfer these skills into academia even at elementary level what it teaches children to do is listen carefully, to think before acting. There are other things that we do at home. I give them specific amount of time to play with their IPads or work on a laptop. They can decide if they want to go on YouTube, watch a story and act it out. I also have a hidden agenda of getting them to learn different skills like literacy and numeracy skills. So these are the things that we do pretty much on daily basis including using technology as well. My children are encouraged to go online and try interactive activities from reading to gaming to supporting them in completing their homework”.

Seema’s narrative above, highlights how she maintains a balance life style for her family. She encourages her children to engage in physical exercise to maintain a healthy lifestyle. She combines physical health with the spiritual well-being by organizing a Study Circle in
her home to enhance spiritual bonding and communal prayers. She teaches religious study to build understanding of religious texts and their application to a person’s daily living. Seema believes that religion gives discipline to a person’s conduct, provide focus and direction so that he/she is not confused. It shapes character so that a person can distinguish between good and evil. Most importantly religion provides guidance to that which is good and takes a person away from that which is evil and destructive to life.

When the family is engaged concurrently in regular spirituality and in worldly activities, they would live a balance life and a good life. Children growing up in such an environment build hope and confidence. Parents in these circumstances can manage matters with minimal difficulties. The occasional anxieties of parenting will always manifest especially as they relate to school performance in tests and exams. The next theme address the anxieties parents have from time to time and how they went about addressing them.

**4.3.4.1.1 Parenting**

Parents seem to be experiencing increasing pressure in these times regarding their children’s education. Everyone wants their child to read well, be at (or near) the top of the class academically, and thrive socially at school. The increased emphasis on standardized testing (e.g. EQAO) only exacerbates the anxiety for parents who now receive specific ‘measurable’ feedback on how their children are performing in comparison to other students (Rodrigues, 2014). Each parent in this study expressed their parenting experience in regard to their children’s schooling at home and at school. Imaam described it as follows:

“*My involvement at the home front has been to engage my kids on a variety of activities: sports, debate on topics at their levels, matters of religious nature, character building, science, current affairs, the environment and culture. I tried to challenge them to think*
straight, to be creative, and to be problems solvers. I tried to learn from them and them to learn from me.

At the home front, my involvement begins in the morning with getting the children ready for school and making sure that all their needs are in place before I send them off. At the end of the day, I will check my children's bags to see if there are items from school that should be attended to. This included homework or anything that the teacher wanted the parents to know about, respond to sign and return to school. In addition, I will normally sit with my kids after they have rested, to talk about what the school day has been like, what they have learned, and what help they would need with their homework. As a parent I would set time to read to each child and with all their children as a group. I am focused in monitoring the progress of my children, so that I am fully informed with what goes on both at home and in school”.

As this parent noted, “involvement for him means the totality of the time he spends in his children's schools as well as the time he spends with them at home.” This is a family that is engaged in learning activities involving helping the children with their homework, play and having fun together during leisure time. Progress is monitored to ensure that difficulties are minimized with extra help. So here we see a parent is on top of what is going on in school and is ready to jump in when it becomes necessary to assist his children. The level of engagement this parent has shared is also echoed by the next parent Haleem.

“Parental involvement means to me getting my children ready for school. At home making sure they have proper food, have enough sleep, so that they are well rested in the morning. That the children have a healthy breakfast, a pack healthy lunch to take to school, they wear clothing that is clean and appropriate for the weather condition. Involvement means that I have daily debriefing sessions with my children asking questions about the school day, checking their bags to see what has been sent home from school, to assist them with their homework, to read to them and them to me. Involvement means taking them to the library on the weekends assist them with their school projects and check to verify that it has been done properly”.

The strategy this parent employs is making sure that children follow a routine which involves rest, eat, homework, study and play and going to bed on time. The parent sees to it that everything the children need for school are in their bags before they leave. Extra-curricular activities are encouraged and added to the routine. This would normally include going to the
library and, having open conversations on different topics. The next parent Rehan also run a tight
ship at her home and has this to say.

“I am involved in all aspects of my children’s education. I work with them at home,
reading, teaching and supervising their school work. I visit their school and volunteer in
the class to assist the teacher and reinforcing the work I have been doing with the
children at home”.

In addition to working with children to maintain their daily routines at home and school,
Rehan also take
s the time to volunteer in school and in particular assisting in her children class. By working with the class teacher Rehan gained valuable information about the curriculum
which she uses to assist her children with their homework. This is an example for other parents
to follow and overtime homework activities would be less painful for parents and their children
because parents would have new information and new strategies for processing the contents on
various subjects in the curriculum.

4.3.4.1.2 Helping with Homework

Common sense dictates that parents who pay attention to their children’s home work are
better informed about their children’s education and have better understanding of what their
children are learning in school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995 & 1997; Ng, Kenney-Benson
& Pomerantz, 2004).

Additionally children who complete homework on time are more likely to develop good
work habits and in the long run would develop a positive attitude towards work (Epstein & Van,
2001; Kohl, Lagua & McMahon, 2002; Simon, 2004). The parents in this study have made
homework completion a priority for their children. They have been involved from the get go with
their children and here they share the extent of their involvement in the following statements:
Haleem says:
“My involvement is limited to “Looking at homework, signing homework books, attending student teachers interviews”.

This parent is not so much engaged with helping in homework but does attend to other activities that also have important value to student success. Other parents have much more extensive involvement and the parent Imam has some opinions in regard to what it means for him to be involved.

“If we want our children to be successful in school, family involvement is important. For me I try to demonstrate my involvement by showing an interest in the work my children bring home from school and by getting involved. I believe that active involvement with homework is one way I communicate to my children the fact that school work is important and needs to be taken seriously. The work I do with my children begins with encouraging them to complete their homework to the best of their ability. I would explain what they don’t understand and would leave it to them to provide answers. To help them to come up with the answers I would pose questions to tease the answers out of them. In this way they are also learning valuable critical thinking and problems solving skills. I would urge them to watch less television and to spend more time studying and reading”.

Showing interest in his children’s work, and supervising the completion of homework is his message to his children that he cares about their education and he cares about their success. Imam also believes that the role of the parent in homework is to explain so that the child understand what he is required to do but never to do the work for them. He believes that children should be trained to become critical thinkers and problem solvers. These are important skills which he believes would work in their child’s favour as he grows up and eventually will be faced with responsibilities for which they will be called upon to make decisions.

4.3.4.1.3 Decision Making

Decision making for some of these parents is limited to home based engagement and Involves parent assisting at home their children in a variety of projects: This includes assisting with homework, taking the children to the library, involving them in recreational activities and
Qur’an classes in the local mosques. A section of the parents in this study thinks the school system has not engaged them sufficiently to a level where they would become part of the decision process in the schools. These parents want real engagement which will enable them to participate in decisions about the schools’ programs and activities that will impact their own and their children’s educational experiences. They believe all parents must be given opportunities to contribute to ideas and offer suggestions on ways to improve their schools. Having families as true stakeholders in the school creates feelings of ownership of the school’s programs and activities (Pushor, 2007, 2012, 2013; Epstein, 1988). Example of one parent in this study who has participated in decision making in her children’s school is shared in the following statement: Fauzia says:

“My involvement in decision making at the school level has been in context of the school council. The principal would bring issues around policies, curriculum and administration either as for our information only or for our approval. Schools are pretty well on their own and parent rarely have any say in what goes on in the confines of district school board rooms”.

Parent participation in school council can also be “a means of fostering the growth and development of parents as people” (Powell, 2001). Parental involvement contributes to parents’ feelings of self-worth and competence, especially among low-income and minority populations. Parents who participate in school based activities tend to feel both vested in what happens at school and more effective in their roles as parents. This discussion is taken further to the next theme which is focused on school-based engagement.

4.3.4.2 School-Based Engagement

The Ministry of Education identifies community engagement as absolutely vital to effective governance (MOE, 2009c). Furthermore, the Public Schools’ Board in the Greater Toronto Area all identified community engagement as a strategic priority that need to be
addressed (TDSB 2000b). To address this issue, parents shared their experiences of their engagement with the boards in their areas. The first parent to share her thought on this theme is Fauzia and she says,

“When it comes to involvement in their school, there are different ways, depends on your own expertise and your own skills, you can get involved in school trips, assisting teachers in class and homework or may be helping them in different activities, to run some fundraising campaigns. It also depends on what type of involvement school needs from the parents, obviously you as a parent wouldn’t go to school and start teaching kids but definitely through parent council or parent teacher meeting you express your concerns, you can give your feedback and you can show teachers that you are there whenever they need you”.

Fauzia thinks there is a menu of activities parents could choose from if they wish to participate in schools and she listed what they are in her narrative so she is saying that parents do have options and they only have to pick what is possible and time they have available. Fauzia is calling on other parents not to be shy to speak with teachers about whatever concerns or suggestions they may have. She believes involvement in school councils is important as this the venue for parental dialogue with teachers and principals. Similar sentiments are expressed by Imam who shared his involvement with this statement:

“Well, my active involvement has been in the school council, as chair of the school council I worked with the principal, to set the agenda for the monthly meeting. I am present in the school for any special function for which my attention is required. I read the mail that is coming to the school council as the chair, so I do go through a lot of mail and then sort out what is useful and then throw out what is not useful. I also participate in fund-raising activities like the movie night, the talent show and the bake sale. These are all activities organized to raise funds for the school, so that the teachers can apply for these funds for certain projects, in their classes such as field trips, purchase of computers, or other resources they deem as priority. So this is an example of my school based engagement”.

Imam gained access to valuable information in his role as school council chair. He developed close relationships with the school principal, vice-principal and teachers in a manner consistent with his position. The benefit accrued from being so close to school authorities was
immense and his children told him they were given special attention they have previously not received. The next to share his strategy for involvement is Ahmad and he provided the statement that follows.

