

Safe havens or religious ‘ghettos’? Narratives of Islamic schooling in Canada

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Transnationalism and the experience of migrancy has lead to cultural dissonance for many newcomers from Muslim countries, unaccustomed to the culturally permissive social norms like consuming alcohol and partying, dating and premarital relations. Residing within culturally incongruent spaces, migrant Muslim communities often seek to shelter their children and youth from negative outside influences. Within this context, independent Islamic schools take on multiple sociological roles in the Canadian Muslim diaspora. For example, these schools attempt to create a ‘safe’ environment that protects students from the ‘de-Islamizing’ forces in public schools and society at large. It is within the nexus of resisting cultural assimilation and engaging cultural survival that the need for Islamic schools emerges. These schools provide a culturally congruent space and a more seamless transition between the values, beliefs, and practices of the home and school environment. They also provide a space free from racism and religious discrimination that many students encounter within public schools. Yet Islamic schools, like other independent religious schools, are also accused of ‘ghettoizing’ students and not providing socialization within society at large, and are considered inadequate arenas for civic engagement in a racially and religiously plural society due to their ‘particularist’ orientation. This paper provides a critical examination of these claims and how they are both challenged and affirmed through the narratives of Islamic school stakeholders.

Introduction

Operating as a social- and spiritually-based alternative to the secular public education system, independent Islamic schools take on multiple sociological roles in the Canadian context. For example, these schools attempt to create a ‘safe’ environment that protects students from the ‘de-Islamizing’ forces in public schools and society at large. Transnationalism and the experience of migrancy has lead to cultural dissonance for newcomers from Muslim countries, unaccustomed to the culturally

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permissive social norms like consuming alcohol and partying, dating and premarital relations. Residing within culturally incongruent spaces, migrant Muslim communities seek to shelter their children and youth from negative outside influences.

Immersion in a culturally incongruent environment has made parents more fearful for their children and the potential loss of their culture and religious way of life. According to Nyang (2000), the challenge of self-definition and identity maintenance is one of the primary challenges facing Muslim communities in North America. He argues that while Muslims are beginning to conscientiously assert their identity within the public square, in the past newcomers were reticent to express their Muslimness openly and engaged in 'survival strategies' such as the Anglicization of names to facilitate integration. Nyang refers to people in this category as 'grasshopper Muslims':

This type of Muslim is usually very eager to receive acceptance from the host society. For this and other related reasons, he or she may change his or her name to something else that is more familiar to the members of the majority community. This is why in the grasshopper category you find a Muhammed Jummah going by the name Michael Friday and Musa Abdulla changing his name to Moses Abdullah. (Nyang, 2000, p. 2)

Nyang notes that this survival mechanism helped many a Muslim immigrant to 'weather the icy waters of racial or cultural prejudices' (p. 2).

Many Muslim parents fear that the assimilative forces within public schools threaten to 'de-Islamize' their children (Murad, 1986; Yousif, 1993; Parker-Jenkins, 1995; Khan-Cheema, 1996; Sarwar, 1996). For example, negative peer pressure, drugs, alcohol use, dating and violence in schools pose many challenges for Muslim students attempting to maintain an Islamic lifestyle and identity while at school (see Jacobson, 1998; Shamma, 1999; Zine, 2000, 2001). It is within the nexus of resisting cultural assimilation and engaging cultural survival that the need for Islamic schools emerges. These schools provide a culturally congruent space and a more seamless transition between the values, beliefs, and practices of the home and school environment. They also provide a space free from racism and religious discrimination that many students encounter within public schools (see Murad, 1986; Rezai-Rashti, 1994; Zine, 2000, 2001). Yet Islamic schools, like other independent religious schools, are also accused of 'ghettoizing' students and not providing socialization within society at large, and are considered inadequate arenas for civic engagement in a racially and religiously plural society due to their 'particularist' orientation (see Gutmann, 1996; Sweet, 1997; Callon, 1997; Theissen, 2001). In the discussion that follows, these claims will be explored within the context of the narratives of Islamic school stakeholders.

This paper is drawn from broader ethnographic study of Islamic schooling that focused on four Islamic schools in the Greater Toronto Area. The study was based on interviews of 49 participants including students, teachers, school administrators and parents as well as 18 months of fieldwork from September 1999 to August 2001 including classroom observations and action research-based teaching. The narratives of 14 high school students, seven teachers and five parents are presented in this paper and provide critical perspectives regarding the challenges and possibilities of Islamic schooling in Canada. As a Muslim scholar and parent of children who attend both

Islamic schools as well as public schools, the outcomes and implications of this research are of personal as well as academic interest. Few studies have explored the social and cultural dimensions of Islamic schooling and their implication for diasporic Muslim communities. This research fills a void in the ethnographic literature by critically examining these processes and situating them within the political debates and contestations regarding separate religious schooling.

Background of religious schooling in Ontario

Figures from the Ontario Ministry of Education reported 2240 children attending Islamic schools in 1999, but estimates from the Muslim community suggest that there are as many as 4000 students enrolled (Scrivenor, 2001). Students are often added to waiting lists from birth and some Islamic schools have waiting lists of 650 students and more. In Toronto and the surrounding areas there were 18 full time Islamic schools and a total of 35 across the province of Ontario in 1999. With the exception of one school, all of these schools are part of the *Sunni* tradition in Islam, with the one exception being a *Shia* school; these two groups comprising the predominant sects within Islam. An updated view of the growth of Islamic schools based on the most recent 2005 statistics of both the Ministry of Education and Statistics Canada reveals that approximately 3500 Muslim students now attend Islamic schools which is an estimated 7% of the total population of Muslim students at the elementary and secondary school levels (Memon, 2006).

In Ontario, full time Islamic day schools are private and receive no Government funding. Only Catholic schools are eligible for public funding under the Canadian Charter, despite the legal human rights claims of other minoritized¹ religious groups in Ontario who are excluded from accessing such public support for their schools (see Sweet, 1997). The Muslim community, consequently, has been involved within the multifaith coalition Ontario Parents for Equality in Education Funding (OPEEF) in order to advocate for funding for religious schools. In 1999 their case was taken to the UN, which ruled that the Ontario Government was violation of humans rights for funding only Catholic schools to the exclusion of other religious schools. The ruling has largely been ignored by educational officials in Ontario and a controversial tax credit offered to private school students was recently repealed by the new Liberal Government.

