January 2012

Schooling, Community, and Identity: The Perspectives of Muslim Girls Attending an Islamic School in Florida

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Schooling, Community, and Identity

The Perspectives of Muslim Girls Attending an Islamic School in Florida

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Date of Approval:
November 15, 2012

Keywords: Islamic Education, Arab Identity, Muslim Teenagers, American Muslim, Socialization, Ethnography

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the minorities, and the minorities within the minorities, who struggle to maintain the elements of their identity which are challenged by the majority, and who struggle equally to develop elements of their identity which are challenged by their own group.

I would like to thank my parents, Peter and Patricia Martinez, who prioritized my education above all else. It is their love, support, and sacrifice that have made this project possible. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for sharing your passion of culture and life with me. I continue to learn from you every day.

I would like to offer special thanks to my best friend Ann Persaud, and Angela Bookout, who inspire me daily to be and do my best. Thank you for your never ending love, support, encouragement, and reassurance. Together we will make a difference.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my thanks to the members of my committee: Rebecca K. Zarger, Ph.D., John Napora, Ph.D., and Darlene DeMarie, Ph.D. for their guidance in the development and execution of this project. Thank you for your time and your encouragement. Special thanks to Shumin Lin, Ph.D., who’s teaching inspired this research.

Special thanks to the administrators of the Florida Islamic School where I conducted my research. Without their support and cooperation this project would not be possible. Extended thanks to the teachers and students who welcomed me to their school, and who shared with me a part of themselves. This project is for you.
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ABSTRACT

As the number of Islamic institutions increases in America, the need for greater understanding of the Muslim community, and the challenges faced by this minority, increases as well. This project seeks to provide such knowledge by exploring one of these rapidly growing institutions founded and funded by Muslims, private Islamic schools. Absent from media and literature is an understanding of Islamic schools and the experiences of youth as their attendees. This project addresses this gap through an ethnographic focus on female students at one Islamic school. Data was collected via interviews, focus groups, observation, and participant observation. This student-centered approach provides qualitative insight on the perspectives of Muslim girls on identity, schooling, and community in order to foster greater understanding of the mission, social function, and practices of Islamic schools.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Well-rounded perspectives on Islam and Muslims in America are rarely seen or heard by the American general public. Media reports are focused on violence, extremism, and oppression, and we hear nothing of love, devotion, or families. In fact, we rarely hear about real people – mothers, fathers, daughters, sons – and seldom do we hear about what is important to them. This lack of knowledge only fuels negative sentiments toward the Muslim population, which is growing rapidly in this country and in others. As the number of Islamic institutions increases in America, the need for greater understanding of the Muslim community, and the challenges faced by this minority, increases as well. This project seeks to provide such knowledge by exploring one of these rapidly growing institutions founded and funded by Muslims, private Islamic schools.

American public and political discourse often portray Islamic schools as institutions that isolate Muslim youth and promote anti-American values (Haddad and Smith 2009, Cristillo 2009). Despite a spiked interest in the possible threat of Islamic schools, there are few works in academic literature that focus on Muslim schooling in the United States. Previous studies are parent- and/or teacher-
centered, and many of them remain unpublished. Scholars of American Islam have called for more literature on Muslim schools in the hopes that new directions in research will elucidate the importance of Islamic education to the Muslim community, and its multiple dimensions (Haddad and Smith 2009). This study answered Haddad and Smiths’ call, and took the approach of prioritizing student perspectives on Islamic schooling in relation to community and identity.

**Theorizing Muslim Schooling**

As social institutions with specific functions, schools play an important role in the inculcation of common, social principles, or the socialization of students, to participate and contribute to society (Durkheim 1956). Furthermore, schooling has been identified as playing a powerful role in the preservation and transmission of cultural values and culture capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). From this theoretical standpoint, it can be argued that as propagators of Islamic values and Muslim cultures, Muslim schools in the United States play a central role in the preparation of their students for membership in multiple communities, including local, national, and global Muslim communities, as well as local and national American secular communities. It can also be argued that an understanding of the daily practices of a school can lead to an understanding of the cultural, religious, and social values held by that school’s community.

Community membership is often studied in terms of social identity and a sense of belonging or commitment to one’s group (Tajfel and Turner 1986,
The development of identity is often described as a process (Erikson 1968). As individuals explore and experiment with the beliefs and perspectives they encounter, they mold a self image in relation to the experiences and values they are exposed to (Garrod et al. 1992, Phinney 1990). Adolescence, especially, is considered a period of development during which an individual evaluates, examines, and sometimes challenges ethical positions, religious beliefs, societal norms, and their positions within family and friendships (Erikson 1968, Dusek 1996, Garrod et al. 1992, Phinney 1990). This study therefore adopts the perspective that high school students in Islamic schools are in a developmental period of identity construction, and that as minority students living in a globalized world, these adolescents are actively engaged in a complex interpretation of multiple ideologies.

In this study, I explore the role of schooling in the mediation of these ideologies by recording and examining both the formal and informal socializing practices which may influence identity construction in daily life among adolescent girls in a Muslim school in Florida. The following questions directed this research: 1) How do students at the Florida Islamic School (FIS) perceive their school environment? 2) In what ways has the formal Islamic school environment influenced the construction and/or maintenance of the religious, ethnic, and community identities of its students? 3) In what ways do students negotiate membership in multiple communities? 4) What role has FIS played in these negotiations?
Background

In order to situate students and school staff within the Muslim community, I provide a review of literature on the Muslim population in America, including Islamic beliefs and practices, and the difficulties Muslims face here as a religious minority (Chapter Three). These challenges include widespread discrimination and the violation of civil rights as a result of the USA PATRIOT (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act. As a result of this government policy, discrimination included government monitoring without notification or warrant, and incarceration without trial. Muslims also face challenges relative to religious accommodation in the workplace and in schools, including the need for appropriate time and space to pray. Finally, the striking diversity of the Muslim population in America often results in the fracturing of the community along ethnic, cultural, and national lines, which complicates community relations and threatens the maintenance of a unified identity.