“I tried to give a minimum of five hours each time I volunteered to do anything at the school. My involvement was limited to work in my children’s classes and at fundraising events in the gym or at family math or assisting with organizing cultural events with parents from the diverse cultures of students in the school”.

This parent’s involvement is limited to volunteering at school activities of various selection chosen by school staff as priority at a particular time in the school calendar. The next contribution on strategies is provided by Ammara.

“I started to volunteer in my children’s school as a computer lab assistant. I have a degree in Networking, which is equal to an IT degree here in Canada. Initially I was not taken seriously by the computer teacher. Whenever he has problems with the computers he would struggle for a while then he would try to look for help. For me it was easy I would just spend few minutes and the problem is solved. He was shocked and surprised that I am able to operate a computer let alone fix it”.

Teachers do not readily accept the professional knowledge of parents who receive their training outside of Canada. The story of Ammara testifies to this mode of thinking and this is why we have in this society foreign trained professionals driving taxis, working as security guards and fast food joints, construction workers and other menial jobs that they can find. When school systems make the effort to communicate with parents or do a professional audit they would quickly realize the wealth of knowledge there is amongst the parents of their students. Parent knowledge is readily available for schools to tap from. All it takes is communication with parents and the sharing would begin (Pushor, 2007 & 2012).

4.3.4.2.1 Communicating

One of the best ways that parents can help their children succeed in school is to be involved with their education. This starts with communicating well with their child’s teacher.
Basically, good communication involves meeting with the teacher, being a positive and courteous partner in their child’s learning, and keeping the lines of communication open in various ways throughout the year (Powell, 2001). Epstein (1995) developed a framework of six major types of parent involvement with their children’s learning. Her framework includes school officials communicating with parents and parents communicating with school officials. The parent narratives that follow explain how the parents communicated with school officials starting with Fauzia who says:

“What I usually do, I wrote a note to my child’s teacher in the agenda or just send a piece of note, teacher calls me and if there is any concern that we cannot resolve over the phone then I personally visit because I know teachers are busy too. They have limited time, they have to be in classes. So, I am mindful of their time and also of my own time. I will try to resolve things over the phone if there is any concern and if things cannot be resolved over the phone then I will go in person”.

Communication for this parent is carried out in various ways: through exchange of notes, phone calls, and face to face. The next parent Haleem share his own communication strategy.

“One of the teachers actually invited me to speak to the students because I do poetry as well so I have to read from my book of poems so on different occasions so yeah so once I was invited to do Arabic calligraphy for some students and recently another one of my daughters was asked if I could come and do a presentation on my work in chaplaincy in the prison so like different ways I have been communicating with teachers on different levels and generally we have a good rapport”.

This parent communicated through class visits and presenting ideas from his writings with the children in the class where his child belong. Haleem also shared his work as chaplain to the class. This level of sharing is appreciated for it build a positive rapport between teacher and parents. Moving along on this path another parent Khaulia shared her strategy for communicating with school official in following words.
“Communication between my children’s teachers and me is excellent. In fact one of the teacher of my children has been very involved with my family. She is a teacher I would describe as very friendly to parents. The teacher knows what is happening in our home because my kids, they go and tell her. Similarly anything that happened in class my kids would come and tell me. So communication is good on both directions.”.

This two-way communication, allows sharing of information, concerns, and feelings. It establishes good rapport, and building understanding, trust, and a sense of collaboration, all of which contribute to the teacher supporting this parent. The next parent Maria makes her own contribution to this discussion and she says:

“Communication is happening with my child teacher is happening quite frequently in a positive tone. I can send him notes, I can send them an email, but not a lot of phone calls or face-to-face meeting, only if it is an issue”.

Two-way communication does take place here through the exchange of notes only but that is sufficient for this parents to establish good relationship with the teacher of his child. Next on the communication list is Nasreen. She says,

“I find teachers aren’t communicating well. They treat it as a job. Should we take on anger on children? School systems make frustration. Teachers forget to send letters home and teach about puberty. They forgot to ask for permission. It shows teachers are not responsible, nor have respect for others”.

Nasreen has less positive experience in communication with the teacher of her child. She calls for teachers to show respect for parents and for a fairer treatment of students. The next parent to share on the issue of communication is Imam.

“I consider it my responsibility to make the work of my children’s teachers easier. The steps I have taken towards this end was through meetings with the teachers, talk and exchange ideas with them, make suggestions, listen to what they have to say and they listen to what I have to say”.

This parent uses one on one and face-to-face communication strategy. Imam is open-minded and comes across as an active listeners in his dealing with teacher of his child. The next
typology of involvement is volunteering and it has already been mentioned how some of these parents have been involved through volunteering in various capacities.

4.3.4.2 Volunteering

Many parents spend countless hours at their children’s schools volunteering with a wide variety of activities in and around the child's school. There are many good reasons for parents to volunteer at school. It is a great way to show their children that they take an interest in their education, and it sends a positive message to them that parents consider school a worthwhile cause to support and be part of. Each of the parents would now share their experiences on how they have been volunteering. Imam says:

“*My volunteer effort is important, because it helps me to channel my energies where I could be more effective. I volunteer as a fundraiser. I concentrated my energy in fundraising so that the school will be successful. I also volunteer on trips and I helped the teachers to supervise the kids*”.

Imam has chosen fundraising because this is an area he is most effective. Also assisted on field trips to give a helping hand and supervision of the children. The next parent that has volunteered is Ahmed.

“I tried to give a minimum of five hours each time I volunteered to do anything at the school. My volunteer effort was limited to working in my children’s classes and at fundraising events in the gym or at family math or assisting with organizing cultural events with parents from the diverse cultures of students in the school”.

The volunteer involvement for Ahmed is in fundraising and in the class as a teacher assistant and in organizing cultural events whereas Ammara says:

“I started to volunteer in my children’s school as a computer lab assistant. I volunteered with the grade one teacher for the whole year, every day, from 1 o’clock to 3 o’clock, helping her to prepare her lessons, for reading with the children and helping with other stuff and it gave me a good idea about the education system. I came to learn about activities such as valentine which encourages love, affection and dating between the opposite sex and same sex. Another example of an activity I was involved with was
Halloween, with its costumes and decorations. All these activities are new for me and I found them a bit disturbing.”.

Ammara’s volunteering is more on the technical side. Working primarily with computers because that is her background. However her experience working with the computer teacher was not very positive, but she overcame the obstacles and was allowed to use her skills as computer engineer to trouble shoot and fix computers whenever they breakdown. She did her work primarily for the benefit of the students. Next to share is Khaul:

“I am volunteering at my children’s school in several activities: for example when they have Art Night. My son he likes to draw and he likes to participate in Art activities and also when they have sports activities like soccer, I like to be there to volunteer with that too. I also like to be involved as a volunteer on field trips”.

This parent volunteers in activities that her son participates in and this way she offers her support and encouragement so that he would do well. Like other parents she also volunteers on field trips and assist the teachers with supervision of the children. An important activity many parents are engaged in is advocacy. For some of these parents, engaging in advocacy for themselves and their children is what occupy a good chunk of their time, moving from one issue to the next.

4.3.4.2.3 Advocating

Parents play a vital role in their children’s education. From the moment a child is born, parents become advocates for them. They steer them away from danger, make sure they are healthy, find them the best possible care and even advocate for them when they are unable to speak for themselves (Parker, Phillips & Bedard, 2008).

Once a child starts school, the advocacy continues: Children may need parent to help them solve problems, to find extra support or be their “voice” in the system. This kind of
advocacy is expected of all parents – it is not confrontational, it is helpful (Foster, Rude, & Grannan, 2012). What follows are narratives of parents advocacy effort in support of their children. Zeenat says:

“I don’t know if my involvement can be considered as advocacy. I would say that advocacy for me has involved my asking the teachers to assist my children to understand each unit they teach. I would advocate for fairness in treatment between my children and other children in class. I would advocate for religious accommodation so that our Muslim children can practice their Islamic faith in school without fear of intimidation”.

This parent understands advocacy to involve seeking assistance from teachers so that her children would get extra help with class work, negotiating with teachers for fair treatment of students and allowing students to pray upon request. Another parent Ammara says:

“Yeah. I always stress how important education is and I want my kids to graduate, I want them to graduate at every stage of their school lives: in elementary, in middle school and in high school. These are the stages that are necessary for every child to graduate. It is a basic foundation for success in education. We need to stress on that. That is why I chose to advocate for my children in order to encourage them to work hard and show seriousness in their education. Of course if the child is not capable, and not all children will graduate, then you have to give them other options. There are variety of ways and means to advocate for your child and this can be done at different levels of transformation”.

Advocacy for this parent is working for the successful transition of her children from elementary to high school and beyond. The parent Fauzia says

“It is always important for me to be an advocate for my children’s education. As a parent I have been an advocate with the school on a number of issues ranging from textbooks to negotiating about homework, explaining to my children why it is important to have homework and regularly following up with schoolwork. Making sure my children are comfortable with school and they are not being bullied, teachers are not harassing them. I mean sometimes teachers are making foolish comments. It is in this regard that I think Advocacy becomes more important when dealing with specific cases such as the time when one of my children was discouraged from taking a certain subject because the teacher was thinking that he shouldn’t be taking this course and I was astonished to hear that. Teachers have no right to do that, especially, in front of the whole class to humiliate my child. Another area I have done some advocacy is in regard to, how they are marking the tests, paying particular attention to the comments the teachers are writing down and
if something you find in the report card is not understandable for you, you can highlight that. I remember, one time I got my daughter’s report card and the comments were not matched with the grades she got. I was so surprised and I thought that this is not the report card for my daughter. That’s why I went back to school and I said, “This is ridiculous; your comments are so contradictory to each other, you need to explain this to me” and then eventually they changed the report card. So, they changed everything in the report card and then the principal apologized and she said, “yeah, I do understand, we should have not done like that” and then I realized and I made my daughter aware of it that all the teachers are not there to support her and I told her, this is practical life and you need to understand. If you think you do not deserve what you got then you need to stand for that.”