The issue of religiously segregated schooling has often been contested on the grounds that it leads to a form of 'religious apartheid'. Defenders of the common school argue that claims for religious or culturally segregated schools are a rejection of liberal democratic values and discourage the positive possibilities of cultural pluralism (Gutmann, 1996). In her book *God in the classroom*, Lois Sweet (1997) also resists the balkanization of public schools into separate religious enclaves that, she argues, discourages the kind of dialogue and debate that can lead to effective citizenship in a plural society. Nevertheless, she argues that Government inflexibility in dealing with religion in public schools has forced many religious families to opt out of the public school system. She argues that the success of liberal multiculturalism lies in the

development of more inclusive practices, including a funding formula to keep religious schools inside rather than outside of public education.

Beyond the politics of funding for independent schools, supporters of Islamic schools are put on the defensive with respect to how these schools are often seen as ‘ghettoizing’ Muslim children and denying them opportunities to engage within the broader plural society. The term ‘ghettoizing’ is used as a negative and racialized connotation to describe independent Islamic schools. Yet interestingly, the same negative terminology is not leveled against supporters of the publicly funded Catholic separate school system, despite the fact that many critics also disapprove of the funding of these schools. Rather the term is used strategically to undermine the claims of other more marginalized religious groups. For example, Gutmann (1996) argues that religious or culturally based schools are part of a ‘separatist multicultural perspective’ and are ‘designed primarily to sustain the separatist cultural identities of minorities and to bolster the self-esteem of students on the basis of their membership in a separatist culture’ (p. 158). Yet, as Halstead (1991) notes in his analysis of Muslim schooling in Britain, rather than committing themselves to self-imposed exile, Muslims in public schools face social isolation when White British parents refuse to send their children to Muslim-populated schools:

A pattern now emerging in some cities is for White parents to stop sending their daughters to a girls’ secondary school when there is a substantial proportion of Muslim girls at the school, so that the school then quickly takes on the nature of a ‘ghetto’ school. (Halstead, 1991, p. 275)

Despite being part of the public education system, this process of racial exclusion and social distance therefore leads to these schools becoming de-facto separate institutions for Muslims.²

Liberal educational thinkers like Gutmann view multiculturalism as a corrective to cultural bias by focusing on cultural diversity rather than cultural separatism. However, multicultural education has failed to move beyond a ‘tourist curriculum’ that features ‘saris, samosas and steel bands’ as entry points into cultural knowledge. Yet this events-oriented focus in dealing with issues of cultural diversity has done little to decentre secular Eurocentric knowledge as the privileged way of knowing in multi-ethnic/multifaith public schools. I would argue that secular Eurocentric knowledge represents the hegemonic way of knowing in public schools that masquerades as universal and neutral space, when it is in fact a biased and culturally situated base of knowledge, which by virtue of its exclusivity imparts superiority and invalidates other ways of knowing, particularly those which are religiously centred.

Independent schools that are based on cultural or religious grounds, on the other hand, seek to move the realities and experiences of their students from the margins to the centre of the educational focus. Gutmann (1996) argues, however, that separate schools that bolster cultural self-esteem do so at the risk of undercutting mutual respect among citizens, because it is assumed that they are teaching the superior contributions of their ancestors and thereby contravening liberal conventions by imposing a particular view of the good life. Yet, in providing a response to this critique

from an anti-racist standpoint, it can be argued that the contributions of marginalized communities have long been absent from the curriculum in many mainstream Eurocentric schools. Reclaiming these historical contributions rather than undercutting mutual respect, this reinforces respect and neutralizes the superiority of the dominant culture. Theissen (2001) argues further that religiously and culturally based schools will enhance rather than hinder social harmony in a plural society:

Allowing for schools which are an expression of cultural/religious traditions, while at the same time ensuring that these schools teach liberal democratic values, will do much more to create harmony within a pluralistic society than the imposition of liberal values and multicultural programs within an environment that is alien to students from minority cultural or religious traditions. (Theissen, 2001, p. 244)

While opposed to independent schools, Gutmann does, however, support an inclusive curriculum in public education that represents cultural diversity and where all individuals have equal civic standing. Yet, while we can assert the notion of 'equal civic standing', we have to do so in the context of unequal social conditions that mediate access to civic engagement. Not considering issues such as those raised leads to a bland, uncritical multiculturalism that does not address issues of power and privilege in society.

Also from a liberal educational perspective, Callon (1997) examines the argument that the common school operates as a vehicle of civic education to perpetuate the ideal of 'deliberative democracy', which encourages 'open discussion in which diverse views are voiced and collectively evaluated, make, apply, and revise the norms by which their community lives' (p. 24). Callon argues that religious schools, despite inculcating positive values, are not able to provide the required approach to a good civic education and therefore cannot produce a good liberal citizenry. Callon goes on to say: 'Religious schooling may encourage much else that is laudable from a civic standpoint, but they *cannot* be arenas for inclusive deliberation by virtue of their exclusive religious identity' (pp. 24–25, emphasis in original).

Yet it can be argued that mainstream public schools also impose a singular moral hegemonic viewpoint based on secularism and Eurocentrism. As argued earlier, these masquerade as universal ways of knowing but are culturally situated viewpoints that are in opposition to faith-centred worldviews and also engage fidelity to a particular partisan worldview or view of 'the good life'.

McLaughlin (1992) argues that for various reasons the common school may not meet the needs of all students (whether on religious, cultural, or special needs grounds) and that, from a social justice perspective, there can be a view that supports separate schools from within a liberal framework, providing they are able to satisfy the conditions of developing critical rationality and independence. He argues that there can be a plurality of legitimate forms of liberal education and schooling that can be starting points for a child's journey toward autonomy and liberal citizenship, and that these may start from a particular worldview or cultural identity. Spinner-Halev (1997) calls this 'moderate separatism' where early childhood and elementary education in religiously-based schools can actually encourage greater knowledge of self without compromising the knowledge of others and that this knowledge of others may occur in sites other than schools or through transition to common schooling in higher grades.

It should be noted that debates on religious education within the Muslim community also produce similar arguments against independent schooling. For example, posing an argument against separate religious schooling, Jafri and Fatah (2003) argue:

Most Muslim parents wish their children to grow and become educated in a climate of diversity, where they can learn to respect and understand the faiths of others, while being exemplary ambassadors of Islam and peace. Muslims do not believe in the segregation and ghettoization of their communities. (Jafri & Fatah, 2003, A-17)

They further argue that the provision of tax credits to families attending private schools is a mechanism to further isolate religious minorities from the mainstream by encouraging separate social and educational enclaves.