I also place Islamic schooling in America within the broad comparative framework of Islamic Education by reviewing common themes in Islamic education literature (Chapter Two). In response to government and media reports on the ties between Islamic schools and terrorist activities, authors from the last decade strive to impart a more accurate depiction of the existing variety of Islamic schooling and the valuable functions they fulfill across political, social, and cultural contexts. More specifically, recent literature explores how schooling
for Muslims has evolved, adapted, and has been reformed over time to meet new challenges and direct change. Ethnographic studies conducted in North American Islamic schools are also reviewed.

Research Design

Observation, participant observation, interviewing and focus groups were used in this ethnographic study to provide insights to the unique perspectives of Muslim girls on Islamic schooling, community, and identity. Girls were chosen as primary participants in order to respect cultural and religious gender segregation practices at the school. Also, it is the opinion of the researcher that the perspectives of Muslim girls are underrepresented in relevant literature and in public discourse. Data were collected in the form of notes, which were coded for the purposes of analysis.

Research for this project was conducted at one Florida Islamic School (FIS), a private PK-12 institution. Regular observation of student life at FIS forms the core of this research, including observations of the morning assembly, formal FIS class time, informal lunch time, and afterschool clubs. In interviews and focus groups, girls were asked to share their experiences as students in an Islamic school, and were asked to discuss what they appreciated most and what they liked least about their school. In total, 140 hours of fieldwork were conducted over the course of two and a half months (11 weeks).
I arrived at FIS as a stranger to the Muslim community. However, my position as an outsider, a student, and a non-Muslim woman, put me in a fruitful position for learning. The girls were curious about me, and many were eager to share with me their thoughts, hopes, fears, and experiences. Although I do not speak Arabic, my fluency in other languages was interesting to the girls and their teachers. Also, the fact that I had learned two of these foreign languages as an adult, through extended periods of time abroad, seemed to accurately convey my genuine love of language and culture. Indeed, I found myself in a very loving environment, where considerable interest and support for the study was expressed.

Throughout my time at the school, I prioritized simply attending class and ‘hanging out’ with the girls at lunch. The authors of many studies on Islamic Schooling agree to teach lessons or entire courses at their research sites. I, however, chose not to volunteer for any positions that might compromise the student-centered approach, which I considered central to this study. I believe that creating alliances with the students, and declaring my interest in and loyalty to their perspectives, made the girls feel more comfortable about sharing their feelings and experiences with me. By providing such qualitative data on the perspectives and experiences of Muslim youth who attend Islamic schools, I hope to foster greater understanding of the social function and practices of such institutions, as well as a greater understanding of the real people who form the American Muslim community.
CHAPTER TWO:  
THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF SCHOOLS

The anthropology of education has focused on the relationships between culture, learning, and schooling. In many cases, the relationships between schooling, power, politics, social identity, and culture have attained special attention. These studies examine, for example, how schooling practices both influence and are influenced by social, cultural, and political phenomena – and how these practices serve to reproduce social structures. Levinson and Holland define school as “a state organized or regulated institution of intentional instruction” (Levinson and Holland 1996:2). This instruction, however, is not limited to “neutral” knowledge. Regardless of local conceptions of an educated person, or the skills and knowledge deemed important by the local community, schools promote the ideologies of a greater order, or “interject”, as Levinson and Holland state, an "educational mission of extra-local proportions" (Levinson and Holland 1996:1). I begin this chapter with a review of basic foundational theoretical literature on education, reproduction, and resistance. Relevant examples of contemporary works which explore the role of formal schooling in socio-cultural identity formation and reproduction are also provided. Second, I review theories on adolescence and identity and provide examples of literature
on Muslim youth identity in the United States. Third, I provide a review of common themes in Islamic education literature in order to situate American Islamic schooling within a global context. Fourth, I review ethnographic studies conducted in North American Islamic schools. Finally, I conclude by drawing attention to the gaps in the reviewed literature, and explain how this study addresses these gaps in relation to its research questions: 1) How do students at the Florida Islamic School (FIS) perceive their school environment? 2) In what ways has the formal Islamic school environment influenced the construction and/or maintenance of the religious, ethnic, and community identities of its students? 3) In what ways do students negotiate membership in multiple communities? 4) What role has FIS played in these negotiations?

**Theories of Reproduction and Resistance**

This study is rooted in Durkheim’s work on education and sociology, which discussed the role of schools in the inculcation of common, social, democratic, and national principles. Durkheim described education as a social institution with specific functions under direct influence of the State, and furthermore described youth as a “tabula rasa” which must be socialized to participate and contribute to society (Durkheim 1956). From this fertile ground sprouted a diversity of critical theories from which I constructed a framework.

The fruits of scholarly labor in the 1970s included theories of reproduction and resistance in schooling. Critical scholars such as Althusser (1971), Young
(1971), Bernstein (1973), Baudelot and Establet (1975), Bowles and Gintis (1976), Sharp and Green (1975), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Apple (1979, 1982), and Giroux (1983) ventured to dismantle the assumption that schools are innocent sites of socio-cultural values transmission and furthermore challenged the belief that schools provide opportunities for individual development, upward social mobility, and political and economic power. Au contraire, these scholars argued, schools are instrumental in reproducing and perpetuating dominant ideologies and the social inequalities which support capitalist structures and production (Giroux 1983, Levinson and Holland 1996).

The role of culture in the perpetuation of social conditions and the reproduction of social hierarchies was brought to the forefront of radical theories of schooling by Bourdieu. Indeed, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) endeavored to expose the powerful role of the education system in the legitimization, production, and maintenance of “culture capital” (i.e., language, style, taste, intelligence, knowledge, values) associated with the dominant classes (Levinson and Holland 1996:5).

