

Muslim Schools in the United States and the Question of Citizenship

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Abstract

This study sought to describe how Muslim schools provide an educational experience that conformed to Islamic teachings, and at the same time prepared students to be contributing individuals to the common good of the American society. The purpose of this research was to determine how a Muslim school simultaneously addressed these two important goals: namely to educate students to be good Muslims and good American citizens. A sample of three schools in the Midwest was selected for the study based on their years of operation, grade levels, diversity, accreditation, and access. The author used interviewing techniques, observations and archival data to find answers to five main research questions. The findings of the study provided evidence that Muslim schools were one more chapter in the history of religious diversity and pluralism in America. Muslim schools brought together many immigrants from different countries of the world and connected families, students, and teachers to a common religious identity and a common aspiration to be full members of a modern society and citizens in a democracy. These schools represented a special blend of practical educational achievement and spiritual enrichment in an atmosphere that was tolerant and open to the larger society.

Keywords: *Muslim schools, citizenship, common good, educational goals*

1. Introduction

The United States is a society founded on religious freedom and the respect of individual liberty. Native and immigrant Muslims have found room in this pluralistic society to practice their Islamic faith and enjoy freedom of religion under the protection guaranteed by the Constitution. Rauf (2005) indicated in his book *What's Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West*, that "many American Muslims regard America as a better 'Muslim' country than their native homelands" (p. 86). This opinion is based on the argument that "the American Constitution and system of governance uphold the core principles of Islamic law." In addition, Rauf noted that the core Islamic values overlap with core American values, because the three Abrahamic religions –Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - share the two greatest commandments:

1. To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength
2. To love our neighbors –that is, our fellow human beings –regardless of race, religion, or cultural background as we love ourselves (p.1).

Muslim citizens of the United States concerned with the preservation of their faith and securing a good future for their children have invested their efforts to establish schools that cater to the academic, spiritual, and social needs of young Muslims. These institutions have increased in number and found their place among other religious schools in the United States. Thus they deserve to be studied thoroughly to examine their roles in instilling religious and citizenship values in the hearts and minds of Muslim children.

2. Method

This study was undertaken to present a deep understanding of the Muslim education experience in the United States. An important contribution towards this understanding was to find out the extent to which Muslim schools reflected the ideals of Islam, democracy, pluralism, and the common good of society. In

addition, this study sought to reveal the diversity and complexity of Islamic schools and the various interpretations by Muslim educators of the nature and practice of Islamic education in the American context. The main goal was to determine how Muslim educators from a number of schools simultaneously addressed both of the following goals: (a) To educate students according to the teachings of Islam in order to be good Muslims, and (b) to prepare students academically and socially in order to be good American citizens who contributed to the common good of society. The study was guided by these five research questions:

1. What was the nature and character of mission statements and goal statements in Islamic schools?
2. To what extent did schools' curricula and the teaching and learning experiences articulate the dual goals of teaching the critical tenets of Islam and key ideas about American citizenship?
3. To what extent did educators of Islamic schools share a common understanding of the dual goals of the Islamic school?
4. What was the nature of school-parent relationships as they related to these dual goals?
5. What was the nature of the relationship between the schools and the Muslim community, as well as the relationship to non-Muslim community?

The research design was based on the literature on qualitative and empirical research in addition to literature on cross-case analysis methodology. The sample of schools was drawn from online directories such as the Islamic Foundation of North America and the Islamic Schools' League of America. The League's directory included 223 schools, with their names, addresses, contact information, and Internet addresses if available. The list comprised eleven schools in the author's state of residence, of which ten were located in the state's largest city. Among them, one school was of the Madrasa-like type, which was excluded from the study because this research was limited to school-type institutions only. Another excluded school belonged to a fringe group considered by mainstream American Muslims as not conforming to the tenets of Islam. Thus, the population of schools decreased from eleven to eight schools. To select three schools from this small population, the author followed the sampling criteria listed below that established minimum requirements for inclusion in the study:

1. Years of operation: students had been graduating annually in the previous five years.
2. Grade levels: the school had at least all elementary and middle grades (Grade 1 to grade 8)
3. Diversity: the student population was comprised of different ethnic backgrounds.
4. Recognition or accreditation: the school was recognized by the state or accredited by a regional accreditation agency.
5. Access: the school officials gave the author access to conduct the study.