Advocacy for this parent is aimed at correcting injustices done to her child over course selection, inconsistencies in marking tests, grade assignment not matching comments on report card. Parent was assertive in challenging her child’s teacher to explain why her daughter did poorly in the report card. Not satisfied with the answers she was getting, she took matters up to the principal and forced the principal to admit that an injustice has been done and demanded that a reversal of grade be entered into her child’s report card with a much better grade and this was done. Another parent is Khaul who says:

“I train my children to advocate for themselves, to take ownership of their future. I want them to make independent decisions about their lives choices, because this is about their future this is about their careers and this is about their future aspirational goals. So what I usually recommend to them is to make a future plan about what exactly they want to be and where exactly they want to be after five years or ten years. Whichever course of action they are going to take now, it is for them to pursue by themselves. Also my children are older now as they are in high school. So I want them to be independent. I still do things for them when they are young. I would go to the principal’s office for their bus passes, but now I expect them to be independent, to go to the principal or vice-principal and speak for themselves on issues such as changing their course schedule or registering or dropping courses. They don't have to come to me and say, “Mom, can you go and change my course in our schedule no, they need to go and talk to their own Vice Principal”.

Advocacy for this parent is left in the hands of her children themselves. She wants them to be independent, determine their priorities and make their own decisions.
are normally impressed with parents who give freedom of choice to their children and also show active involvement in school matters like helping with fundraising to support school programs in need of additional resources.

4.3.4.2.4 Raising Funds

Fundraiser is a great way to raise essential funds for schools, fundraising has always been used by schools to provide extra services and activities, such as additional playground equipment, field trips and sports uniforms (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives [CCPA] & Froese-Germain, 2006). Fundraising is used for the extras that parents and staff want for their schools. Many schools now have to raise their own funds for activities and supplies that once were considered basic necessities, and parent volunteers are essential to organizing and chaperoning these fundraising events and other school activities (MOE, 2012). The parents would now share their experiences in fundraising efforts starting with the parent Ammara who says:

“The School created opportunities for fundraising by asking us to approach businesses in the area for support in material and finance.” The school also encouraged us to use opportunities in our places of work to seek donations to support school initiatives”.

There are a range of possibilities parents were asked to explore to seek funds in support of school programs. They were encouraged to raise funds even from their places of work. There was project specific fundraising initiative like what Ahmed mentioned below.

“I and other parents raise funds so that we can provide more computers for the school.”

This type of fundraising initiative has greater chances of success since there would be a section of people who would easily provide funding because of their interest and affiliation with computers. There were other fundraising activities which other parents are engaged in and Imam explains which fundraising he was involved in.
“I also participated in fund-raising activities involving children and their parents like movie night, talent show and bake sales. These are all activities geared to raise funds for the school so that the teachers can apply for these funds for certain projects in their classes as well as to pay for field trips. This is an example of how I have been involved in school fundraising.”

The parents involved in fundraising also assume responsibility for funding projects teachers submit for funding. Their role as funders gave them special status and respect from school authorities. The parents who normally are engaged in fundraising are in most cases also serving as members of the school councils. The activities of the council and the role parents play in it would now be the theme of the next section.

4.3.4.2.5 Serving on School Council

Every school in Ontario is required to have a school council. The majority of school council members must be parents (The Ontario Gazette, 2010). In this section, parents tell their stories about their involvement or lack of involvement with school councils in the schools where their children attend. One of the parents, Imam says:

“Well, my active involvement has been in the school council, as chair of the school council I worked with the principal, to set the agenda for the monthly meeting. I am present in the school for any special function that for which my attention is required, I read the mail that is coming to the school council as the chair, so I do go through a lot of mail and then sort out what is useful and then throw out what is not useful. I also participate in fund-raising activities like movie night, talent show and bake sale. All these activities were organized to raise funds for the school, so that the teachers can apply for these fund to buy equipment, organize field trips buy resources and support class projects. These are just examples of my involvement in school. At home I am very much engaged with my kids, helping them with their homework and making sure that they understand the material they are working on. Otherwise I am just engaged in monitoring their activities and ensuring that they progress successfully through the grades”.

Imam’s position as chair of the school council gave him access to important information about the work of school councils. His position as chair also gave him access to senior school authorities with whom he meets regularly. Under his leadership Imam was involved in
fundraising efforts that brought much needed funds to support class activities. Other parents have also participated in school council work and were involved in fundraising and other school initiated activities. The experience of school council membership is shared by another parent called Seema says:

“I have time availability from my work schedule. I do go to attend the community school meetings where they are informing parents through the board what changes are happening in the school. Currently my children are going to work recall of farmer school because our community just have an open school so I became a little bit more involved as a participant giving my voice and feedback to some of the proposed changes they were planning. I attend school council meetings during the course of the school year to become aware of some of the changes that are being proposed”.

Seema does attend school council meetings to keep herself informed about what is going on in the school of her children. She also manages to devote some time to other school based activities. The other parents offer opinions about their involvement in school council duties. In her contribution, Fauzia says:

“I was involved with the school council and I was even elected to the presidency of the council and held this position for one year. As chair of the council I was frequently summoned to the school to meet with the principal or invited to attend meetings with other executive members of the school council. Also as chair I do attend special functions like graduation ceremony and cultural events”.

Fauzia was also chair of her school council and performed functions similar to those of Seema. It is encouraging that some of the parent in this study have been active in school related activities and also served in leadership capacities. So far in this study information that connects parent engagement and student success continues to emerge and evidence of support of student of these parents has been clearly articulated. The parents who serve on school council have also been known to be involved in other educational activities with their children both at home and in school. The next and final parent to share ideas about his involvement with school council is Ahmed and he says:
“I am a member of the school council where matters to do with the school’s programs are discussed and action taken. Attempts are made at trying to reach out to other parents who are not so much involved. I also assist the class teacher by reading to my child and helping him in math and computer”.

The participants in this study have to some extent demonstrated limited familiarity with the education system and have built enough confidence and the motivation to be able to participate in school based activities either voluntarily or in response to an invitation by the schools to get involved some of their programs.

However there are many parents who have not been engaged with their schools. Ahmed is suggesting that these parents be encouraged through various means so that they are convinced as to why they should be involved. One strategy the schools could use is doing outreach to these parents in their communities and on their language. Outreach would not only foster the entry of parents into the schools, but would recognize the fact that Parents are an effective resource for improving student achievement; furthermore, parent involvement has a positive effect on students, teachers and schools (MOE, 2009a & 2009b). Many researchers (Epstein 1988; Pushor, 2008) maintain that the more parents are involved in their children’s education, the greater the effect on achievement. Parents who monitor their children’s homework and school attendance into junior and senior high school continue to influence achievement. Family members help their children with homework assignments and other school-related activities by using Parent tool kit (The Council of Ontario Directors of Education [CODE], 2012). Other services outside of schools can be tapped to support parent effort and schools can facilitate the link to community services through a process of collaboration with those services. The next theme collaborating with community would expand on how this is done.
Collaborating with the community—schools can help to link families with support services offered by other agencies, such as healthcare, cultural events, tutoring services, and after-school child-care programs. One of the parents Maria Says:

“My home based engagement involves a regular check in to see how my children are doing in school, helping them with their homework, helping them get ready for school. As to my school based involvement, I used to be involved by attending school council meetings. But I do not do that anymore”.

The pattern of involvement for all these parents so far seem the same. Each one of them is involved in one or more activity with their children’s schools and most of them are members of school council. Ahmed says:

“I teach my children to be responsible and to look at education beyond school, to focus at other responsibilities in the home, like doing their chores and helping out in whatever activities the family undertakes. They are also encourage to help others in the community who are less fortunate than us. They are reminded about bigger societal responsibilities like volunteering in senior’s homes, in shelters, in food banks and library”.

Teaching children to be involved in chores at home prepares them for life long duties they would be performing as adult in the future. They in turn would pass on what they learn about domestic chores to their own children and the cycle would repeat itself with future generations. Children are also taught to take on community responsibilities like serving in seniors’ homes, food banks and volunteering in libraries. This commitment to community service and encouraging students to do their part in serving the vulnerable in their community has become an important requirement to completing academic work.

4.3.4.3 Community Based – Engagement

The Toronto District School Board “believes that education is a shared responsibility among parents, the community, students, staff and that by working together we all contribute to the improvement of our schools and the success of our students (TDSB, 2005). In addition to local involvement of school-based parent councils, the board has ten community advisory
committees that provide an opportunity for parental and community input and advocacy on policy and programs (TDSB, 2013b). The theme that falls under this classification is community collaborating below.

4.3.4.3.1 Community Collaborating

The relationships between governments and community groups are changing. It is no longer acceptable for government to “just” consult with the community on the important issues affecting them. Government and community must increasingly work collaboratively to make real changes. Collaboration has been defined as “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem or issue can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (Austin & Hesselbein, 2002). Engaging parents and community members in collaboration is the acknowledgment that governments do not have all the pieces of the puzzle. Therefore, they need to collaborate with parents who have different pieces of that same puzzle – pieces that are just as credible and are based on parents’ own experience derived from raising their children (Gray, 1989). Community collaboration is also about changing who influences policy formation in the education system. Educators must develop ways of engaging parents and community members successfully in developing the goals of their schools. For example, families should be encouraged to participate in all facets of their child's education (MOE, 2010). How parents have worked with schools in the context of their membership in the community would be the subject of discussion in the narratives that follow beginning with the parent Ammara who says:

“When my son was in grade 4, he did something silly, but the teacher said, whatever you (my son) did, it comes from your country, it comes from your culture, so I had to stop this kind of talk. The way I tried to stop this, was by mobilizing all the parents in the school. I ask them to join me so that I can stand up to this teacher because it is not for her to make such disrespectful comment about my culture. If my son did something wrong like he copied whatever his friend was doing, it has nothing to do with us as a culture. It is not a
practice we condoned as parents nor would our culture condoned it. I don’t like everything bad a child does to be framed as a practice of our culture, our religion or our background. So, when I and the other parents in the community stood up with me to stop this teacher and demanded a retraction of the negative comments about our culture, she listens and guess what, the teacher apologized and then everything changed. So this is an example of how we parents can collaborate to fight injustice and racist remarks”.