These deterministic themes of domination and power in which students appeared, or rather disappeared, as passive and voiceless pupils, came under criticism from scholars such as Giroux (1983). Reproductionists, Giroux argued, failed to “provide any major insights into how teachers, students, and other human agents come together within specific historical and social contexts in
order to both make and reproduce the conditions of their existence (Giroux 1983:259).” In order to account for the shortcomings of reproductionist theories, Giroux advocated theories of resistance. This new perspective allowed for the “self-creation”, “mediation”, “agency”, “innovation” and “resistance” of individuals and group culture within schooling (Giroux 1983:259-260). Ethnographic studies such as that of Willis (1981) propelled these critical theories by exposing the active resistance of working-class ‘lads’ to the middle-class ideology of their school. They were not the ‘blank slates’ suggested by Durkheim, but rather dynamically involved ‘agents’ in the production and reproduction of socio-cultural practices and values (Levinson and Holland 1996).

Based on these theories of socio-cultural reproduction and resistance, this study is grounded in the following perspectives: 1) Schools are not isolated sites. They are institutions which both influence and are influenced by social, cultural, economic, and political phenomena; 2) Schools provide a legitimized space for the production and reproduction of socio-cultural, economic, and political ideologies and structures; 3) Schools are instrumental in the reproduction of the cultural values needed for upward social mobility and/or success in their respective communities; and 4) Students do not passively absorb socializing ideologies, but rather engage directly with the practices of their schools, and therefore have an active hand in reproducing and/or resisting socio-cultural values.
Examples of Socialization in Schooling

The following studies were conducted on formal schooling in evolving states. Their review elucidates how the cultural and social identities, beliefs, and behaviors needed for success in the greater community (as deemed by those in power) are embedded in apparently neutral school curriculum.

The works of Rival (1996), Skinner and Holland (1996), and Cheney (2007) document the non-curricular practices of schools which reinforce the construction of modern, educated identities. For example, Rival (1996) and Cheney (2007) found that in both the Ecuadorian Amazon and in Uganda (respectively), the simple act of wearing a school uniform cultivated a schooled identity and served as a socio-cultural, symbolic expression of modernity and class status. Günlü (2008), on the other hand, is able to connect the curriculum of schools with greater political, modernizing agendas by analyzing instructional materials implemented in adult literacy campaigns in Turkey. Beyond cultivating “modern” values and practices, schooling is also shown to play a central role in the construction of unifying national and supra-identities which are above regional, religious, or ethnic identities (Caymaz 2008). Cheney (2007), Skinner and Holland (1996), and Caymaz (2008), for example, show how awareness of nation and patriotism are inspired in the classroom and in curriculum through national flags, anthems, hanging portraits of national leaders, and national symbols.
The advantages and disadvantages of supra- or national identity formation via schooling are also documented. In the case of Uganda, Cheney writes of the unifying power of instruction in the national language, which allowed youth to form friendships with many different ethnic groups. Beyond the use of a national language, Ugandan textbooks also downplayed past ethnic tensions in order to foster unity and a common national identity. In this case, the inculcation of Uganda’s youth with national ideologies had positive effects on the dissolution of ethnic tensions (Cheney 2007). The work of Skinner and Holland (1996) also show this to be the case in Nepal. Through national curriculum, schoolchildren of diverse ethnic groups, religions, and languages are brought together and taught in settings where caste discrimination and segregation are not overtly practiced. In the creation of these new identities via schooling, students took an active role in dismantling caste and gender hierarchies.

In opposition to the above studies, Garcia (2005) and Luykx (1999) illustrate how the absence of local and ethnic curriculum in two Latin-American countries has only served to perpetuate discrimination and social inequality. Luykx and Garcia both write of the perceived “Indian problem” in Peru and Bolivia, respectively, which has presented an obstacle to national unity and development. These authors tie rigid classroom practices and curriculum with the perpetuation of social inequalities and dominant class ideologies, which denigrate indigenous identity in the name of a unified national identity.
The studies reviewed above provide a framework for a link between everyday micro-level processes and macro-level, global, educational, and political nation-building phenomena. They reveal the importance of every aspect of daily school life and practices to the (re)production of social structures and identity development. School grounds, uniforms, the images and flags which are posted on classroom walls, curriculum, and the implementation of curriculum by teachers, all have meaning. This study acknowledges the significance of the school environment and its role in the reproduction and/or rejection of greater socio-cultural and political phenomena.

**Theories of Adolescence and Identity**

Most research on identity is framed within two theories, social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and identity developmental theory (Erikson 1968). Social identity theory is centered on group identity and the sense of belonging to a group. This theory argues that group identity is critical to a sense of self, and that a sense of belonging inspires self-esteem and psychological well-being. Identity developmental theory is based on process. According to Erikson, individuals achieve an identity at the end of a phase (usually adolescence) consisting of exploration, crisis, and commitment (Erikson 1968, Phinney 1990).

Adolescence is a period of development during which an individual evaluates, examines, and sometimes challenges ethical positions, religious
beliefs, societal norms, and their positions within family and friendships, in order to mold a self image (Erikson 1968, Dusek 1996, Garrod et al. 1992, Phinney 1990). While the process of identity development in adolescence is often focused on the individual, an alternative perspective contextualizes that individual. In other words, identity development is examined in terms of one’s self-image in relation to family, ethnic group, gender, class, etc… (Garrod et al. 1992, Phinney 1990). Anthropological ethnographies adopt this perspective, and seek to identify and explore adolescents’ position within the cultural contexts of family, beliefs, traditions, values, and relationships (Schlegal and Hewlett 2011). Anthropologically informed studies of adolescence then record and examine both the formal and informal socializing practices of family, community, and schools which may influence identity development in daily life. Furthermore, they explore the ways in which adolescents engage with their community, while contributing to and contesting its ideologies and structures (Schlegel 2000, Schlegal and Hewlett 2011).

Cultural identity formation becomes increasingly complex when adolescents are exposed to multiple cultures (Jenson 2003). Often, they must negotiate traditional ideologies and practices under newly globalized conditions. Western values of secularism and individual autonomy, for example, can disrupt cultures centered on community and family cohesion or religious devotion. Identity formation, and especially, multicultural identity formation, is therefore affected by the degree of cultural difference between the cultures to which an
adolescent is exposed, and the psychological adjustment of the adolescent to these differences (Jenson 2003).