To determine eligibility, the author sought information directly from the administrators of the eight schools via telephone and email, and visited websites of the schools and professional organizations, including the Islamic Schools' League of America. Eventually, three schools fulfilled the eligibility requirements and were chosen as research sites for this study. After the sample of schools was selected, data were gathered from interviews, observations, and archival materials from electronic and print sources. Most of the data were important in highlighting the issues related to the research questions, but data from interviews and observations were more important in shedding light on the particular world of each school and in providing answers to many questions of the study.

Interviews

The author secured the school administrators' permission before accessing the three schools in order to recruit participants and conduct the interviews and observations. During the recruitment process, few educators were concerned about possible backlash in case their opinions and identities were made public. In the context of post 9/11 tragic events and the subsequent blaming of radical Muslims for what happened, such concerns were well understood and respected. Other educators were afraid that principals might punish them for their negative comments about the schools. To assuage their fears, the author

emphasized the confidentiality of schools and staff and avoided reference to 9/11 or school matters that might influence the participants' chances of being recruited.

The author approached 45 individuals among the 87 potential participants in the three schools, but only 28 educators were interviewed for this study, including teachers, principals, assistant principals, and board members. The total number of participants was made of 10 males and 18 females. The author used a pre-interview guide that included introductory notes about the nature of the study, participant's rights, and a letter of consent. No electronic recording device was used during the interviewing process due to some participants' concerns with their job and personal safety as described earlier.

Even though the author constructed 23 open-ended interview questions based on the five research questions of the study, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way to allow for new questions to be brought up as a consequence of interviewees' responses. More than thirty hours were spent in interviewing the 28 participants. The responses of participants to the questions were transcribed and coded using the Auerbach-Silverstein coding method to organize the transcripts and discover patterns within the responses. After the interview results were coded, there emerged themes related to duality of goals, religious pluralism, provision of an American education, and citizenship.

Observations

During visits to the three schools to conduct interviews, the author made random observations of school events, teaching and learning, students' behavior, staff-student relationships, and school displays that could provide evidence to support the research questions. The goal of observing the school was to get a full description of the educators' approach to the dual nature of their mission and to find practical answers to the research questions. Observations were done in classrooms, prayer hall, cafeteria, gymnasium, hallways, and wherever students were present.

Collection of Archival Materials

Archival materials were collected from many sources. The main source of information was the schools' administrations, which provided the author with historical facts, school publications, policies, and programs. The second source was the schools' websites, and the third source was Internet search engines such as Yahoo and Google.

3. Findings

Duality of Goals

The study described the three schools' core mission statements that articulated their dual goals of providing an Islamic education and preparing students academically and socially to be successful citizens. These goals found their practical implementation in the adoption of educational programs that educated the students in the knowledge of Islam and prepared them to be good Muslims. In addition, the three schools provided secular subjects that were aligned with the state standards and fulfilled the admission requirements of US colleges and universities.

The balanced duality of School A's goals was illustrated in its mission to teach students about "social awareness and responsibility through involvement in community causes", and educating "the whole child physically, spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally." Educators agreed on a balanced education that prepared students to be good Muslims and competent citizens. For example, one teacher indicated that her goal was to prepare students who "reflect the teachings of Islam and are good citizens of this country." School B's mission was "to provide excellent education in an atmosphere of faith and to prepare students to be life-long learners and contributing members of society." According to most educators, the environment in the school was conducive to the achievement of the above goals. For example, one teacher noted that the environment "protected students against the 3 V's: violence, vandalism, and vulgarities." For School C, the mission statement was "academic excellence in an Islamic environment,"

but according to some teachers, the emphasis was more on secular academics and less on Islamic subjects. The school administrators, on the other hand, believed that they provided a rich Islamic environment conducive to academic excellence in all subjects.

The study findings confirmed what ancient and modern Muslim scholars said about the aims and objectives of Islamic education. The upbringing of students according to Islamic teachings and guiding them through a holistic training of the soul, mind, and body found parallels in what Al-Ghazali (1983), Nasr (1984), Al-Attas (1999), and Yassine (2000) said about the goals of Islamic education. The findings also confirmed what Goodlad (1984) advanced in his book *A place called school* where he identified the ten major goals of American schools.