Engaging the narrative of Islamic school stakeholders

In Canada, the challenges and debates surrounding religious education continue to centre on whether religious schools lead to isolationism through the ghettoization of children and youth into separatist religious enclaves. The narratives of many of the students, parents, and teachers responded to these concerns through counternarratives of Islamic schools as ‘safe’ spaces that provided protection from negative outside influences such as drugs, gangs, violence, sexual harassment and yet they rejected the notion that this constituted a form of ‘religious apartheid’ or ‘ghettoization’ as a result. Others did feel that the schools were not adequately preparing students to integrate into mainstream public schools or post-secondary institutions and were concerned about social isolation. Teachers, in particular, felt that systems of integration between independent and public schools needed to be set up so that information and resources could be better shared between these systems. The following discussion explores these issues and concerns relating to ‘protection’ versus ‘isolation’ as the byproducts of independent religious schooling.

Racism and opting out of public schools

In comparing their experiences in public schools and Islamic school, many themes emerged from the student narratives. Students spoke of their experiences of disenfranchisement in the public school system and how their transition to Islamic schools allowed them to feel a greater sense of belonging. For example, trying to ‘fit in’ and accommodate to the social and cultural mores of the public school environment involved various aspects of cultural identification and practice, such as what kind of food it was ‘safe’ to bring to school that would not lead to ostracism from other students. Nusaybah, a 16-year-old Grade 11 student of Pakistani descent attending the Al Rajab school, talked about how she finally felt comfortable bringing the kind of food she ate at home to school without the judgment and negative reactions from other students:

See here it’s like Islam, so if you’re Pakistani you can bring samosa, you can bring leftover food from the night before and it’s like no one’s going to care. It’s like, ‘Oh whatever’. But

in public school, if you bring a sandwich and if it's like even slightly the weirdest thing they'll be like, 'Ooo why are you doing?! Why are you eating that?' So you pretty much have to stick to peanut butter in public school.

Having to 'stick to peanut butter in public school' is a powerful metaphor for the dominance of Eurocentric practices within the culture of mainstream public schools where any deviance from these socially enforced norms results in being labeled 'weird' and, in Nusayabah's case, being forced to conceal any evidence of 'ethnicness'. Mundane experiences such as these lunchroom encounters actually have a profound effect on the identity and cultural self-esteem of ethnically minoritized students.

Parents also reported negative encounters when they approached public schools to register their children. Qassim and Sobia were Canadian-born parents of a 4-year-old son also at the Al-Shawwal Islamic school. They were both of Trinidadian origin and in their mid-20s. While Sobia grew up attending Canadian schools, Qassim had returned to Trinidad for much of his schooling and had converted to Islam from Hinduism during his teens. During our interview, Sobia reported experiencing negative receptions from public schools when trying to enroll their son for kindergarten. They discussed how this impacted their decision to send their son to an Islamic school instead:

Jasmin: What made you decide to choose an Islamic school out of all the choices that you have?

Sobia: Well, we just moved to the area and I went to the public school and I was rudely insulted there, and I was like, forget it!

Jasmin: What do you mean insulted?

Sobia: They acted as if I had no knowledge of being in Canada in terms of filling out an application form or anything. And I was just like, if this is what the administration's like for this school, I can't imagine how the whole school would be run.

Qassim: I think more and more I find that public schools are not meeting the needs of a diverse population. I think it pretends to be inclusive and it is in fact quite discriminatory. And I don't want my child to be placed in an environment where he is being discriminated against.

Sobia's experience of being treated as an immigrant who was not perceived by school officials as having the cultural capital required to even fill out an application for her son. This was particularly insulting for Sobia, who was Canadian-born and yet had the label of 'foreigner' inscribed on her body because she was racially minoritized and wore *hijab*. Based on their experiences with public education, Sobia and Qassim felt that placing their son in an Islamic school would allow him to build a strong sense of identity and self-esteem, free from racial and religious bias and discrimination.

School as family

As a result of the racialized pressures and exclusions encountered by many Muslim youth in public schools, being able to fit in and be accepted in Islamic schools was a

significant theme in the narratives of students. Students reported feeling less social differentiation on the basis of race, class or culture in the Islamic school environment in comparison with public schools. A particularly salient theme in the student narratives was the way in which students characterized being in an Islamic school as being in a familial setting. Many students talked about the school and the relationships that existed among students and teachers as being ‘like a family’ and said that they felt that Islamic schools had more of a safe and comfortable environment for Muslim students than did the public schools. Amal,³ an 18-year-old Arab student from Kuwait, described the welcoming environment she encountered in the Al-Rajab school and how ‘kind’ other students were when she first came to the school. Amal had only been in Canada for three years and spent the first two years attending a public school. At the time of our interview she had been in Islamic school for one year. For Amal, the relationships with friends and teachers that she developed in the Al-Rajab school became like a surrogate family:

Uh, what I like is—or the most important thing for me is—friends. Like my friends, we have the same beliefs. We can get together, we all like the same things. And the thing is like the teachers they are more like sisters and brothers to us than teachers. We’re like ... we’re free here. We can talk and express our opinions because—of course we have the same beliefs and the same religion—and the thing is they understand. They are more understanding and we are like a community—like a small family. Not like public school. It’s like I was really scared there. I had nobody there and the teachers were like strangers to me. Here it’s more like a sense of community. I remember from back when I first came to this school it was like: OK, this is so familiar to me.

Saira, a 14-year-old student of Pakistani descent, who had recently transferred from the public school system to the Al-Safar Islamic school, had similar sentiments, referring to her school as being like ‘a big family and a community, everyone can rely on each other, we can help each other’.

Other participants also stressed the role of Islamic schools in creating spaces of solidarity and community among Muslims. Ibrahim, a parent and community activist, originally from Sierra Leone, co-founded a grassroots organization that provides educational support and advocacy for Muslim families dealing with the public school system and Islamic schools. He spoke of Islamic schools as sites where community solidarity could be fostered in a way that would counteract ‘tribalism’ or the fragmentation of Muslims into ethnic-based enclaves, by providing a mechanism for fostering greater cohesion on the basis of a common Islamic identity:

Also, another goal of Islamic education, or Islamic school, is the reinforcement of the whole question of solidarity among Muslims—children as well as parents—because we’re united in faith. And we’re united in building the bond of brotherhood and sisterhood within Islam. I think most times, as it is in the mainstream, this is where these relationships are reinforced so that kids, teachers, identify more as Muslim—much more so than where we come from. Because we always say that, you know, Islam is one body and we are brothers and sisters. But I think we have not acted this out in our daily interaction and I think schooling allows that possibility to happen. You know, as kids grow up in these schools, the colour line is erased. They begin to see more and more of each other as children who are the same—not thinking about where they come from.