Jenson (2003) draws important parallels between cultural identity formation and ethnic identity formation: “As diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural groups come into contact with one another, there are invariably differences in power and status among those groups” (Jenson 2003:190). Indeed, identity development can be especially complex for ethnic minorities (Shrake and Rhee 2004). Shrake and Rhee (2004) describe ethnic identity from the perspective of developmental psychology as “an individual’s sense of self as derived from his or her membership in an ethnic group, which involves a sense of belonging and commitment to one’s own group” (Shrake and Rhee 2004:4). Their study on Korean American adolescents builds on the works of Phinney and colleagues (1990, 1992, 1993, 1997, 1999) who argue that “a high level of ethnic identity achievement indicates a secure sense of self as an ethnic group member, which is crucial to the development of adolescents’ self-concept” (Shrake and Rhee 2004:4). Additionally, they address the importance of adolescents’ attitude toward other groups, and, adolescents' perception of their ethnic/racial status in the larger context of society. For example, Shrake and Rhee identified the awareness and perception of racial/ethnic prejudice and discrimination against one’s own group as potentially harmful to identity formation and psychological and behavioral development (Shrake and Rhee 2004). Indeed, Shrake and Rhee (2004) found that ethnic identity was a significant predictor of both internalizing
and externalizing problems for Korean American adolescents - the greater their sense of belonging to their ethnic group, the fewer the cases of depression, anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, and delinquency (Shrace and Rhee 2004:15). Conversely, psychological distress and/or problem behaviors were strongly associated with perceptions of racism and discrimination.

Clearly, the diversity of adolescent experiences with globalization, minority status, and/or immigrant acculturation is complex. Factors such as gender, education, age, religious orientation, values, and discrimination, exemplify the variety of aspects adolescents must negotiate in the process of identity formation. In the face of such dynamic forces, studies must shy away from universalized developmental pathways to adolescent cultural identity formation, and instead allot special attention to the unique circumstances of individuals and their communities (Jenson 2003). Based on these theories of adolescent identity formation, I conducted my research guided by the following insights: 1) Florida Islamic School (FIS) high school students, as adolescents, are in a developmental period of identity construction; 2) As minority students living in a globalized world, these adolescents are actively engaged in a complex negotiation of multiple cultural ideologies; 3) The degree to which they achieve a sense of belonging in their communities will be affected by how they negotiate these identities, and 4) An understanding of their expressed and/or displayed identities must be contextualized within the multiple cultural ideologies and practices to which they are exposed.
Muslim Youth Identity in North America

Consistent with the literature reviewed above, several works reveal diverse viewpoints and experiences of Muslim students on the topic of identity. In her study with six Yemeni American female students attending an American public school, Sarroub reveals that they often found their Muslim, American, and Yemeni identities to be irreconcilable. Though they were proud of their Yemeni culture and religion, they were also a part of American society, which challenged the practices of the Arab Muslim community. Sarroub even goes so far as to claim that the lives of these Yemeni girls’ "illustrate that an inevitable clash occurs at the intersection of U.S. values" and the sociocultural, religious, and ritual practices of the Yemeni community (Sarroub 2001:412). She also states, however, that though this was the case at the time of her research with first generation Americans, that it may not be the case with second or third generations in the future.

Interestingly, Sirin and Fine's findings (which focus on both first and second generation Muslims and were published seven years after Sarroub's article) challenge this "Clash Hypothesis", which puts the identities of Muslim and American in opposition and labels them as incompatible. By implementing a mixed methods approach, Sirin and Fine examine how young Muslim students (who attend American public schools) negotiate multiple identities across contexts. Furthermore, they explore the perceptions and experiences of Muslim youth in America, including sociocultural preferences, coping strategies for
discrimination and/or isolation, psychological stress and well-being, and self-esteem. Ultimately, Sirin and Fine find that Muslim youth in America “piece together the fragments of identity in highly divergent ways” and migrate “relatively smoothly between worlds” while “inventing new hybrid spaces” (Sirin and Fine 2008:125,195). Contrary to Sarroub’s conclusions, they found that Muslim and American identities are not mutually exclusive, but rather highly compatible. I expect that FIS girls will struggle to coalesce some aspects of mainstream American culture with the cultures of their families. Overall, however, I expect they will be engaged in an interesting mediation of values through which they do, in fact, develop new and unique perspectives and practices.

Islamic Education and the Schooling of Muslims

Contrary to the medieval, unchanging, militant, and uniform image of Islamic education as it is painted by the American media, schooling for Muslims, including Islamic schooling, has evolved, adapted, and has been reformed over time to meet new challenges and direct change. Muslim communities have been affected by a great variety of differing unique and global phenomena. There are secular states with Muslim majorities, Islamic states, secular states with historic Muslim minorities, and secular states with new and rapidly growing Muslim minorities – and these are found in such diverse geographic locations as Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. It is unfortunate, but true, that the majority of literature on Islamic schooling begins with a disclaimer of sorts on terrorism and the role of Islamic education in the rearing of radical, militant Muslims. In
response to commonly held misconceptions regarding the number and influence of schools with legitimate ties to terrorist activities, authors of Islamic education strive to impart a more accurate depiction of the existing variety of Islamic schooling and the valuable functions they fulfill across political, social, and cultural contexts. Many publications from the last decade therefore do shoulder some common burdens and share some common themes, including: 1) the evolution of Islamic educational institutions, 2) globalization and the educational needs for economic development, and 3) the role of Islamic schooling in cultural reproduction and identity maintenance. The following review will explore and seek to disentangle this complex web of interconnected themes in order to construct a broad comparative framework in which to place Islamic schooling in America.

Colonialism and National Development

The historical influences to Islamic education commonly considered as the primary “game-changers” are colonialism and nationalism (nation-building and national development). Before these influences, Islamic schools served to educate youth on the religious practices of their communities and prepare them morally for adulthood. Colonialism and nationalism, however, required educative systems to bear the greater burden of satisfying a variety of demands on local, national, and international levels (Daun, Arjmand, Walford 2004). It is beyond the scope of this study to review the impact of such forces on education in all Muslim communities around the world. However, I will provide an overview that will serve
to contextualize the present study. Examples are drawn primarily from research on Morocco and Turkey, however examples from Iran, and countries and communities in Asia are provided as well.