Religious Pluralism

The ideals of USA Founders have helped to establish a pluralistic society where followers of Islam, like other religious groups, have found a hospitable environment conducive to religious tolerance and freedom of worship. As a result of increasing immigration and conversion to Islam, Muslims in America have grown in number (almost 1% of the population according to the Pew Research Center in its report *American Muslims* published in 2007). In addition to mosques and Islamic centers, Muslims established schools to exercise their freedom to educate students according to Islamic teachings and to build a thriving community.

Educators characterized the three schools as pluralistic and diverse to a certain extent. Their student populations were predominantly Muslim but from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, including many from Arab and Asian ethnicities with few Black and White Americans. School A's relationship with the surrounding non-Muslim community was marred by controversy as the school's mosque project was blocked by the city council, which eventually resulted in court rulings in favor of the school. Without denying the right of Muslims to have a mosque on the school property, some educators feared negative reactions from the schools' neighbors, especially during the post 9/11 tense climate. Unlike School A, the other two schools enjoyed less contentious relations with their neighbors. Those relations were in fact tolerant and respectful, especially when the schools organized annual dinners and interfaith gatherings that were open to the local communities. One educator described the relationships with non-Muslims as very positive.

The findings of this study confirmed the changes in the American religious landscape that were articulated by Eck (2001) through her work in the Pluralism Project and reported in *A New Religious America*. In this book, she laid out two important facts about the American religious landscape, namely that the new American society was more religiously diverse and pluralistic than ever before, and that Muslim Americans were a vibrant part of the American pluralistic fabric as displayed by the growing number of their mosques and schools.

As educational institutions based on faith the three Muslim schools in this study were very similar to those Muslim schools portrayed in Eck's book. They provided an Islamic and academic education in an Islamic environment and facilitated the integration and assimilation of younger Muslim generations into the larger society through a process of acculturation in which they learned to express their faith and culture as integral members of a multi-faith and multi-cultural American society.

This study substantiated the belief of contemporary Muslim intellectuals in the United States such as Rauf (2005) who emphasized the role of Muslim educational institutions in affirming the identity of Muslim students as Americans and Muslims coexisting peacefully with Christians, Jews, and other faith members, and sharing the core values enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. Rauf indicated that "such educational programs would help assimilate new Muslim immigrants into American society and would help young, America-born, second-generation Muslims articulate the American Muslim dream to their own nation and to the world" (p. 261).

The author's observations and interviews in the three Muslim schools corroborated what Barrett (2007) and Merry (2005) found, namely that Muslim immigrants enjoyed high levels of education and income compared to other communities. The immigrant Muslim families, who constituted the great bulk of all families in the three Muslim schools, achieved their American dreams of becoming successful professionals and businesspeople while maintaining their religious beliefs and practices. They sought to help their children achieve their dreams by providing them with good education that prepared them for spiritual and academic excellence.

Provision of an American Education

In the three schools, non-religious curricula were based on state standards in elementary, middle, and high school phases. The secular curriculum in School A, which did not have a high school level, was adapted from a local school district and covered all subjects, including physical education. In Schools B and C, the high school programs were college preparatory and provided students with more electives and advanced placement courses. In addition to academic preparation, the schools supported the social and personal development of students through extracurricular activities that enhanced responsibility, social skills, and spiritual training. School C educators, for example, prided themselves upon the Islamic-rich curriculum and environment they provided to students.

The three schools were constantly engaged in activities that helped students learn the required subjects and achieve high academic standards. The daily lectures during morning assemblies and after prayers inculcated students with love of knowledge as an Islamic obligation. Educators often quoted in these lectures the well-known tradition of the Prophet: "seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" to emphasize the importance of learning and encourage students to excel.

These findings concerning the provision of a comprehensive education in the three Muslim schools substantiated Goodlad's ten major goals of American schools. Except for vocational goals that were not addressed by Muslim schools, the study findings showed the extent to which each school strived to achieve these goals in their academic, social, and personal levels despite financial and staffing challenges. Being accredited and recognized by regional and state agencies, these schools demonstrated their capacity to provide an education that was aligned with state standards and that met the ten major goals for US schools. In addition, the schools' records of academic achievements were a clear testimony to the educators' endeavors in this direction. Some students scored higher in college admission tests and were accepted into leading universities. Others won scholarships and awards at the local and state levels.