Deqa, a 16-year-old Grade 12 Somali student who had attended the Al-Rajab school for three years, also saw Islam as a force of social cohesion among the culturally diverse student body in her school: 'We're all from so many different countries and different backgrounds and we all have different cultures, but the only aspect that brings us together is Islam. So this makes Islam more pure to us'.

Ali, an 18-year-old OAC student of Bangladeshi descent who had attended the Al-Rajab school for three years, also associated his relationship with teachers and fellow students to that of a 'family' situation. He referred to teachers as 'brothers' in a familial sense, which, although a common reference in the Muslim community where people customarily refer to one another as 'brothers' or 'sisters' within Islam, held a higher significance of being more as a 'true' family. He remarked that he felt he received more attention from teachers in the Islamic school and felt that this was qualitatively different and more positive than his treatment in the public schools. In the same vein, Deqa felt that the school provided her with a more 'comfortable environment'. When I asked her if she felt that she faced any challenges in the Islamic school, she replied that there were greater challenges outside the school than inside:

Challenges? Maybe you better ask somebody else because I can't think of any challenges. It's not too difficult, because it's actually more challenging to be outside because then you have to deal with more stuff. Around here all you have to deal with is being around fellow Muslims and just discussing faith, it's basically like a much more comfortable environment.

Being in a faith-centred environment, therefore, provided a source of comfort, familiarity, safety, and cultural congruence. Yet critics of separate schools argue that this sense of 'safety' and comfort breeds an unhealthy insularity by secluding these children and youth from other non-Muslim peer groups.

Non-Muslim friends

Many students spoke of their relationship with friends from outside the community. Saira, who was a recent migrant into the Islamic school system, noted that although the majority of her friends were from public school and were not Muslim, the friends that she had made at the Al-Safar school in only the past year were actually closer to her. She felt that this was because they had more in common from an Islamic point of view and that they had a better understanding of her feelings and experiences as a young adolescent Muslim girl, since their experiences were similar. Noora, a classmate of Saira's who was also 14-years-old and of Guyanese descent, had been one of the first students to enroll at Al Safar when it began in 1993. She also found it easier to socialize with Muslim friends, arguing that non-Muslim friends are a more likely source of negative peer pressure and often don't understand and question the religious lifestyle that they have chosen: 'With your non-Muslim friends, they don't understand you, and they'll keep questioning you about your religion, and they might not only ask just to know, they might ask to try to shake you or to bend you'.

Many students noted changes in their relationship with their non-Muslim friends due to the shift in values and perspectives many of them had when they became part

of the Islamic school environment. This reflected more of a sense of ‘growing apart’ from these friends, rather than a deliberate attempt to distance themselves. Iman, a 17-year-old Grade 12 Somali student who had attended the Al Rajab school for three years, spoke of the changes in social practices that students underwent as they acclimatized to the new values and mores of the Islamic school, leaving behind often un-Islamic practices from their public school days.

When you come into an Islamic environment, people tend to change a lot of the time. So it’s like calling up an old friend and that person might have been the same or might have even changed worse, but you’re like more on the positive side.

Deqa also agreed, noting that since ‘Islam was an everyday thing’ she found it more comfortable to share friendships with fellow Muslims.

Among the male students, there were similar sentiments about needing to be with Muslim friends or resist the negative peer pressure that many of their friends outside of school encouraged. Yet they felt that the moral grounding that they received from Islamic school did enable them to build resistances to negative peer pressure. Sabbir, 19, and Saadi, 17 years old, were brothers and both had been attending the Al-Rajab school for 18 months. They were both born in Canada but are of Pakistani descent. They reflected upon their new interactions with friends they left behind in public school:

Yeah, I still have non-Muslim friends who I used to hang around even before I was in the public schools. I still hang around them now, but you don’t get influenced by their ideas. We don’t get influenced by non-Islamic culture. But they are still my friends. They respect the fact that I’m Muslim. They always have. There are some people who don’t accept you because you are Muslim especially in the area that I live now. (Sabbir)

I have a lot of Jewish friends too. We don’t discriminate at all. Just because we go to a Muslim school, when we come out, it’s not like we can only talk to Muslim people. It’s not like that at all. (Saadi)

It is significant that both Saadi and Sabbir maintained ties with non-Muslim friends who came from different cultural backgrounds and faith communities. They demonstrated that religious schooling need not be a form of ‘religious apartheid’ and that it was possible to maintain cross-cultural and interfaith ties outside of school.

Ghettoization

The fact that Islamic school students were, by and large, open to maintaining ties with non-Muslim friends from outside of school, despite their noted concerns about negative peer pressure, goes a long way to dispel attitudes against religious schooling on the grounds that it breeds the insularity of already marginalized groups. Students parents, and teachers addressed the criticisms leveled against independent parochial schools as being ‘religious ghettos’. Farida and Shazad, Guyanese parents in their mid-30s from the Al Safar Islamic school, pointed out, for example, that a certain amount of isolation was necessary in order to ‘minimize the risks’ of children falling into unacceptable kinds of behaviour that exist within mainstream culture. Farida

went on to note how the inculcation of values in a separate and culturally congruent environment was necessary to first build a sense of identity within Muslim children that would then help them integrate into mainstream society without losing their Islamic values and identity:

I guess that some of the things they're being taught in the public school, and you have to, like, you know, just wonder what, because they teach them things that are non-Islamic too, and you want to isolate them from some of that when they're young so that, not that you don't want them to be exposed, but if you give them too much of that, they will eventually be, so you try to isolate them and gear them into Islam as early as possible. Eventually they'll be going into the public system. You're preparing them for that too but they'll be stronger as their identity builds.

There were some concerns, however, that without more engagement with the mainstream society, some schools did run the risk of socially and intellectually isolating their students. Even among Muslims, there were negative stereotypes attached to the idea of Islamic schools. Shahnaz noted that many of her family and friends from back home in India were opposed to her decision to send her daughter to Islamic school:

My in-laws, everyone, they said, you know, 'Why are you putting her in an Islamic school?' My friends—they're calling from India, 'Why are you putting her in an Islamic school? You're in Canada! You should put her in the public school system. You know, why are you making her backward like that? And why are you doing this to her?' They weren't against the *hijab* or the Islamic dress code or anything, but they were just, you know, she's going to go out in the real world. Why do you want her to be just sheltered like that in the school system?