Many Muslim countries and communities were colonized and thereby subjected to the introduction of secular laws and education systems which mirrored those of the colonists’ Heimat (Daun, Arjmand, Walford 2004). In Indonesia, for example, educational reforms were modeled after Dutch government and Christian schools, which resulted in the inclusion of general educational courses to supplement subjects of religious sciences (Azra, Afrianty, and Hefner 2007). Morocco, on the other hand, experienced the more direct and assimilationist strategies of the French, in which case a new, centralized, and highly regulated system of education was introduced. The primary objective of this education system was the production of future administrators for the colony whose values and interests would reflect those of the French (Daun, Arjmand, Walford 2004; Boyle 2004).

Even in Muslim communities that were not colonized, similar developments in education occurred, but at different times and under different pressures. In Turkey, for example, educational alternatives to traditional Islamic schools can be traced back to the height of the Ottoman Empire, during which the Enderun Mektebi (Palace School) was established to train and educate the highest ruling administrators and military leaders of the empire (Kazamias 1966).
Threats posed by the culminating interest of European powers in the Ottoman Empire, repeated conflicts with the local leaders, and the loss of land to enemies, then propelled education-oriented modernization efforts beyond the palace walls and into the military, with the ultimate goal of westernizing the whole of the empire’s institutional framework (Nohl 2008).

Strategies adopted by many Muslim countries during the post colonial period, or, during periods of intensive nation construction in non-colonized countries, brought educational reform to the forefront of state affairs. Curriculum and languages were nationalized (i.e. determined by the state, officially legitimized, and required in all schools), and Islamic subjects were either re-introduced or dispelled officially from the state system (most reintroduced Islamic elements) (Daun, Arjmand, Walford 2004). After achieving independence (1956), Morocco retained the education system of the French, expanded it, and eventually also ‘Arabized’ it (Boyle 2004). Consequently, public education retained Muslim and Islamic cultural values, but continued to provide opportunity for individual social mobility, and came also to be seen as the means to national development and prosperity (Boyle 2004). In Turkey, after the establishment of the Republic (1923), the primary goal of government education was to actively create citizens. Chiefly, the Ministry of National Education promoted secularism and scientific philosophy (Nohl 2008). Laws passed during this time closed many religious institutions, limited religious education, and subjected such education to central inspections. After the Second World War, however, a conservative
organization of schooling was created, which placed greater emphasis on patriotism and religion, with the hopes that a strong sense of nationalism would counter communism. Slowly, religious and moral courses were re-introduced, and by the 70’s, these courses were made compulsory. Islamic education, then, became a key factor in Turkish nationalism.

*Economics*

While most Muslim majority countries were still in intensive periods of nation-state construction the pressures of globalization, particularly in the 1970s, began to take their toll (Badie, 1986). Beyond the preparation of children to be morally responsible, active members of their community, as well as patriots, education was increasingly expected to respond to local and national economic needs (Daun, Arjmand, Walford 2004). In the beginning of the twentieth century in Indonesia, for example, even pious parents recognized the need to demand vocational and practical education for their children. In order to fulfill the desires of the state for economic development, and the desires of Muslims at the local level for social and economic advancement and religious education, Indonesia developed an educational system that is now considered one of the most pioneering and innovative in the world (Daun, Arjmand, Walford 2004). Most *madrasas* (Quranic schools) in India have also been cooperative in responding to the economic needs of their communities by making a variety of critical adaptations (Metcalf 2007). Considering the difficulty many madrasa students encounter in acquiring employment in a global and transitioning economy,
Islamic education reform in India has been concerned with providing madrasa students with “substantial real-world benefits” (Sikand 2008:47). This has included the introduction of ‘modern’ subjects and in many cases also vocational subjects such as tailoring and typing, or other more advanced craft or technical training (Sikand 2008, Metcalf 2007). The incorporation of such subjects with Islamic sciences indicates the Muslim Indian community’s dedication to simultaneously prepare students for higher education and employment, while still protecting and promoting Islamic and cultural values as well as Islamic identity (Metcalf 2007).

*Culture and Identity*

In addition to the conscious efforts of Muslim nations and educators to prepare students to engage and contribute morally, politically and economically to society, it is clear that Islamic schooling also plays a critical role in the reproduction and transmission of local, cultural values and identity. In many cases therefore, the survival and persistence of Islamic educational institutions around the world lies beyond religious instruction, and rests rather in Muslim cultural and Islamic identity (Boyle 2004). In Hindu majority India, for example, Muslims have continued to send their children to Islamic schools with the hope that they will instill a “distinctive cultural identity against the “Hindu” identity evident in public life and even government schools” (Metcalf 2007:88). In fact, the fear of Hinduisation is one of the propelling forces behind the inclusion of ‘modern’ subjects in madrasa curriculum (Sikand 2008). Also, even outside of the
student population, madrasas in India provide a central space within each community for Islamic legal, moral, and spiritual guidance (Metcalf 2007). As a minority with limited state support, Muslims are therefore conscious of the critical role of madrasas in the maintenance of community boundaries and identities (Sikand 2008).

In Morocco, madrasas have “played an important cultural and institutional role in the… religious, political, and social imagination” (Eikelman 2007:131). In particular, learning the Qur’an and developing the discipline necessary to memorize it is regarded culturally as “an integral part of socialization” in Moroccan towns and villages (Eikelman 1985:62). Due to the growth of secular education, Qur'anic schools have had to adapt in order to maintain their social and cultural roles. They have done so by creating a niche for themselves as preschools and supplemental schools which do not oppose, but rather complement public education (Boyle 2004). At the national level, Quranic schools “embody the continuation of a valued traditional institution – the Moroccan Kur’anic school – and thus represent a link with time past, with cultural roots, and with Moroccan identity” (Boyle 2004:134-135) and furthermore “contribute to national solidarity and shared values” (Eikelman 2007:145-146). Boyle (2004) suggests that Quranic schools represent a “rite of passage” for Moroccan children. By maintaining the tradition of Quranic memorization, for example, children partake in a tradition shared by their parents and grandparents. This
practice, among others in Islamic schools, reinforces community, Muslim, and even national identity (Boyle 2004).