The teacher attributed this child’s bad behavior to her cultural background and the parent felt offended by this reference as it comes across as racist and condescending. The parent Ammara mobilized the other parents in the community to confront the teacher. Parents collaborated on this issue to fight what they considered an injustice and an insult to Ammara’s culture. The teacher retracted her comment and learned a hard lesson that warned her that messing around with a parent’s culture and religion would result in serious consequences for such a slip.

Another issue which galvanized the community was the issue around the Creating Safe and Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13). Parents including Muslims, Christians and those of other faiths were adamantly opposed to this bill. Bill 13 “requires school boards to prevent and address inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour among students in public schools. These behaviours include bullying, discrimination and harassment. The new law promotes respect and understanding for all students regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability or any other factor” (Broten, 2012). In the narratives that follow are discussions arising from parents’ opposition to Bill 13, starting with Maria.

“Our moment of collaboration was heighten when a fellow Muslim sent us an email about the Ministry of Education bill on human sexuality was first introduced. It was a shock to many parents when they learned about (Bill 13). I clicked on the website and I actually saw what it is they are proposing and it is not pretty. It is not the kind of information any Muslim parent would want their children to be exposed to let alone learn from. I took it upon myself to confirm from the Toronto District school board website the content of bill 13. I also learned that no one from the board has actually reached out to parents to tell them about Bill 13. It was at this stage that I and many other parents, Muslims and non-Muslims waged a relentless campaign to stop the Bill (13) from being
passed. Forces mounted against this bill where far too great for the government to ignore. In the end the government had to withdraw the bill. This was indeed an example of community collaborating to fight against immoral values”.

Parents were angry that they were not consulted prior to the introduction of Bill 13. They accused the government of trying to promote lifestyles with their children, which are immoral and go against religious teachings. The backlash was huge and relentless and the government was forced to withdraw the bill temporarily while tempers cool down only to reintroduce it quietly and have it pass without anyone noticing. But this kind of parent opposition and community mobilization was an example of the role numbers can play in changing laws and policies that a community finds unacceptable. Other forms of parental collaboration with community organizations was shared by Imam:

“I was involved with several parent organizations. I was involved with the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML) The Ontario Coalition of Literacy, People for Education, Ontario Parent Board and finally the Muslim Educational Network, Training and Outreach Service (MENTORS). All of these organizations are working to get parents to be more involved in their children’s education”.

The responsibility for defending parents’ rights and for getting parents to be engaged with the education system is championed by many community organizations, large and small. The majority of these organizations have no religious affiliation and most times speak and advocate for general parental concerns and interests. However there are religious specific organizations whose work go beyond generalities and their advocacy is around issues of religious rights and accommodations. Parent at times would seek redress for religious injustices by appealing to their religious leaders in mosques and a parents who has used the agency of the mosque is Khawaja.

“I was engaged with other parents in meetings with officials of the Peel and Halton District School Boards. The officials of these boards came and talk to the Muslim women in the Mosque. There were so many things we discussed with them regarding school programs and aspects of the curriculum that go against the teaching of our faith, we
found troubling for our children and for us parents. We inform the officials that there are many parents who are not familiar with what is going on in their schools e.g. bill 13 the sexual education law. We ask them to explain what arrangements they have to explain bill 13 to parents who cannot communicate in English. The board officials said that they would provide translators to parents who are unable to speak English during meetings and during interviews? They officials said they would encourage teachers to make themselves available to meet with parents during lunch time, they informed us that parents are welcomed to come to school and ask questions about any issue or they are free to share concerns and provide information about what is going in their communities. We informed the board officials that there are so many things that children are learning in schools that parents are not aware of. I don’t know if it is a policy to keep parent ignorant, so that there wouldn’t be too much pressure on the school and the staff. When I tested the availability of teachers to meet with parents as promised, I found that I wasn’t able to see teachers during non-teaching hours. I also didn’t know that as tax-payers we pay for three hours to have the teachers available to us for questions and interviews. I didn’t know that parents can have access to translators any time we want. So, there are things that have been put in place by the school boards to make things easier between immigrant parents and school boards. However If information about school activities and programs are not advertised, if people still don’t know about them, I think having correspondence with parents through, newsletters sent in different languages, I think it will make things little less stressful”.

Parent/board dialogue on this controversial subject, helped clarify differences surrounding Bill 13 and parents’ understanding of what is involved in this law. Even though the bill has the best of intentions, the fact remain that parents are dead set against the bill. Despite their opposition to Bill 13, parents were willing to allow the board officials to visit their mosque. The visit provides an opportunity for dialogue with parents in their own comfort zone. It was a bold step and a good start to improving school/community relations. The idea of board staff reaching out to parents is what Ahmad wishes would happened on a regular basis.

“The school boards have done little to reach out to parents. I remembered what was in place at the early stage of the amalgamation of the boards. There were 40 community liaison workers whose work it was to maintain a presence in the community working with parents and assisting them with language issues and other settlement related needs. These workers also provided training to parents so that they are able to participate in school based activities. All this came to an end when the community liaison position was ended and replaced by a weak and ineffective position of community support worker. The community support workers were not allowed to work in the community. They are to deal with community issues from their offices and their activities are limited to providing
Ahmad is calling for a reinstatement of the community liaison positions that were eliminated with the amalgamation of Metro Toronto’s school boards to form the Toronto District School Board under the Fewer School Boards Act, Bill 104 (MacLellan, 2007). The community liaison personnel who were the link between the TDSB and community and provided very vital and useful service were lost. What was put in place to work with the community are water down positions called community support workers. These replacement workers are ineffective and have very little authority or independence to deal with parent issues and concerns. A lot more needs to be done if school boards are really serious about building partnerships with parents and build a credible and effective equity and inclusive strategy where everyone: parents, staff, students, community members will feel welcomed (MOE, 2010).

We can see from the foregone discussion on the strategies employed by parents towards engagement that personal initiatives by individual parent have been the driving force to their engagement. Community organizations like MENTORS have helped with training these parents through capacity building workshops spanning over seven week periods at a time (MENTORS, 2014). These workshops have definitely made a difference. Principals and teachers in the family of schools where MENTORS ran parent engagement workshops have observed an increase in parent attendance and participation at school council meetings and school based activities. Attempts by school boards to offer training to parents through what they called parent institutes have been inadequate (Quan, 2010).

A lot more needs to be done by school authorities if they are to truly engage parents as partners in education. The leading expert on parent engagement Debbie Pushor says parental engagement occurs when school situations are “mutually determined by educators and parents to
be important for children and are lived out in a respectful and reciprocal relationship” (Pushor, 2007, p. 6). Some ways parents have been engaged are through collaborative efforts such as: working with schools to create homework policies, sharing personal opinions and observations at school Council meetings or taking part in the yearly survey of the school board. According to Pushor (2007), other forms of parental engagement relates to parents assisting with teacher-initiated activities such as photocopying, Volunteering, or helping out with anything, which follows the school’s schedule (Parsons & Taylor, 2006).
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Discussion

Canada’s generous immigration policy of the 1970s open the door to a huge influx of immigrants from around the world (Harold., in Magocsi, 1999). Amongst Immigrants who took advantage of this open door policy are people who subscribe to the Islamic faith (Israel in Bramadat & Seljak, 2009; Bramadat & Seljak, 2005). They came in large numbers from around the world and continued to arrive at a steady rate over the years. It is predicted that the number of Canadian Muslims will triple over the next 20 years, from 1.1 million in 2011 to nearly 2.7 million in 2031. At which time Muslims are expected to make up 6.6 percent of Canada’s total population, or more than double today’s 3.2 percent (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Islam is a body of faith and a way of life embedded in a wide variety of cultures and ethnicities and races. It represents nearly 1.5 billion people worldwide (Pew, 2011). The Muslim community in the GTA comprising ethnicities who hail from a wide spectrum of backgrounds: 36 percent originated from the Indian subcontinent — Pakistan, India, or Bangladesh; 32 percent Arabs; and about 14 percent Iranians. Smaller numbers come from other countries like Somalia, Afghanistan, and Turkey reflect this trend. When combined as a faith community, Muslims have become the second largest non-Christian religion in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2005).

It is not surprising given this demographic breakdown of the Muslim community, that in some neighbourhoods in the GTA, Muslim students make up a sizeable proportion of the student population in the public schools.
An example of a school with a large Muslims population is Toronto Valley Park Middle School in the Muslim majority neighbourhood of Thorncliff Park in North York. The school is 80% to 90% Muslim (Bennet, 2011). The school allows for 40 minutes prayers in the cafeteria every Friday after lunch as a safety issue. They do not want the students leaving the school to travel to a nearby mosque in the community. This accommodation by the school principal at Valley Park School became the lightening rod in a public debate over the place of religion in publicly-funded district schools (Agar, 2011; Friesen & Hammer, 2011; Gallinger, 2014).