Shahnaz's family and friends back home saw social and cultural integration as the goal of schooling for their diasporic relatives in Canada. The fact that they felt that keeping Shahnaz's daughter in an Islamic school would not only be sheltering her from mainstream society but also be making her more 'backward' in the process is indicative of the way that, due to the colonial legacies and growing western cultural imperialism and hegemony, Muslims equate westernization with progress, and view tradition and faith as an anachronistic hold on less socially desirable traits.

Rukhsana, a mother of three children attending the Al Safar school who was of Pakistani descent, felt that having an Islamic education should not stand in the way of being active participants and contributors in society and was critical of those who allowed themselves to become too insular:

OK, they obviously should have the Islamic teaching but they should have to integrate in society. They can't be just Muslim. You have to be Muslim, obviously, but you can show that you can contribute to society. You can get involved in the community, you know, do something volunteer. There's food banks. There's a lot of things that they can get involved in. They're an integral part of the society. We can contribute to the society. We can contribute with our academics. There are hundreds of ways to contribute but they're not contributing. They want to stay within themselves. They don't want to spread out. I don't know why.

Sister Mehrun, the principal of the Al-Safar school, also disagreed with the perspective that Islamic schooling disallowed Muslim children to have healthy interactions

with children from different religious and cultural backgrounds. She argued that children from her school were engaged in activities outside of school that put them in contact with people from the broader community, and that the self-esteem and confidence they were developing in their own identities as Muslims were just as important as cross-cultural interaction.

We are living in the society—we are not that completely isolated—the children go shopping, the children are watching television, they go for picnics and all that, and you know they are aware. But at the same time, I think having a good self-concept and being comfortable with who they are, is just as important. And after all, basically I came from another country and I don't think so I had any trouble adjusting to the society. So those children that are growing up here they are not completely isolated. *Insha'allah* [God willing], once they are older, they will have a good understanding, maybe a better understanding than what we have.

Therefore, in Mehrun's view, the children from her school were being equipped to deal with their identities as Muslims and being rooted in their own sense of identity was the basis for developing an understanding and knowledge of others. Leila, a Grade 12 student of Somali descent who attended the Al-Rajab school, had similar sentiments, arguing that being prepared to live out their identities as Muslims provided them with the life skills that they needed to maintain their identity within the plurality of society and to develop a basis from which they could interact with others:

Well, you know being prepared in the sense of not being out there it's not such a big deal, cuz' like you take the bus with everybody. It's like our lives interact with different people, but it's just that the school prepares us Islamically—giving us an Islamic perspective on how to deal with everybody- and in that sense they are preparing us, like for the world.

Other students were offended by the suggestion that they were isolated or that they were not aware of the world outside of them. In my interview with Zarqa, Aliyah, and Nusaybah, 17-year-old Grade 11 students of South Asian and Afghani descent, they were defensive of their choice to be in an Islamic school and did not feel that it impinged on their ability to know about other cultures and ways of life. They also defended the choice of those who wanted to focus on their own faith as a central aspect of their education:

But like you have a right to your own religion, and if you want to put yourself into a box and only do your religion and only know about your religion it's your choice. It shouldn't matter. I know it's like a good thing to know about other religions and respect other religions and understand other religions, but how to explain it? (Zarqa)

You should also know about your own. (Aliyah)

Countering the argument made by liberal theorists that being among a diverse community of students in public schools allows for greater opportunities to gain cross-cultural knowledge, the students argued that the Eurocentric hegemony of the public school meant that their learning centred on Anglo-Canadian traditions and history and prohibited learning about other cultures, as they discuss in the following exchange:

- Jasmin: What about the opportunity to, say, learn about different cultures?
Zarqa: That's good. I think that's a really good idea.
Aliyah: But we've learned that. We've been learning all our lives before we came here. We've been learning about other people's religions, other people's holidays, other people's things. The teachers they'll be talking about what the Inuits did in the olden days, or what the Christians did. They talk about all that stuff, but you don't really hear them talk in a positive way about Muslims.
Nusaybah: But like Islam was never really talked about in public school. And only like the French holidays, or the English holidays, not like Chinese holidays or Buddhist holidays. None of those are really respected or taught in public school anyways, so how are you supposed to know about other cultures? I only know about Christianity and Hinduism from Indian movies, right? But those are the only three religions that I know, they don't really teach you in public school or you don't learn from other people.

Therefore, as they argued, they learned more about other religious ways of life from 'Bollywood movies' than they did from their public schooling. Opportunities to learn about other cultures and faiths from their peers was also limited, they noted, since most minoritized youth were more concerned with conforming to the traditions of the dominant culture or going to malls than discussing the finer points of theology:

I don't know that they really show you their culture. They all act that one culture, they all act that one Canadian, typical Christmas, Halloween, whatever. (Zarqa)

You won't have the Hindus talking about their temple or whatever, they all talk about malls, clothes, they don't talk about their religion anyways, so what's the point? (Aliyah)

Students noted that the cultural demographics of Islamic schools, where Muslims from South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, as well as North American converts could be found, was very diverse. Therefore they did not feel 'cheated' out of having access to cultural diversity by being in an Islamic school. Deqa, for example, did not feel that being in an Islamic school was an impediment to understanding and engaging in Canadian multiculturalism since Islamic schools already had a culturally diverse student body:

I think that's especially not true for Islamic schools because we're so like, multicultural and in that sense we are very open-minded and we accept each other's different cultures. And even though we have Islam as what is bring us together, we also have many things that are different. And that's why we accept each other in that way and we do deal with people—outside people basically and it's not like a big deal. And it's not like we get a shock outside later on.

Religious diversity was taken up at the high school level through world religion courses that were offered as electives, as they are in public schools. I was very impressed by some of the projects that the Grade 10 world religion students presented at an exhibition of the school's work at a local civic centre. One group of students had prepared a PowerPoint presentation on Buddhism and another group had constructed a model of a concentration camp in their presentation of Jewish history. This demonstrated to me that these students not only had access to knowledge of

other faith communities but also had an interest in learning about other religions and developed their presentations with both pride and respect.

In elementary schools there were less curricular opportunities to integrate knowledge of other cultures, since Islamic schools followed the same Eurocentric curriculum mandated by the Provincial Government as did public schools. Teachers in these schools individually tried to make their curriculum more inclusive, since, as Ruqayyah, a teacher at the Al Safar school, noted, she did not want the children to grow up as if they were ‘living in a bubble’:

That’s something [ghettoization] that I know myself—and I know some of the other teachers—we are scared of sometimes that it might happen. But, *insha’allah*, I won’t because I want them to realize that they have to learn about everything. They have to interact with everybody. So that’s my main take. I personally have received criticism about teaching things like the Olympics. Some parents think it’s an un-Islamic thing. Not all of the parents, just a couple. But I said—without getting defensive—that I understood where they were coming from, but that to me is almost like living in a bubble. There are so many non-Muslims that know more about us than we do about them. I just think it’s important for them to learn about everyone and everything. We’re back to the Prophet of Islam. He knew about everyone. He knew about all the lifestyles and everything. And there’s no harm in learning just for the sake of knowing and thinking, OK, this is what this group does, and this is what that group does.