It is important to note that according to some authors (Pitman and Chishtie 2004, Mehran 1989, Kraince 2009), Islamic schooling on the level of mass education, as it is controlled by the state, can have negative effects on their populations, in some cases. Unlike Morocco, India, and Indonesia, Pakistan has not developed a complementary or cooperative system of Islamic education (Pitman and Chishtie 2004). Instead, schooling has prioritized Muslim identity construction, and the reproduction and maintenance of Islamic values rather than general education. National identity, in this case, is based on the Islamic faith, and schools shoulder the government's burden in fostering this identity. The claim is made, for example, that:

“…it is a constitutional requirement… [that] Pakistani educational policy be developed that ensures the preservation, practice and promotion of Islamic ideology and principles. With this in mind, the policy is expounded that “Curricula and textbooks of all the subjects shall be revised so as to exclude and expunge any material repugnant to Islamic values, and include sufficient material on Kur'an and Islamic teachings, information, history, heroes, moral values etc. relevant to the subject and level of education concerned (p.13) (Pitman and Chishtie 2004:104-105).
The continued resistance of Islamic educators to include secular subjects in schooling, in other words, is a great obstacle to the state, as it struggles to survive in an environment of global economics (Pitman and Chishtie 2004:105).

In Iran, the government has bestowed upon its education system the responsibility of creating a new generation of “committed and doctrinaire Muslims” since the revolution in 1979 (Mehran 1989:35). “The ultimate aim of the socialization process in Iranian schools”, Mehran writes, “is the creation of a model citizen eligible to live in the ideal Islamic society” (Mehran 1989:49). To accomplish this, educators were assigned the task of replacing the value system of the former regime with new norms based on Islamic criteria. This included the “purification” of school curriculum from “all colonial and tyrannical topics” to the presentation of an exclusively ‘Muslim’ perspective, including Islamic and revolutionary subjects (Mehran: 1989: 36-37).

Finally, in Malaysia, ministry officials in charge of school curriculum are focused on promoting only one particular interpretation of Islam, and consistently ignore the diversity of perspectives formally characterized by Islamic studies. This is especially problematic with regard to women’s rights and their marginalization within Malaysian society (Kraince 2009). Interestingly, Kraince (2009) reveals that resolutions drafted at the 2005 Seminar on Religious Curricula in the Muslim World in Kuala Lumpur called upon educational institutions to employ teaching methods “based on promoting and respecting
freedom of opinion and religion, freedom of expression and right of
disagreement, and right of others in living in peace and security with their faiths
and styles,” however, the conference also concluded that:

“there shall be no focus on differences of ideological and
jurisprudential schools in the religious curricula.” It called upon
educational institutions in the Muslim world to “clean and exclude
the religious curricula from all contents and methods that
strengthen and lead to disunity and disharmony among Muslims”
(Kraince 2009:136).

In Pakistan, Iran, and Malaysia, it is clear that institutions of Islamic schooling,
even at the level of mass education, can prioritize the transmission of certain
Islamic and cultural values, but may do so by employing methods which dilute
the religion of Islam to a narrow interpretation. The paradoxical conclusions
reached at the Seminar on Religious Curricula in the Muslim World, as quoted
above, reveal the struggles of some Muslim countries with nationalism and
globalization as they seek to foster, via education, both unique cultural identities
and a globally unified Muslim identity. For the purposes of this study, it will be
important to examine whether the school realizes a balance between cultural,
religious, and civic identities or whether various aspects of these identities
receive special attention and/or are ascribed a higher value.
Schools as Cultural Mediators

Such public discussions regarding Islamic education, and what type of knowledge, exactly, is required to live as a modern, observant Muslim, is a clear indication that Islamic institutions are anything but unchanging (Hefner 2007). Indeed, in most of the Muslim world, Islamic education has been forced to mediate engagement with Islamic tradition and the demands and opportunities of the modern world. This position as ‘cultural broker’ is one identified (in one way or another) in the literature by many authors (Azra, Afrianty, and Hefner 2007). In Indonesia, Hefner writes, “Islamic schools have taken giant steps to span the gap between general and religious education. They have built bridges between Islamic and non-Islamic higher education, in the process creating one of the world’s finest Islamic university systems” (Hefner 2009:96).

In Morocco, Boyle writes, “Kur’anic school education helps children, parents and the community in general to mediate between traditional Moroccan Islamic values and practices and the desire for “modern” education and knowledge that they believe will lead to greater social and economic development” (Boyle 2004:138). Even in countries such as Pakistan, Iran, or Malaysia, it is clear that Muslim schools will play a central role in efforts to resolve political, cultural, and religious tensions on both a local and international scale (Hefner 2009). In the meantime, each community will strive to produce educational institutions which successfully mediate political demands, demands
from practical, technical, and economically relevant training, and demands for Islamic moral and values education (Daun, Arjmand, Walford 2004).

From this brief survey of Islamic education literature, I consider the following: 1) that the political, cultural, and religious history of any Muslim community has had both implicit and explicit effects on the educational institutions which they develop and attend; 2) that these institutions have changed and adapted over time, to meet new, economic and social challenges, in highly divergent ways; and 3) that Islamic education, from the local to the national level, plays a critical role in a) the transmission of cultural and Islamic values, and b) the construction and reproduction of cultural, political, and Muslim identities. With regard to Islamic education in America, the importance of arriving at such conclusions lies in the possibility of identifying common goals and challenges for Muslim educators. Also, it is important to note that the faculty and administrators in American Muslim schools often come from a variety of countries and backgrounds. This review then also serves to elucidate the great diversity of educational experiences and values that each teacher/administrator may ‘bring to the table’ when developing the curriculum, and contributing to the practices, of American Islamic institutions.