Letting Muslim students pray in school makes good sense in Toronto’s Thorncliffe Park. The demographic make-up of the school favour this decision to let the student pray and government policy allows this to happen (MOE, 2009b). The public school system claims to be open, liberal, and tolerant of individual rights and cultural differences. While this is true, the Ontario government should be on guard to ensure that the integrity of the policy on equity and inclusive schooling together with the guidelines on religious accommodation and observances (2000a) are protected against arbitrary interpretation and abuse.

The demographic changes of the Muslim community referred to above have profound implications for the public school systems in the GTA. While on the one hand, the Ontario Ministry of Education promotes a policy that recognizes equity, diversity, inclusion, and recognizes parents as partners in education (MOE, 2009a, 2009b & 2010). On the other hand the government is not in any way interested in promoting religious practices of parents in its school. Emphasizing instead the secular nature of the public system and its expectations of its students to
respect diversity by acknowledging their differences while at the same time embracing their commonality (Ontario Education Act R.S.O., 1990).

It is a fact that the Muslim presence in public schools is significant enough to warrant attention. The Muslims can no longer be ignored on matters to do with the education of their children and school boards in the GTA would be wise to accept this demographic reality and extend, recognize and make accommodation to the Cultural and Religious Practices of Muslim parents and their children (TDSB, 2000a & 2000b). The Ontario Ministry of Education policies on Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario schools and Parents in Partnership, Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE, 2009a, 2009b & 2010) contain enough information that speak about the need to bring a parental perspectives on matters relating to the educational, cultural, ethical, religious and moral issues which respects religious freedom and the expression of their culture (Anderson, 2009; Barton & Armstrong, 2007; Ballard, 1999; Barnett, 2008; Battiste & Henderson, 2000).

These education policies on equity and inclusion are also meant for boards to use as tools with which to provide a feasible, supportive and respectful environment within which parents and their children will realize the fulfillment of their religious observation (MOE, 2009a & 2009b).

In my interviews with these Muslim parents, they mentioned specific areas of religious practices for which they need accommodation, such as the need to allow children to pray during school hours (TDSB 2010a). Islam requires Muslims to perform the five daily obligatory prayers, understanding the requirements for modesty, male/female interactions (Abdalati, 1975 p.58; Haneef, 2006).
These parents reject the teaching of sex-related issues in school, believing that such teaching should be dealt with at home and that teaching about sexuality must be age appropriate and conducted with sensitivity within the precepts of Islam (sub-theme 4.3.2.1; Bill 13, 2012).

Thus, the educational contexts within which Muslim parents wish to identify and being engaged in is manifest in their religious conviction (sub-theme 4.3.2.2). They are asking the school system through its existing policies and practices of equity and inclusion to recognize this fact (TDSB, 2000b). These policies and practices while they recognize diversity and cultural practices, the reality is that not all school boards have fully implemented the expectations of the policies over the five years they were requested to do so (MOE, 2009b). There continues to be a struggle between the school boards in the GTA, with their liberal secular orientation and the Muslim parents who are concerned about the participation of their children in curriculum matters especially around topics that are considered controversial and in appropriate for Muslim children to participate in without parental consent. The parents further require opportunities for their children to engage in the observance of their devotional duties during the school day (Berns-McGown, 1999).

As discussed already, the Muslim parents in this study represent a cross section of the ethnic mosaic referenced in the previous section. They are all bound together by a common identity refer to as Muslims and a common faith and belief in Islam [Qur’an 5:3]. Each of these parents is firmly committed to the pursuit of knowledge as dictated by their religious call (Bukhari).

One of the parents in this study Fauzia also spoke about the importance of knowledge contained in one of the Chapters named “Pen” from the Qur’an (3.4.1.1) which is the very first
divine command revealed to the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is to “Read/recite in the name of your Lord who created, who taught by the pen” [Qur'an, 96:1, 96:4]. They referred to numerous other passages in the Qur'an and in the prophetic sayings extolling the virtue of knowledge and exhorting its pursuit: "...Those (who) truly fear Allah (God), among His worshipers, (are those) who have knowledge..." [Qur'an 35: 28] Say: "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" Only it is those who are endued with understanding that receive admonition" [Qur'an 39: 9].

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) went even further to explain the divine command to seek knowledge by informing adherents to the faith that: “Seeking knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim, male and female” (Attirmidhi). The Parents in this study echo this prophetic statement and the revealed command in the Qur’an by explaining the duty of Muslims to continue to pursue knowledge, as long as he/she lives (4.3.1). Zeenat echoed these command by stating that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) encouraged his followers to engage in “seeking knowledge from cradle to grave”. This is because Allah (GOD) has raised the status of those who have knowledge, and described them alone as truly fearing of Him [Qur’an 35:28]. True knowledge for these parents does not only mean obtaining formal academic education, where a person is awarded a degree or diploma. This kind of credential is normally what one would need to earn them an income and a hope for a good standard of living. The less ambitious would turn away from learning and never explore the treasure of knowledge anymore. True learning means that one continues to read and study, increasing one's life-long learning in accordance with the words of the Qur'an “And say, Lord increase my knowledge” [Qur’an 20:114].
The Muslim parents in this study have invested into their own lives this culture of knowledge acquisition and are passing it on to their children (sub-theme 4.3.4.1). They are demonstrating daily their commitment to their children’s education by the amount of time they spend helping them with their school activities (sub-theme 4.3.4.1). These activities include: homework, preparing them for school and volunteering in school based activities (sub-theme 4.3.4). These parents believe that by volunteering (4.3.4.2.2) they would be able to monitor the education their children are receiving in public schools. The effort they put in volunteering would contribute to the vibrancy of the school environment and open up opportunities for other parents of diverse backgrounds to be involved (Ba quedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Kaur, 2013).

Being engaged also allows these parents to advocate for their children (4.3.4.2.3) by negotiating with school staff a process of accommodation around subjects and issues in the curriculum that are in conflict with Islamic faith (4.3.3.4; TDSB, 2000a). Epstein (1988, p.58) wrote about the need for schools to encourage parents to become actively involved in the education of their children. This she says can be accomplished by building parental capacity, through parent leader workshops or parent academies (Quan, 2010).

The workshops would educate parents about what it means to be involved and the benefit they would derive by being involved in school based activities (MENTORS, 2013). Through training, parents would acquire sufficient knowledge and skills to gain confidence in themselves and become more willing to be involved in their children’s Schools (MENTORS, 2013; Parsons & Taylor, 2006). Beyond the training, schools can demonstrate their seriousness to engage with parents through on-going collaboration on projects and through sharing knowledge. Developing relationships among all players (teachers, parents, students and
community), would increase parental and community engagement in education. Through collaboration, bridges are built between stakeholders; in particular bridges of communication are instrumental to success.

5.2 Implications

The census figures (Statistics Canada, 2006) of Muslim ethnicities mentioned in a previous section above have had profound implications for Muslims in public schools and School Boards in the GTA. The Muslim parents are well aware that any demand they make from the system regarding religious accommodations (4.3.3.4), would draw opposition from bigoted groups like the Hindu Advocacy group and Jewish Defense League against their members in the GTA (Agar, 2011; David, 2012; Kalinowski, 2011). Anti-Muslim hatred are regularly expressed in any number of vicious stereotypes e.g., the Arab terrorist and religious fanatics etc. (National Council of Canadian Muslims [NCCM], 2014). The emergence and growth of the Jewish Defense League (JDL) the Muslim Canadian Congress and Hindu Advocacy as socio-political fringe movements are unprecedented in the Canadian setting. Initially dismissed and duly condemned as racist and Islamophobic far-right organization, these groups organize campaigns against the alleged threat posed by Muslims and Islam since 2001(Kalinowski, 2011). They were instrumental in launching campaign against Muslim prayers in public schools. They have one thing in common, a hatred for Islam and Muslims understanding that they create a form of order that clearly demarcates Islam as the other.

It is partly for this reason that school boards should make every effort to engage Muslim parents in the school system and they can do so by introducing a basic understanding of Islam to the schools, accommodating the need to pray, and understanding the requirements for modesty
(TDSB, 2000a). By providing these accommodations, the school system is not giving “special consideration” or “favours” to Islam and Muslims but putting in place ways of removing the barriers to full participation of Muslim parents and their children in schooling (MOE, 2009a).

The education establishment tells us on one hand that they take the issue of equity and inclusion seriously and are doing all they can to promote and sustain diversity and inclusion programs in the school system (MOE, 2009a). On the other hand they argue that it is unlikely for a system which is secular to promote any particular religion or ideology and prefer instead to remain neutral (Freire, 1972). However it is no secret that the curriculum and mode of operation of the school system has the hallmark of Eurocentric and Christian orientation to it. Schools are run according to the Christian calendar of events (Guo, 2011).

This means that religious minority parents and the Muslim community being a major player are constantly subjected to negotiating accommodation for their involvement and that of their children's involvement in school curricula and activities (Guo, 2011). This on-going negotiation is particularly challenging for Muslim parents. Some find the non-Islamic and largely secular nature of society present difficulties for them and their children in the fulfilment of their religious observation.

Islam is also often portrayed by the media as an inherently violent religion and Muslims are seen as terrorists whose very presence is seen to pose a threat to the peace and security of countries of the West, like Canada, the United States and Europe (Faruqi, 2012; Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005). Yet little attention has been paid to issues of race, colour, stereotyping, prejudice, systemic injustices and the open abuse parents and students face in their daily lives in Toronto (Comack, 1999).
At issue is how Muslim parents can find ways to negotiate their religious practices within the public school system and at the same time remained actively involved in school based activities. For example one of the parents in this study Ammara shared an experienced she thinks points to an act of racism and gender bias. This happened when she was volunteering as an assistant to the computer teacher in her child’s school. One computer was defective and she wanted to fix it. She met with resistance at first, but when she persists, she was given the chance to work on the computer she quickly demonstrated her knowledge of computers and her competence as a worker.