Citizenship

Educators in the three Muslim schools sought to establish communal and academically rigorous institutions in order to prepare students to be successful citizens. In addition, these students were looked upon as future leaders of the American Muslim community and symbols of its progress and development. The Muslim school environment encouraged students, teachers, and parents to establish communal relationships that went beyond the school daily life to encompass the religious and social lives of the community members. In School A, students cleaned up side streets and took part in helping the local public library. The school organized exchange visits with public and parochial schools, and invited Jewish students and local churches to talk to Muslim students. School C organized annual community dinners attended by non-Muslims and that were reported positively by the media.

There was also a clear evidence of how Islamic rituals played a pivotal role in building strong ties between the members of the school community. For example, in the holy month of Ramadan, a spiritual atmosphere permeated the schools as staff and students fasted during the day and donated generously to feed hungry people. This communal togetherness was based on the concept of community in Islam, which was regarded as "a human collectivity held together by religious bonds that are themselves the foundation for social, juridical, political, economic, and ethical links between its members" (Nasr, 2004, p. 161).

Furthermore, the academic programs and extra-curricular activities in the three schools prepared students with the skills necessary to succeed in high schools and colleges. They enhanced the children's abilities to practice Islam and learn Qur'an and Arabic, and they helped students to be more confident and well-adjusted to their social environment. This research found clear evidence of educators' efforts in preparing students to be equipped with Islamic morals and academic skills that enabled them to be responsible citizens. The daily activities and discipline codes emphasized a strict adherence to Islamic values and respect for established authorities and laws of the land. According to one teacher, the students seemed more American than their parents and were prepared to serve this country and perform their civic duties while keeping their Islamic identity. Another teacher noted that "the condition of Muslim students in this country is much better than in Muslim countries." Other educators commented that students identified easily with the American culture more than with their parents' traditions.

During the author's observations, there emerged strong evidence of respect and tolerance towards non-Muslim citizens. Students learned to respect and tolerate the People of the Book (Christians and Jews) as well as followers of other faiths. They showed a good understanding of the values and morals shared by these faiths and were able to relate them to Islamic traditions. Such values were reflected in the universal principles of the Declaration of Independence, for "it embodies and restates the core values of the Abrahamic, and thus also the Islamic ethic" (Rauf, 2005, p. 83). These humanistic values found their best modern expression in this concise and portentous paragraph:

That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness – that to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed. (p. 83)

The findings in this study indicated the Muslim schools' role as academic institutions delivering a good American education that prepared Muslim students to be good citizens of this country. They also confirmed the research findings by Bryk (1993) and his colleagues in their book titled *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* where the authors presented strong evidence of Catholic schools' contributions to the common good of the American society. At the core of their success were the development of a strong communal organization and the achievement of high academic standards that provided uniqueness to the Catholic education experience.

In reference to literature on other religious schools, this study corroborated most of what Devink (1996) wrote about the characteristics of Christian schools in the US. The Muslim schools' emphasis on fulfilling the spiritual, intellectual, and physical needs of students was similar to that of Christian schools except in fundamentalist Christian schools that were strikingly different from Muslim schools in terms of openness to the outside world and tolerance towards other faiths and denominations (Peshkin, 1986).

4. Conclusion

This study touched upon some critical issues that affected the way Muslim schools in the United States dealt with their dual mission of delivering an Islamic education that was consistent with Islamic teachings, and providing an academic education that prepared students to be good citizens and productive contributors to the common good. This study revealed that, by striving to achieve a strong communal system and high academic standards, the three Muslim schools demonstrated their valuable contributions to the common good of the American society by preparing educated and religious citizens who would abide by the laws of the land and enrich this pluralistic society. The findings showed that these schools created a balanced duality in their goals; they constituted natural consequences of America's religious pluralism; they provided a typical American education; and they strengthened citizenship. The schools achieved that by first assimilating students of many racial and ethnic origins into a strong American

Muslim ethos, and secondly by molding their minds and emotions through academic programs that enhanced pluralism and reinforced citizenship.

The study also uncovered areas of development that needed more emphasis and attention by school administrators and teachers, namely involving all stakeholders in formulating inclusive and dynamic mission statements, developing more opportunities for students to practice citizenship in their communities, and improving teaching and learning to prepare the best graduates.

In conclusion, this study provided evidence that Muslim schools were one more chapter in the history of religious diversity and pluralism in America. Muslim schools brought together many immigrants from different countries of the world and connected families, students, and teachers to a common religious identity and a common aspiration to be full members of a modern society and citizens in a democracy. These schools represented a special blend of practical educational achievement and spiritual enrichment in an atmosphere that was tolerant and open to the larger society.

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