**Islamic Schools in North America**

Generally, Muslim schools in the United States adhere to local and state public school curricula and use standardized textbooks for core subjects. In
addition to mathematics, the sciences, and English, these schools offer courses on the Qur'an, Islamic studies, and usually Arabic. Though this is typical around the world, in the United States, many Muslim schools increasingly emphasize an understanding of the meaning behind passages in the Quran and Islamic practices, rather than simply requiring memorization of the words and practices in Arabic (Douglass and Shaikh 2004). Also unlike Muslim institutions abroad, students are typically exposed to a variety of perspectives and interpretations of Islam due to the diversity of immigrant and indigenous Muslims in the United States explored above. As Douglass and Shaikh (2004) point out:

“Muslim educators in the U.S. widely believe that, in order for the youth to live as Muslims in a free society that places few outward constraints on individual behavior, students must truly understand and internalize Islam’s principles, beliefs and practices, and learn how to apply them in contemporary society” (Douglass and Shaikh 2004:9)

In other words, Muslims in the United States cannot rely on the cultural restrictions of the mainstream society to guide them in religious practice, and teachers have responded to this by modifying their educational practices. This modification prepares children to become competent members in both the Muslim community, and mainstream America.
American Islamic educational institutions are often portrayed in academic literature within two theoretical frameworks: “1) the Muslim school is conceptualized as a transnational space where Islamic identity is negotiated and contested in a pluralistic, multicultural society or 2) the school is viewed as a (counter-) cultural alternative to the perceived hegemony of white Anglo-Protestant culture prevalent in public schools…” (Cristillo 2009:70). As an example of the first framework, Kelly’s (1997) ethnographic study of a private Muslim school in Montreal focuses on: the Islamic environment of the school, Muslim social identity, social integration and assimilation, and other related themes. She also explores the discrimination experienced by Muslim students in public schools. Indeed, Muslim schools are, as an example of the second framework, often presented in these works as alternatives to the problems and discrimination in public schools, and also as sites free of secular epistemologies and the temptations to date, drink, and do drugs (Cristillo 2009, Wormser 1994, Zine 2008).

The American media, on the other hand, often portrays Islamic institutions as breeding grounds for young Muslim radicals and terrorists (Douglass and Shaikh 2004, Haddad and Smith 2009, Cristillo 2009, Haddad 2004, Smith 2010; Siddiqi 1999). There is a fear that the schools isolate and marginalize Muslim youth in “ethno-religious ghettos” (Cristillo 2009:70) and promote or construct Muslim identities and values that clash with American, Western, mainstream identities and values (Haddad and Smith 2009, Cristillo 2009). Cristillo takes a
different approach in his publications to correct these misconceptions by conducting a broad structural analysis of Muslim schools, and placing them in a “web of social relations and cultural meanings that, among other things, overlaps the boundaries of other institutions constituting American civil society” (Cristillo 2009:70). Interestingly, Cristillo’s unpublished ethnographic study of a private Islamic school in New York City provides numerous detailed examples which illustrate the opposite. He provides various quotes from the Principal/Imam (prayer leader) of the school which highly discourage integration with American society, including the celebration of civil and religious holidays. In this ethnography, Cristillo examines and provides a “thick description” of the Islamic environment of the school, and explores various themes, including the connections between the local and “translocal”. Specifically he is referring to the local Muslim community, and the global Muslim community, or, ummah.

Zine (2008) published a theoretically rich critical ethnography of Canadian Islamic schools which examines sociological and ideological imperatives for Islamic schooling in the diasporic context. Her analysis is framed by several discursive frameworks, but is based primarily in a critical faith centered epistemology. Zine explores how Islamic epistemology shapes both the formal and informal curriculum and socializing practices of four schools – also addressed is the role of these everyday pedagogical, spiritual, and social practices in the formulation and framing of student identities.
To date only one paper has focused on Islamic schooling in Florida. Kysilka and Qadri (1997) give a brief introduction to Islamic principles, address the need for Islamic schools, and examine/explain the goals of the Muslim Academy of Central Florida (MACF). This illustrates the need for more comprehensive studies on Islamic schools in Florida, which include the perspectives those who attend and administer such institutions.

**Filling in the Gaps**

Neither Durkheim nor Bourdieu address student agency or intersectionality. They portray students as passive recipients or “blank slates” who absorb these socio-cultural and national values without resistance, and ignore the influence or implications of their ethnicity, race, gender and age on their indoctrination. These social and cultural reproductionists also focused predominantly on European or American societies, and failed to explore education and socio-cultural reproduction in non-Western, developing nations (Levinson and Holland 1996) or communities. The studies on education and socialization in developing nations examined above do address non-Western societies and the intersecting variables of ethnicity, age, and global phenomena. Some also examine the agency of students and educators. Nevertheless, there are still some important elements missing. The reaction of the Huaorani to being “modernized”, for example, is missing from Rival’s work on schooling in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Skinner and Holland and Cheney do include the general
opinions of their populations in Nepal and Uganda to this regard, but qualitative, individual voices/data lack presence in these and similar studies.

Although the complexities of Muslim American identity are thoroughly explored from a predominantly psychological perspective by Sirin and Fine (2008), their study and that of Sarroub (2001) explore the identities, experiences and perceptions of Muslim students in American public schools, but fail to consider the role of formal schooling in the development of these identities. They also fail to connect day to day socializing and discursive practices to the construction of identity. Finally, they do not include the perceptions of students in private Muslim schools.

Ethnographic studies conducted in private Islamic schools are generally teacher-, parent-, and administrator-centered. Cristillo (2009) for example, notes the absence of student viewpoints in the discourse of ‘Open School Night’, but fails himself to offer significant space in his dissertation to explore (in depth) the opinions and perspectives of the school’s Muslim youth. Also, what little attention he gives to students is limited almost exclusively to boys. Kelly’s (2007) interview data are also almost exclusively from teachers and parents. Zine (2008) does provide copious student quotations, but does not provide ‘thick description’ of student life and behavior at school. So, although the reader is informed of what the girls might think, how the girls act and what the girls do in school remain elusive. Finally, Kysilka and Quadri (1997) situate MACF only superficially within
the context of American schooling and Islamic principles, and ignore the diversity of the Muslim population. Furthermore, they provide no qualitative data on the experiences of the teachers or students which influence and shape the school.