Over the years, research has repeatedly revealed that many teachers are not well prepared to work effectively with immigrant parents (Malatest & Associates, 2003; Turney, & Kao, 2009; Berkson, 2005). In their daily encounters with cultural diversity, many teachers still confront many challenges. One of the challenges is the fear of diversity (Palmer, 1998) and the fear of Muslims, particularly after the September 11th event (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005), partially resulting from a lack of knowledge and readiness to approach differences with an open mind.

Stereotypes about Muslim women especially those wearing the headscarf are all too common (Bullock & Jafri; Bullock, 2002). On the contrary Ammara is a well-educated woman with a degree in computer science with specialty in networking from her home country Egypt. She is actively involved in her children’s education and volunteers in various activities in the school, but this fact is lost in the computer teacher’s mind. The commonly held view in mainstream discuss is that anyone whose culture does not measure up to western “standards” is inferior (Rezai-Reshti, 1994, p.37). Muslim women are seen as victims of oppression, and are in need of rescue from their oppressive husbands (Syed, 2008).
Little attention has been paid to how minority parents negotiate their religious practices within public schools. The current curriculum and teaching practice in K-12 education, characterized by Eurocentric perspectives, standards, and values, does not reflect the knowledge and experiences of our culturally and religiously diverse student and parent population. Another challenge is the "difference as deficit" perspective (Dei, 1997). Rather than seeing difference and diversity as an opportunity to enhance learning, education systems seem threatened by it. The school authorities can overcome their phobia by using the diverse strengths, experiences, knowledge, and perspectives of students and parents. The various cultural groups could eradicate what is referred to as the "difference as deficit" model. This model sees diversity ignored, minimized, or as an obstacle to the learning process (Chow & Cummins, 2003; Dei, 1997, 1999, 2000).

Epstein (1988, p.58) recognized the need for schools to encourage parents to become actively involved in the education of their children and recommended a number of ways this can be accomplished beginning with holding parent leader workshops or parent academies (MENTORS 2013; Quan, 2010). These workshops would educate parents with ideas about what it means to be involved in their children’s education and the benefit they would derive by being involved in school based activities. Through training, parents would acquire sufficient knowledge and skills about the education system and with this knowledge they would be able to engage in activities that support their children’s learning at home and in schools.

Schools can demonstrate a seriousness to engage parents by allocating exclusive space for parents to meet other parents to exchange ideas, share resources, or obtain information about programs and services in the community.
The Muslim parents in this study are very keen to work with school authorities as partners, for the education of their children. They suggested that the engagement process begins with the recognition of their cultural and religious concerns and for their concerns to be treated in a spirit of inclusiveness and respect (MOE, 2009a, 2010).

The Muslim parents ask that the school boards in the GTA back up their words with action, moving from policy on paper to policy implementation (4.4.3 & 4.5.3). In this regard the parents are recommending that actions be taken to address the following issues to emphasize the importance attached to Muslim parents’ concerns (4.3.3.4.): Muslim parents are requesting that accommodations be made to include the acceptance of their religious symbols, exemptions from certain classes, and accommodation of prayers in public schools (4.3.3.4. & 4.3.3.1), (Russo & Hee, 2008; Syed, 2008; TDSB, 2000a).

Muslim parents ask for a recognition of their values, languages, culture, religion, and their educational backgrounds (4.3.3.1). The belief is that when parents’ knowledge is included in the curriculum, schools would be enriched with resources that bring a global perspective into the educational environments (Barnett, 2008; Levy, 1997; Pushor, 2007, 2013).

Muslim parents feel underrepresented in school councils (4.3.4.2.5). They believe that the school councils, are dominated by certain ethnic groups or groups of parents with knowledge of the education system (4.3.3.1.2). They point to the school population and the demographic breakdown favour parents of ethnic and faith communities in overwhelming numbers, all of whom are not represented in the school council. The Muslim parents in this study felt that in order to create inclusive school councils, schools authorities need to ensure that representations in councils are proportional to the population of each ethnic group with children in the schools.
Schools need to make conscious efforts to find out why Muslim parents aren’t involved in large numbers in school councils, in school social events and in other school activities (4.3.2.4.4). They can find out by using information gathered through surveys, questionnaires, seminars, one on one interviews and through social media.

Other ways these parents suggested the school engage with them is through regular parent-teacher meetings (4.3.4.2.1). From these meetings parents with interest in becoming leaders and mentors to other parents can be recruited, trained and sent to their communities as outreach workers (4.3.3.5). The schools can Start by selecting a core group of Muslim parents, work with them so that their engagement would have a positive pay off for the schools leading to increased parental and student engagement in school activities. Active and informed parents would use their knowledge of the school system to invite and encourage other parents who are normally referred to as the silent and hard to reach parents.

School boards should develop with contributions from parents, faith and cultural holiday calendars. This would be an act of goodwill showing how schools are recognizing and celebrating important cultural events of parents throughout the year. These special events can be publicized whenever they occur, through the schools newsletter or online.

Schools can be more inclusive in the curriculum, when they request parents to share Knowledge of their culture and share a vision which become incorporated through school activities and board initiatives (4.3.2.1). Schools should maintain on-going assessment of their visions through constant surveys of parents attending school councils meetings, results from bi-annual surveys as well as what is working and what is not working and what need to be changed.
It is important to continually assess the schools’ visions by analyzing data such as the percent of parents attending school council meetings. Schools can establish a mentorship system at the school level which would be an effective way of encouraging in helping new parents transition into the school system and adjust to an unfamiliar school environment. Schools can recruit volunteers in the community to explain the logistics of the school in the different languages that are represented in the schools (4.3.4.2.2 & 4.3.3.1).

The diverse nature Canadian society has become is increasingly posing challenges to public institutions (Kymlicka, 2008). Schools are the first to face this challenge as their populations rapidly change to mirror the diversity of the community in which they are located. Hence the need to accommodate parents’ requests for their children’s religious and cultural needs become a matter to be taken seriously (Statistics Canada, 2007).

As a way of moving forward with the issue of accommodation of Muslim parents’ requests, the call is made to educational systems to inform their teachers and staff about how to deal with issue of diversity and inclusion and why it is important for them to pay attention to the beliefs and practices of their students and parents (McDonough, & Hoodfar, 2005). Ignoring this reality would deprive institutions and their staff of valuable knowledge about the cultural diversity of students and parents. Often stereotypes and discrimination and even intolerance are the result of ignorance (Zine, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004; Hill, 2012). In the case of schools, it is about teachers’ ignorance of their students’ religious beliefs and practices (Bramadat, 2009). How does ignorance get addressed? First by providing training to teachers at the pre-service level in universities about the religions of the world. This should be a required course made mandatory and a condition for completing teacher training and the issuance of a license to teach (Bramadat & Sijiljak, 2005, 2009; Bouchard & Taylor, 2008). Incorporating teachings about the
faiths of parents in our education system to pre-service teachers would give them a huge advantage in the classroom where the reality of diversity will face them at the very beginning of their careers.

The fact is the more school staff gets to know their students and parents, the more they would appreciate the differences they are faced with (4.3.3.2). Collectively they would try to build bridges so their fears for each other are overcome (4.3.3.1). Increasing the possibility for teachers, students and parents to interact freely with ease and comfort, with each group appreciating the others without fear of the differences that exist (Spinner-Halev, 2000).

Another way of making equity to work, the parent of this study would like to see schools develop affirmative action policies (4.3.3.1.1) to create spaces for Muslim teachers to be hired, so that they would serve dual purposes of teaching and mentoring of parents and students of their community and eventually would become fully engaged with the school system.

5.3 Recommendations

The ideals on which the public school system has been created, continue to enjoy the support of the Muslim parents in this study. However in order to maintain this support, public schools should pay attention to the concerns raised by Muslim parents in order to fully demonstrate their sincerity and commitment to parent engagement and consideration of parents as true and equal partners in education. The following recommendations would contribute to on-going conversations around improving parent-school connections as we move forward to achieving an inclusive school system that serves the interests of all parents with Muslim parents playing a pivotal role in this change process. The following recommendations are presented:
5.3.1 Learning from the cultures of Muslim families

Schools should organize “share your culture day” celebrations to recognize and validate the important cultural events of each community represented in the school. In the case of Muslims events such as Eid –ul- Fitr is a major event celebrated to mark the end of the month long exercise of fasting-called Ramadhan. A second major event in the Muslim Calendar is Eid-ul-Adha or the feast of sacrifice celebrated at the end of the rituals pilgrims perform during their pilgrimage to Makkah. Other Muslims have added a third celebration called Muharram, which is the first month in the Islamic lunar calendar. The schools could organize a potluck by encouraging parents to contribute food from their culture and using such occasions to establish personal contacts with parents and getting to know them very close. When such celebrations occur, families would respond with more open engagement through volunteering with their neighbourhood schools.

As already noted, the literature is unanimous in the belief that parent education is key to student success. What this means in regard to building sustainable parent leadership is for schools to go beyond the occasional parent workshops organize at the annual public schools parent conference in November each year by the Toronto District school board’s parent involvement Action Committee (PIAC). Instead schools should offer or host in-depth six and eight-session workshops in leadership, family literacy and math activities and if there is popular demand hold these classes on Saturdays and see whether more parents would attend.

Schools should welcome parents to classes, have them observe the teachers teach and seek their feedback on what they have learned. The schools should honor parent contributions to
ideas and integrate knowledge derived from their cultural practices, while mobilizing resources and involving them in student learning in and around the classroom.

Schools should not only care for the needs of parents, but for school leaders and staff to acquire the cultural competence/cultural capital needed to relate to parents. Such competences could include an ability to speak the languages of parents, familiarity with their countries of origin, their religions and being comfortable with their unique cultural practices. Furthermore, school staff must be sensitive to the concerns of Muslim parents who see a need to instill a strong Islamic identity in their children as a survival tool in a school system where so many trends and mores, which are diametrically opposed to Islamic teachings and values, are promoted.