Ruqayyah, therefore, was attentive to the need for students to have a broad education that included knowledge of other ways of life aside from their own and she situated this as integral to the practice of the Prophet Muhammed as an example for all Muslims to follow. Nevertheless, she also had to contend with the narrow viewpoints of some parents who expected only Islamic knowledge to be represented—a position very much in contrast to the historical Islamic traditions of pedagogy and knowledge production that built upon the earlier knowledge of the Greeks. Ruqayyah feared that such attitudes and the absence of a multicultural curriculum would lead to divisive social attitudes that would lead students into reproducing the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy as a means of relating to the world outside the school.

I hope, *insha’allah* [God willing], we’re not ghettoizing them because I know it’s not just me, myself, I know a lot of the teachers are teaching them about different things, different projects. Last year I was teaching about Native cultures. So, *insha’allah*, I hope we’re not doing that [ghettoizing]. It is scary because I don’t want any child coming out of the school having an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ approach.

Being attentive to the way that Islamic schooling could potentially lead to an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ way of thinking about the world is a significant concern. This is largely due to two reasons. The first is due to the current geo-political context and the impact of the post-9/11 world: the backlash against Muslims in North America, the bombing of Afghanistan, the war against Iraq, and the oppression of the Palestinians. As a result of these events, many Muslims feel victimized on a global scale and children are not immune to internalizing these feelings of oppression and resentment toward those complicit in the causes. The binary notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ framed within ‘the clash of civilizations’ paradigm popularized by Huntington (1993) have some saliency on a psycho-social level, where marginalized groups who are ‘otherized’ within dominant

discourses and geo-political narratives also return the gaze in equally distancing and pejorative terms.

The second factor in this dynamic is the relational narrative espoused by many religious leaders who refer to non-believers in their *khutbas*, or sermons, through the derogatory reference of *kafirs*. While Christians and Jews are referred to in the Qur'an as *Ahl al-kitab*, or 'people of the Book', referring to the common theological heritage shared by Christians, Jews and Muslims, the term *kafir* is reserved for apostates or non-believers. The term *kafir*, however, is a label often generically applied to non-Muslims and one that frames a particular reference point for Muslim children as they view others outside their community. In this way, some religious authorities use religious discourse in destructive ways to reinforce separatist boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims.

This was evident to Bilquees, a teacher in her late 60s, of Indian descent, from the Al Shawwal school, who saw such attitudes trickling down from the religious leaders who were also administrators of the school. She discussed the inappropriateness of these attitudes and her resistance in seeing these reproduced within the school:

I think, they do get the feeling oh, we are Muslims, they do get that identity eventually, but in a way, they are kind of discriminating other kids, by saying that they are *kafir* and we are Muslim. That kind of attitude develops into them, between Muslims and non-Muslims a lot. Oh, those are *kafir* and we are Muslim, more like arrogance and you know pride. Of course, we are supposed to be proud of our religion, but not in the way that they are doing it. Like, oh yeah those are *kafir* schools or *kafir* this. And I said, don't say that, you know. It's not appropriate for us to say that. It's good to be a good Muslim, but you cannot put down somebody else.

Bilquees resisted the construction of an Islamic identity through 'arrogance' or self-righteous pride, in a way that was constituted through the construction of the abject social difference of non-Muslims. She rightly argues that these attitudes, espoused by some community leaders, were themselves un-Islamic, and she felt that it was important that the schools did not reproduce this cultural ignorance among students.

Other teachers also spoke of the need to make sure that children grew up with an open mind and were tolerant of other social differences. Rima, a teacher in her mid 30s of Egyptian background, expressed fears that children were too sheltered in their Islamic school environment:

We should equip them and have them open-minded to know what's going on out there ... not to live in that cocoon. That's another problem of having Islamic school environment is having to live in this cocoon—in our school anyway.

Both Ruqayyah and Rima—teachers from two different schools—used similar metaphors of 'enclosure' to express some of their fears and concerns regarding the possibilities of 'ghettoizing' students. They describe their concerns over students living in a 'bubble' or 'cocoon' as potential and sometimes actual byproducts of socially isolated Islamic school environments. In the case of the Al Shawwal school where Rima worked, many families were newcomers, having come to Canada as immigrants and refugees, which contributed to their social isolation. Their social ties were primarily through the Mosque community and the school. Children, therefore,

had less exposure to other environments. Many newcomer families from Muslim countries find it difficult to come to terms with what they see as an overly permissive society that legitimizes many practices that they see as contrary to Islam such as alcohol and pre-marital dating and sex (Berns-McGown, 1999; Shamma, 1999b; Zine, 2001). Islamic schools are more attractive, by contrast, since they provide a culturally congruent environment where family-centred values are reinforced.

At a forum on community education and activism, a Somali activist with a women's settlement organization described how Somali Muslim families saw children as their 'RRSPs'⁴—in other words, as an investment that would provide a 'return' to them in their old age when their children would be expected to provide for and look after them. She explained that many families feared losing their children to the dominant social mores of western culture, which was based more on individualism at the expense of communal and familial responsibilities. Islamic schools, in this sense, were viewed more as a means of protecting their children and, therefore, protecting their investment in the future of their family and community.

De-segregation and integration into public schools

Other participants did acknowledge the 'ghettoizing' effects of segregated schooling that may make transitions to public secondary or post-secondary institutions more difficult. Bilquees acknowledged the problems of integration without adequate preparation:

If we are isolating our children from the rest of the world, and eventually when they go into high school or say even after high school, we have university that will not be an Islamic university or anything, so they eventually have to merge into some system that is not going to be Islamic. So if the child is not prepared from the beginning to go into these institutions, how is he going to progress? You know, I don't understand how we can do that. (Bilquees)

Sakhina, a teacher in her late 20s at the Al Rajab girls' high school who was of Pakistani descent, had similar concerns about making sure students would be prepared to integrate and succeed in post-secondary schooling. She noted that ghettoization was a dual process; one that occurred as the result of how those looking at the school from the outside regard the students as being culturally apart from dominant norms and then how the students themselves would relate to the outside world:

The people who were outside looking in would see these girls in their [Islamic style] uniforms. And it's like, 'what goes on in there?' That sort of thing. The people who were inside looking out—like the students themselves—sometimes they don't know how to interact with our society and they have to learn. So I'm for the Islamic schools but I'm also afraid of that whole ghettoizing aspect. Are we going to be able to function in society?