5.3.2 Validate Parents’ Cultures

Parents do care for their children education. However as we have seen in this study, some educators still assume that immigrant parents don’t care about education. Parents do care, they just need an invitation and they need an environment that is conducive to their engagement. Muslim parents are devoted parents are hardworking, trusting, compassionate, and open to change. Muslim parents have high aspirations for their children, that they express these aspirations at home according to their own cultural orientation of which religious values are a driving force. These are not always the same values educators’ promote and often they tend to equate parents involvement with attendance at school events and responsiveness to school requests.

5.3.3 Small Outreach

Parents’ contact with schools is often marked by formality and bureaucracy, as seen in curriculum nights in September each year in public schools. This event is totally devoted to a one
sided teacher presentations of curriculum information. Schools can promote greater participations at these curriculum nights when they are mindful of parents ‘comfort level. The language and complexity of terms are sometimes above the level of comprehension of parents especially those for whom English is a second language. School outreach efforts to parents are ways to explain school literature and the curriculum in a manner that foster understanding in an informal and interactive environment. This would affirm that schools care for families as human beings and recognize the importance of relationships as the foundation of school and family partnerships. Other strategies that have proven effective are personal telephone invitations to activities, events designed to attract parents’ open-ended gatherings for coffee with the principal, and more interactive approaches to back-to-school night.

5.3.4 Nurture Parent Voice

What matters most after building an inclusive parent leadership through training, is bringing parents to the table for dialogue and sharing in a true spirit of partnership, to learn and work together for the mutual benefit of schools, families and communities. As Muslim parents become more aware of education issues through leadership training or community organizing, they would undergo personal transformation. Some parents who graduated from the MENTORS Parents’ Leader Training have been emboldened to pursue higher education after their initial training as parent mentors.

Public schools face the dilemma of reconciling their secular values against the demands of faith communities for accommodation to practice their religion. Educators no longer agree on what constitute commonly shared values, they are often at odds with what parents of faith such as Muslims would desire for their children. Parents therefore are asserting their rights to direct
the education of their children, and they are asking the public schools to help them reach that goal. In this way, all public schools by responding to the needs of parents of faith through religious accommodation would be serving the common good for which public schools were created in the first place.

The policy document which has served as the basis of this study clearly emphasized the need for equity and inclusion in the education system. The guidelines require boards to in service their school staff about the religious diversity in schools in the GTA. If the guidelines are not fully implemented, the acts of discrimination against Muslims we have already witnessed in opposition to school prayers at Valley Park School would extend to other schools with sizeable Muslim student population in the GTA. What would result in the long run is the abandonment of the public school system by Muslims for the safer sanctuary of private Islamic schools. I would strongly recommend that teachers are given training in world religions and this training must start at the initial teacher training in university and must be made compulsory for all pre-service teachers. This is not an exercise on religious indoctrination, but an effort in promoting religious accommodation arising out of knowledge gained from organized training. Learning and appreciating other religions would give teachers a huge advantage. It would increase the quality of communication and interaction between teachers and parents. Even if one does not belong to any particular religion, just knowing about its fundamental teachings would build confidence in the teacher and foster a quality of communication which would be beneficial to both teacher, students and parents (Bramadat & Selijak, 2005; Bouchard & Taylor, 2008).
5.4 Conclusion

This study was conceived with the intention to explore the importance of building capacity amongst parents who have not fully gotten involved in school matters and have not benefitted from the information and assistance available in their community schools. This lack of connection has disadvantaged both the parent and their children. Information that parents need to know and share would extend to the children and helping them to succeed. The research literature is replete with facts about the relationship between parent knowledge of the school system and the chances of their children doing well in school.

The need to engage a select group of parents who have some understanding and are already involved in their children’s school is very much the solution to engaging parents who are hard to reach and totally not connected with schools. MENTORS is already conducting a limited level of parent leader training on a seven week cycle. The graduates of this training are reaching out to other parents and inviting them to attend small group parent training in their communities using the language widely spoken by parents in the area. The community level training is pursued so that many more parents would be better informed about the education system and with this knowledge they would be ready to begin a process of engagement with their children’s school, volunteering for various activities and serving on the school council. This cycle of parent training in schools and in the community has been going on for three years and is continuing. An increasing number of parents are enrolled in the training, are graduating and joining the ranks of parent volunteers serving in various capacities at their neighbourhood schools. It is looking likely that if this trend continues, schools would benefit immensely from the knowledge of highly trained, highly motivated and well informed parents who would made themselves available for volunteer activities in school programs.
Building parent capacity is a welcomed effort by educators and parents. The Ministry of Education has provided small grants to community organizations like MENTORS to continue training parent leaders but this effort is very little and can only reach a small group of parents in one ward in Scarborough. The vast number of parents in the GTA do not have the same opportunity to benefit from such a program. Hence the effort to build sustainable leadership cannot be realized without the injection of more funds so that many more parents would be trained for leadership so that their children would benefit from the education they need to succeed. The parent leader training bring together the diversity of parents in the school community. If the schools take on this responsibility of conducting leadership training for their parents, including integrating parent knowledge many more parents would get involved and would use their training to assist their children at home and get them well prepared for school each day. The parents would fulfil a need in school when they are invited to take on roles that recognized their input to decisions making in school matters. The individual parent is a member of the community and when the collective body of parents become actively involved in their neighbourhood school, the community would do whatever the school ask of them to support and help improve the operation of the school. This level of engagement by the community makes the schools community schools, inclusive and welcoming to everyone. A description of the profile of parents who live in communities where schools are located would throw some light on the diversity that exists in neighbourhood across the GTA.

As already discussed from the data published by statistics Canada, the demographic changes in Canadian society in recent times, has brought to light the importance attached to equity issues. The issues relate to Muslim parents in the public school system, whose concerns have become fully integrated and made an integral part of the Ministry of Education policies on
equity and inclusion (MOE, 2009a). The process for realizing equity in the system would require putting in place effective communication strategies (4.3.4.2.1; Parsons & Taylor, 2006; Epstein, 1988), with highly trained supportive staff members at the local school who would foster effective parent engagement in the education of their children. Parent resource room could be set up in each school. These rooms would provide parents with connections to other parents and also help them to gain access to information about service organizations that support parents in the neighbourhood. The school board should provide parents with information about the school system and ways to become involved in their children’s school community. Ensure that information about the school system is translated into different languages (TDSB, 2014).

Communication: through the use of various media would bring the school and community together. Through open and genuine dialogue, the way is paved for the elimination of any discriminatory barriers that have prevented meaningful parent engagement in the past (4.3.4.2.1). The communication with parents could be done through the agency of translated newsletters, one-to-one conversations with school staff, teachers (including translators), and informative workshops (Parsons & Taylor, 2006). When parents are exposed to a variety of media and training they become more confident and are more likely to feel welcomed in schools and will be willing to become part of their school environment.

The schools can start by selecting a core group of minority parents, work with them so that their engagement would have a positive pay off for the schools leading to increased parental and student engagement in school activities (4.3.3.5). Active and informed parents would use their knowledge of the school system to invite and encourage other parents who are normally referred to as the silent and hard to reach parents.
Another effort at demonstrating to minority parents of a school’s commitments to equity is through its hiring of teachers from diverse backgrounds (4.3.3.1.1). Schools equity program must also be seen to favour the composition of school councils that represent the diversity of parents in the school (4.3.4.2.5). Development and provision of cultural holiday calendars allows school to recognize and celebrate important cultural events of parents throughout the year and these can be publicized through the school’s newsletter (4.3.3.1, & 4.3.3.4). Schools can use the internet to share homework assignments via email and eliminate the possibility of children losing their homework (Parsons & Taylor, 2006).

Schools can be more inclusive in the curriculum when they request minority parents to share knowledge of their culture and share a vision which become incorporated through school activities and board initiatives. Schools should maintain on-going assessment of their visions through constant surveys of parents attending school councils meetings, results from bi-annual surveys as well as what is working and what is not working and what need to be changed.

It is important to continually assess the school’s vision by analyzing data such as the percent of parents attending school council meetings. Schools can establish a mentorship system at the school level which would be an effective way of encouraging and helping new parents transition into the school system and adjust to an unfamiliar school environment.

Schools can recruit parent volunteers to assist other parents during special events, to explain the operational processes of the schools in the languages of the parents (4.3.4.2.2). The duties of volunteers would include activities such as greeting parents as they arrive, showing them around the buildings, assisting during school events or serving as interpreters at parent/
teacher interviews. Schools should be mindful that some parents are new to the Canadian school system and would need extra help to adjust to a new school environment (4.3.4.2).

All efforts must be made to harness the strength and talents of parents in the school community and as a demonstration of the schools’ willingness to meet the Ontario Ministry of Education’s expectation as required in the Ontario Equity and Inclusive education strategy (MOE, 2009b). This effort can begin by tapping parents’ knowledge, professional, and cultural expertise (Pushor, 2007, 2013). This would allow foreign trained professional parents to share their culture, values and expectations for themselves and their children (4.3.3.1). This cultural transfer will enrich the schools with valuable resources that would add on to their collection of ideas. The ideologies shared by parent professionals would be presented from a global perspective to the benefit of all (4.3.3.2). Furthermore, parents whose knowledge has been utilized would be motivated to continue to participate in school based activities in their neighbourhood schools (4.3.4.2).

Informed parents are active in signing up their children for after school programs which include additional support at home work clubs, other extra-curricular activities (4.3.4.3). Parental cultural and linguistic training of their children at home will add value to the children educational pursuit, increasing the chances for their success.