Students, therefore, seemed to exist within a fish bowl, where they were being scrutinized by those on the outside and yet were so contained in their own environment that the fear was that they might literally feel like fish out of water once they had to integrate into mainstream schools and institutions.

Amira, a teacher of Pakistani descent in her mid 30s from the Al Safa Islamic school, also agreed that students had a certain distance from the dominant culture but argued that they were not completely cut off from their social or cultural surroundings. She echoed the views of some students who felt that being in public school was more isolating in many ways for Muslim students who are living a faith-centered lifestyle:

Well, in terms of knowing what's out there, all of them, like, they live in a society where they see the kind of things that go on. They know, they are sort of aware of the things non-Muslims do. But it's sort of at a distance. Its not, like, when they're at high school they're put in an environment where they will feel like the oddballs and there will be pressure to be like the others.

Peer pressure was also a concern regarding students who would be migrating out of the safety of the Islamic school environment and be facing many social and cultural challenges in the public school system. The process of desegregation and the student's preparedness for resisting the negative peer pressure that they would likely confront, such as the pressure to date or use recreational drugs and alcohol, were issues of concern to parents and teachers. For Amani, an Ethiopian teacher in her early 30s from the Al Safar school, some fears were allayed by the recent graduates from her school who went on to high school and were successful both academically and in maintaining their Islamic identity in the face of social challenges and pressures to conform to mainstream norms:

I'm glad you brought that up because this is one of the concerns that all parents have. They constantly worry: are they going to be able to handle [public] high school? Like last year we had our first graduates so in fact we want them to come back and tell us how they survived their first year, to talk to the Grade 8s that are about to graduate and to tell them, you know, I mean they were hearing lots of myths about how bad the high schools, public schools are. ... I always tell my students: If you know who you are and you feel confident about yourself and your identity and your place in this society, you can go anywhere and survive, you can go to the moon, you can go to Mars.

Receiving a faith-centred learning that rooted these students in their sense of identity, self, and purpose in life was, for teachers like Amani, the key to preparing students to negotiate their identities and experiences in mainstream society and still retain their Islamic way of life. She felt that students needed guidance and support to make the right choices in their lives:

Even right now, as Grade 8s we keep telling them they're the role models and the ambassadors. So we're preparing them, psychologically we're preparing them that you know, you guys are now mature adults, you can make your own choice, you can be responsible. And the other thing also that we tell them is that you always know where to come when you need help. Like we try, we give them a support system.

Amira also pointed out that, from an Islamic point of view, as many of these students reach puberty they cross the threshold from childhood into adulthood and, therefore, are now considered accountable to Allah for their religious obligations. With a limited number of Islamic high schools, many Muslim adolescents migrate into public schools during this period, when the onus is on them to be spiritually

responsible and accountable for maintaining their five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and other religious requirements. Therefore, she argued that the need for developing life skills starts early in their schooling through inculcating a form of values education to help guide students toward making correct moral choices in their behaviour and actions when they leave the more regulated environment of the Islamic school:

What we do, starting from Grade 6, we start teaching them, we start telling them, like you know, it's high school, this is what you're going to encounter ... and then also we start telling that they're going to be their own decision makers, and that being in an Islamic school, there are teachers everywhere so there will always be someone there to pull you back and say, 'You know, you shouldn't be doing this', so that will no longer exist in high school. So we tell them ... no one is going to tell you, your parents will probably never find out what you do in high school, so ... the onus is on them, they have to make their own choices. And that we have tried our best to show them the choices and what the consequences are for the choices. A lot of that starts in Grade 6 ... you know, relationships, drugs, everything that is encountered. And we talk, openly and frankly about all these things, especially the relationship with boys and girls and dating. We talk about the consequences and what can happen ... [sexually transmitted] diseases and things like that. So, we sort of tell them that it's between you and Allah, and you have to seriously start saying to yourself, Oh, what choice do I want to make? Do I want to make one that goes towards the straight path? Or do I want to make one that's going to lead me to the wrong path?

Teachers described several strategies that they had already implemented to help students make the transition into public schools. For example, Amira explained the steps taken at the Al Safar school to create dialogues and discussions around peer pressure. The majority of the teachers in Al Safar had grown up in Canada attending public schools, 'unlike most teachers in other local Islamic schools who were more recent immigrants. These teachers had a greater understanding of the challenges that their students would be facing and were conscious of the need to develop proactive strategies to help them cope:

Like we have to, we just have to be very open about it. Um, because I don't think they're that open about it with their parents. We talk about gangs, being involved in certain cliques or groups in high school, or doing things because a group is doing it, we even had some seminars on gang violence, and things like that. We had the police come in and they were talking about consequences and the Young Offenders Act, and what constitutes arrest and so and so, so they have a better idea. ... And, that's all we can do, and just pray that they will make their life choice, cause there's no longer someone watching you or someone telling you, or someone even enforcing ... like if someone just goes and starts using foul language in every sentence, like who's going to enforce it? Whereas if they're with us, okay yeah, they're going to be in trouble, it's a big deal.

Students migrating out of Islamic schools, therefore, become more morally responsible for their behaviour, where un-Islamic practices like swearing, as Amira pointed out, that are highly sanctioned in Islamic schools, become more common and less regulated by public school authorities.

Sakhina felt that the key to integration was through community engagement through individual and school-based interactions:

I think the key is through community work. Not necessarily with Muslim organizations but non-Muslim organizations too. Like community service where the school, as a community, goes to a senior citizens' home ... you know, because I think, like, work within the community that way. If you're working with senior citizens, you're working with the elderly. You're helping them. Go to the library and be part of a reading club for young kids who come there.

Sakhina felt that opportunities like these needed to be sought out by Islamic schools since they provided the type of interaction that would be consistent with their religious values rather than being a compromise. Some of the Islamic schools were involved with public schools through track meets and science fair competitions, which allowed opportunities for collegial interaction through sports and academic events. Teachers spoke of the need to develop more opportunities like these, such as through spelling bees or speech competitions that would create further linkages and networks between the local public and independent schools.

Independent schools were not seen as being completely separate from the public system since students often migrated back and forth between these systems and Islamic school students eventually graduated and moved on to public high schools or universities. Therefore, it was felt that the public schools should have a vested interest in the students in the Islamic schools since many would, at some time, have to reintegrate into public education. Rima had some concrete recommendations and requests for support from public schools that would help fill some of the resource gaps in the Islamic school and help students make their transitions into the public education system smoother, such as the assistance of guidance counselors or English as a second language (ESL) support. However, she added that because of pervasive racism and Islamophobia, there was still a lack of trust with the mainstream system and how guidance counselors, for example, might respond to issues in the community by calling in Children's Aid authorities and having children removed to non-Muslim homes:

Bringing in some of the helpers that could help the kids could be from outside in the public school system if we could get them, like guidance counselors or remedial help would be good. Maybe guidance helpers are limited though because if somebody gets hit or something, you know, they get abused at home or somebody's going to complain, then it's going to be more of a problem for our community. We're being alienated in dealing with organizations like Children's Aid because of the way they're treating us. And so that alienates us. You know, this is very important, but at the same time I don't want to make more problems for our community. I know the Children's Aid is very prejudiced so we feel that even though some kids might need their help, we don't tend to go to them because of what they might do.

Rima's fears of turning to guidance counselors or Children's Aid come from a history of experiences where these authorities have been quick to remove children from their homes before abuse could be corroborated. For example, at Rima's school a child of one of the teachers had been removed from the family on allegations of abuse laid by doctors when the mother brought the child in to seek medical assistance. Police came to the school and interviewed this teacher's Grade 1 students to see whether she had been abusive toward them, and her other children were

removed from her care. Two weeks later, medical tests determined that the child had not been abused but suffered from a chemical imbalance in his brain. Members of the community charged this as a case of Islamophobia that caused authorities to act against the parent and level suspicion against the school before other medical possibilities were ruled out. Community fears of differential negative treatment by authorities are, therefore, often a barrier to seeking out professional help and services, and many prefer to deal with situations of conflict or distress internally with the help of religious leaders, rather than being potentially exposed to mistreatment.

In other ways local public schools have stepped in to provide logistical support to Islamic schools. For example, sister Mehrun, the principal of the Al-Safar school, described the connections she fostered with a local public school to provide various kinds of support to the school, particularly in a crisis situation:

We invited the principal [from the public school] and we took them to dinner as well and showed the whole building, the office. Two years ago we went and borrowed some equipment for our play day, like ropes or whatever. And also we made an arrangement with them, in case of an emergency, you know, because they're on a main road and being a Muslim school and place of worship, in case of threats, or some kind of problem like that bomb threat, we made an arrangement with them to go to their school.

Evacuation planning became imperative after the Oklahoma City bombing when Islamic centres across North America, including Al-Safar, received bomb threats as Muslims and Arabs were mistakenly accused of the terrorism. The alert was high again right from the day of the September 11th attacks. By the afternoon of September 11th, Muslim men from the community left their work early and formed a security perimeter around Al-Safar, which is both a Mosque and a school, for fear of attacks—despite the fact that it was not yet known who was responsible for the acts. The burden of collective guilt and punishment for the tragedy of September 11th has left an imprint on the way Islamic schools and centres now regard their own safety in the community.

Interestingly, students pointed to the lack of Government funding for Islamic schools and society's lack of knowledge of Muslims as the main factors contributing to their 'ghettoization', as the following OAC students from the Al Rajab school explained:

Some of the challenges will be like, the school, its not Government-funded so there's a lot more, you know, involvement amongst the community and yourself, so in public school everything is basically given to you in your lap basically. You just come to school, write the stuff and then just go home, right. Here it's a lot more harder than that, because like I said the school is not properly equipped sometimes. (Daood)

See, we're not subsidized. Being segregated from different communities doesn't mean that we're not aware of the things that are going on, the social conflict going on around the world. But like, we pretty much know a lot of these things. We hear things but we're just not like in tune with them all the time. (Iman)

And just because this is Islamic school, they might not think that we're well educated, right? And that's a problem. (Summaya)

The Ministry of Education come in and they check out our school, the work that we're doing, you know look at the binders and stuff. We're pretty much like normal people.

There's no difference, just the religion, being tight with your religion, that's the number one key. (Iman)

Therefore in their view, the issue of being separated out was an effect of the discriminatory funding policies of the Government and the way in which they felt positioned by the dominant society and culture, rather than a conscious attempt by Muslims to self-exile from society. Students clearly respond to the peer support, religious freedom and camaraderie that Islamic schools engender, but do not see themselves as essentially living separatist lifestyles or not being conscious of the world around them. In other words they do not see centring their Islamic identity as a negation of their Canadian identity or their role as active citizens.

The challenge for both public and Islamic educational systems is to develop ways to have a complimentary co-existence as parallel systems that implicate one another. More inclusive funding formulas may provide a means to keep independent religious schools within the public purview at the same time offering alternative faith-based education for families who choose a more spiritually-centred education. Such an arrangement can avoid the segmentation of schools into separate cultural and religious enclaves that have no connection with one another. A system that engenders more cooperation and interaction between the various religious and secular public schools would provide a mutual opportunity for growth and learning. Secular Eurocentric schooling in Canada can no longer masquerade as an ideologically neutral space when it affirms particular identities and discourses and marginalizes others. By recognizing religious pluralism as a positive and intrinsic aspect of society, a truly inclusive school system centring the knowledge and experience of communities on the margins would weather well the challenge of social fragmentation along racial and religious lines.

Notes

1. I use the term 'minoritized' to refer to the social, political, economic and cultural forces that conspire to relegate world majority groups of people to a subordinated status.
2. In a recent study of schools, religion and public funding, Parker-Jenkins *et al.* (2005) outline a distinction between Muslim schools, schools for Muslims and Islamic schools in the European context. 'Muslim schools' are qualified as those where 'the intention is to develop an entire ethos consistent with religious values' where as the 'school for Muslims' have similar aspirations but in actuality tend to be schools characterized by a shared religious identity but where the integration of religious ethos and curriculum is not feasible due to staffing or financial constraints (p. 40). The authors note that greater access to state funding can help offset these concerns. What is qualified as an 'Islamic' school is a school where Islamic epistemology and praxis are embedded into the formal and hidden curricula and where all subjects are taught from an Islamic perspective (p. 40). In the Canadian context, schools overall aspire to this same ideal and therefore the term 'Islamic' schools is applied universally.
3. The names of participants and schools in this study are identified through the use of pseudonyms to protect their privacy and anonymity.
4. RRSP's refer to Canada's 'Registered Retirement Savings Plan' which is a retirement fund that individual can contribute a portion of their income, tax free. The saliency of this reference is as a metaphor for children being an investment for one's future.

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