Given this multiplicity of educational opportunities in the community, we can see that the education of children is carried out by what is popularly referred to “It takes a village to raise a child”. Education is therefore a shared responsibility amongst many people with whom a child is exposed to beginning from the home and school where a child spends most of their time and the community where they live also playing a supportive role (MOE, 2010).
It is therefore agreed in the literature on parental engagement, reviewed by (Leithwood, Steinbach, & Jantzi, 2002) that the more parents are involved in their children’s education in school, the more they would be able to influence and direct their child’s academic pursuit and success. The Ontario Ministry of Education policies on Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario schools and Parents in Partnership (2009a, 2010) strengthened this belief. A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools (2010) contains enough information that referenced the parental perspectives on educational, cultural, ethical, religious and moral issues. These perspectives are discussed in the context of trying to have a true understanding of cultural pluralism and the need to make all stakeholders feeling welcomed and included (Anderson, 2009).

Reforming the education system, to create space for Muslim parents is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge because it would lead to fundamental changes to the education system in a manner that would attract opposition from those who want religion kept out of public schools. It is an opportunity for parents who are currently not engaged with the education system, to join the growing movement of parents for change that is sweeping across the GTA. This movement is now gaining momentum and are asking to be engaged in the true spirit of equity and inclusion. In a spirit where no one is left behind, but all are welcomed in the change process. However for change to take place would require the sincere intentions of school leaders and staff towards parent engagement, backed by action. Otherwise giving lip service to the idea of change can make the whole exercise become just another exercise in futility and a journey into ‘fantasy land’. The parents especially Muslims, newcomers and immigrants who according to current statistics happened to form the majority of public school supporters would remain in the margins and no process of change would lift them up enough to a level that will
bring them anywhere near to the education partnership table, where decisions that affect them
and their children are made.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Interview Questions for Parents

1. What do you know about parental engagement/involvement in your children’s school? How do you perceive it?
2. How are you engaged in your children’s formal education?
3. Why do you believe that to engage in your children’s education is important? What drives you to be engaged?
4. What strategies do you employ to be engaged in your children’s schooling? Why did you choose this type of engagement?
5. Has anything changed the way you have been engaged in your children’s schooling in the past? If yes, why it has been changed? How it has been changed?
6. Do you think that religion plays a role in why and how to be involved in your children’s education?
7. Do you think that your religious identity constitutes an impediment to be engaged in your children’s schooling? If yes, how?
8. Do you have any feeling of alienation from the school community because of your religious identity?
9. Do you feel invited/welcomed in the school? Do you see any relationship between your engagement and the policies or practices school holds on to?
10. Are you familiar with the following policy documents from the Ontario Ministry of Education?
   a) Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Yes  No
   c) The Guidelines and Procedures for the accommodation of Religious Requirements, and Observances (TDSB, 2000) Yes  No

   If “yes” where did you get information about these documents?

11. Do you think that the government and schools’ policies related to parent engagement encourage Muslim parents’ engagement in their children’s schools or deter their engagement?
12. Do you encounter any challenges in the quest of being engaged in your children’s school? If yes, what challenges do you face in supporting your children in school?
13. What specific supports do you believe can help Muslim parents to become more engaged and sustain that engagement in their children’s schooling?
Appendix B
Demographic Information Sheet

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is your highest level of education?
   - [ ] Less than high school
   - [ ] High school
   - [ ] Undergraduate
   - [ ] Graduate MA/PhD
   - [ ] Age ________
   - [ ] Gender: Male [ ] Female [ ]

2. How many years have you lived in Canada? ________

3. The length Experience related to Parent Engagement in your Children’s Education ________

4. How many children do you have in public school?
   - [ ] High school [ ]
   - [ ] Elementary school [ ]

5. What is the gender and age and grade of each child?
   a) Child 1: Male [ ] Female [ ] Age [ ] grade [ ]
   b) Child 2: Male [ ] Female [ ] Age [ ] grade [ ]
   c) Child 3: Male [ ] Female [ ] Age [ ] grade [ ]
   d) Child 4: Male [ ] Female [ ] Age [ ] grade [ ]

6. Please indicate your ethnicity/race: ________

7. Please select one of the following options to indicate your annual family income
   - [ ] Less than $ 24,999
   - [ ] $ 25,000-$ 54,999
   - [ ] $55,000-$ 75,000
   - [ ] More than $ 75,000
Appendix C

Content of Email to Parents

Dear Parent,

My name is Jamila Butt. I am a Masters candidate at OISE/UT and am currently conducting research under the supervision of Professor Nina Bascia (OISE/UT, 252 Bloor Street West) towards my thesis. I would like to know if you could recommend me the name of a parent to participate in my research. The purpose of this email is to provide you with information that you will need to understand what I am doing, and to decide whether or not you choose to participate. Participation is completely voluntary, and should you decide to participate. You are free to withdraw at any time.

The information letter and consent form are attached herewith for your consideration. If you are interested to participate, then we can schedule an appointment at your convenience.

Jamila Butt
M.A Candidate
Leadership Higher and Adult Education
OISE/UT, 6th Floor,
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON, M5S 1V6
Appendix D

Information Letter to Participants and Consent Form

(Where participants are individually interviewed and audio recorded interviews constitute the raw data)

This study involves you participating in one interview with me. Participation is completely voluntary, and if you are interested to participate, then we can schedule an appointment at a time and location of your convenience. The interview will be informal and will last approximately seventy-five minutes. We will be doing a cross between an open interview and an interview from a guide. Interview will be audio recorded with your permission and then will be transcribed upon your consent. You will be free to withdraw at any time and at any stage of the study without consequence or penalty and you may refuse to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. You will not be judged or evaluated, will not be at risk of harm, and at no time will value judgment be placed on your responses.

The Title of this research project is “Building Sustainable Leadership for Inclusive School Communities: A Case of Muslim Parents”

The nature and purpose of the research is to investigate how Muslim parents are involved in their children’s education in public schools within GTA in Ontario.

What, essentially, I am doing is interviewing parents and asking them about how they are involved in their children’s education?

Areas I hope to touch on are: Exploring Muslim Parent Involvement in Public Education; length of stay in Canada, parent involvement in their children’s education, challenges in getting involved, previous involvement with schools outside of Canada, ethnicity, country of origin, level of education, knowledge of the public education system and parent engagement policy and parental involvement strategies

Before the interview starts, you also have the opportunity to ask the researcher (me) any questions regarding the research and the content of the information letter so as to be sure that you understand the research to be conducted as well as other relevant items on the information letter. The letter explains the nature of the study and the outline of your participation. You may also contact Professor Nina Bascia, my Thesis Supervisor for more information related to the study, if you are interested.

Once the audio recorded interview(s) have been transcribed, the original or raw data will be stored in my office in a cabinet under lock and key. Only Dr. Nina Bascia, the supervisor and I will ever have access to this raw data. In the transcripts, names and other identifying information about you will be systematically changed. Identifying codes that could connect you with the changed names will also be kept in a cabinet under lock and key in the place designated above. The timing for the destruction of the tapes and/or the raw data is five years after the completion of the study.
As interviewee, you will receive a copy of the transcript of your interview. Your transcript will be sent to you to read in order for you to add any further information or subtract to correct any misinterpretations. Any section that you request to be removed from the transcript of your interview will be deleted. As you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, you may request that the entire transcript of your interview be destroyed and if you wish to withdraw, you can do so by calling me at (416) 546-7055 or sending me an email at Jamila.butt@mail.utoronto.ca.

I will be sharing major aspects of my preliminary analysis with you and you have the opportunity to provide feedback. How I will be doing this, is emailing you with key ideas, and offering my availability to meet with you at your convenience if you wish to discuss the findings. If all participants agree, a copy of the findings will be sent to each participant. The final report will also be presented at the conferences to share the findings with other colleagues and will be used for public presentations and will be made available for publication. The participant’s identity will remain confidential and pseudonyms will be used. Any personal information collected for this study will be reported in such a way that individuals cannot be identified. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it, and may request a summary of the findings of the study. The copy of the thesis will also be available at OISE/UT library on T-Space.

The confidentiality and anonymity of your participation is assured. Any personal information collected for this study will be reported in such a way that individuals cannot be identified. All identifiable electronic data/information outside of a secure server environment would be encrypted, consistent with University of Toronto’s data security and encryption standards. Potential benefits you might derive from participating are:

This research will contribute to the understanding how Muslim parents are involved in their children’s formal education in public schools, what are their attitudes towards involvement, what Strategies they employ, what challenges they encounter and what supports do they require to be more fully involved and sustain this involvement in the education of their children. As such, the results of the study could call into question the viability and intent of current reform in the policy. It is also worthwhile for the individual parents as it allows them to reflect on their own practice and action in regards to their involvement in their children’s education. Additionally, this study may also present some empirical evidence on the subject in a Canadian context, with particular reference to the Muslim community within the GTA in Ontario. Your opinion and your suggestions can be of benefit for the policy makers and you may feel encouraged to be more involved in your children’s education.

**Criteria for the Selection of Participant:**

Participants for this study will be parents. I will select participants who are Muslim parents of the children currently attending public school in the GTA and have been involved in the formal education of their children. This selection criterion will ensure that as parents you have an experience in being involved in your children’s schooling and you are either first
generation parent or second generation parent and you have been living in Canada either for a long time or you are Canadians by birth and you can express yourself in English. Thank you in advance for your participation.

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To Be Completed by the Participants

I have read this document and any enclosed documents. I understand what is being asked. I understand the nature of the research.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time.

By signing below, I am indicating that I am willing to participate in the study and I have received a copy of this letter.

Name: ____________________________________ E-mail________________________________________
Telephone:______________________________
Signature: ___________________________ Date: ______________________________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion: _____
Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio recorded: _____
Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study please or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.