In this study, I address these gaps in the literature in the following ways: 1) I prioritize the unique perspectives of female students at FIS and give them the opportunity to express their opinions on Islamic schooling. 2) I employ a student centered approach, which acknowledges participants as Muslims from a variety of backgrounds and Islamic practices, and therefore examines the intersectionality of age, gender, culture, and ethnicity. 3) I explore the agency and experiences of FIS high school girls in the formal Islamic school environment, including their agency in and resistance to the establishment and development of individual and community identities. 4) I provide ‘thick description’, or, detailed, qualitative data on the day-to-day practices of a private Islamic school and examine the role of this environment in student identity development.
Around the country, the number of mosques and Islamic centers, Islamic parochial schools, colleges, weekend schools, and Muslim organizations are rapidly rising (Haddad 1991). Despite this dramatic growth, Muslims in the United States, much like other minority communities, face a great variety of challenges. Unlike other minority communities, however, Muslims face challenges tied to the basic principles and practices of Islam. How Muslims respond to the American social, economic, and political environment is therefore influenced and directed by Islamic beliefs, obligations, and responsibilities (Voll 1991). In order to properly frame this study and its findings, the context of Muslims in the United States must first be examined in terms of these basic religious principles and the dynamic challenges faced by the community.

The Pillars of Islam

The heterogeneity of the Muslim community in America calls for unity based on shared, basic, principle Islamic beliefs for peace and collaboration. The Qu’ran advocates the unity and equality of all believers, regardless of tribal origin.
(and/or nationality), economic status, and ethnic identity. The “spiritual, non-territorial” (Esposito 2002:16) community of Muslims, identified by the Qur’an and the hadith (collections of testimony on the practices and deeds of the Prophet) as the ummah, is described as one that unites its members through shared beliefs. The notion of membership in a worldwide ummah, is one that continues to be supported by Islamists today, and contemporary Muslims continue to consider the ummah a social identity which transcends contemporary national and/or political identities – this is especially relevant in the context of the American Muslim community (Esposito 2002).

Muslims around the world vary in their interpretation of the Qur’an, in their socio-cultural practices, their rituals, and their politics. There are, however, elements of Islam that are basic to the religion and universal. Prescribed in the Qur’an are five observances to be followed by practicing Muslims. These Pillars of Islam form the core of the religion (Esposito 2002):

**The Shahada**

Of the five pillars, the shahada, or, declaration/confession of faith, is the most basic: “I give testimony that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is the Prophet of God.” This proclamation declares Islam’s unyielding belief in only one God (its monotheism) and condemns polytheism and idolatry. It also acknowledges Muhammad as its prophet and messenger (Esposito 2002). Muslims share a high level of respect, affection, and admiration for the Prophet
Muhammad. They revere him for his wise leadership and spiritual guidance as a husband, father, statesman, merchant, soldier, orphan, widower, and other social and mystic roles. The variety of his life experiences supports the validity of his position within Islam as the model Muslim, as he prescribed practices to guide Muslims in all aspects of life. Muslims look to Muhammad and his life for moral guidance, and consider his actions and traditions as a model for pious individual and communal life (Smith 2010; Smith 2001). Any individual who speaks the shahada three times in a formal, public setting is considered legally Muslim (Smith 2010).

Performance of Salat

The regularity and discipline of ritual prayer, salat, is meant as a constant reminder of a Muslim’s humanity before his or her creator – a means of maintaining perspective in their lives (Smith 2001). Though the Qur'an itself does not specify the number of times a Muslim should pray, nor the ritual actions that accompany prayer, these details were addressed and established by Muhammad, and are recorded in the hadith (Smith 2010). Based on Muhammad’s practices, prayers begin by washing to purify the body and soul and by facing Mecca. This is followed by a series of recitations and invocations, accompanied by movements and prostrations, to express a Muslim’s submission to God and his or her worship of God. The bodily prostrations (standing, bowing, kneeling, touching the ground with one’s forehead, and sitting), performed alone or in rows facing a prayer leader, are meant to express humility, demonstrate
discipline, and invoke unity and solidarity. Under normal circumstances, this ritual is to be performed at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and in the evening (Esposito 2002, Smith 2001, Smith 2010).

The Zakat

The Qur’an specifically instructs Muslims to pay an alms tax, or zakat. The responsibility to care for the poor and the oppressed is one relentlessly preached by Muhammad. Zakat, or “purification”, suggests piety as well as purity, and expresses a Muslim’s gratitude to God for his wealth, and his or her responsibility and commitment to the less fortunate in the community. Typically, this requires a yearly contribution of 2.5 percent of an individual’s total assets. (Smith 2010; Esposito 2002)

Ramadan

Continuing in the promotion of discipline and compassion, Islam prescribes a month-long fast during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar known as Ramadan. During this time, Muslims are to abstain from food, drink, and sexual activity from sunrise to sunset – requiring intense physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional discipline (Smith 2010). Abstinence from these basic human necessities and desires is meant to remind Muslim’s of their frailty and dependence on God, but is also meant to inspire compassion for and identification with the less fortunate in the community who must endure hunger
regularly (Esposito 2002). Before dawn and after dusk, families unite to share special meals together, and when the month of Ramadan comes to an end, Muslims celebrate for three days, including a great feast known as *Eid al-Fitr* “feast of the breaking of the fast”. Also commemorated near the end of Ramadan, is the “Night of Power” on which Muhammad received his first revelation from God (Esposito 2005).

*The Hajj*

Following Ramadan, all able Muslims, at least once in their lives, should observe the fifth pillar of Islam, the *hajj* (visit/pilgrimage) to Mecca (Esposito 2002). Mecca has remained “primary in the worship life of Muslims” (Smith 2010:19). It is the birthplace of the Prophet and home to the most sacred shrine of Islam, the Ka’ba. As pilgrims approach Mecca during the *hajj*, they greet the city with the declaration “Here I am, Lord, here I am!” and replace their ordinary attire with simple garments, meant to remove any distinctions of rank or status in society. As they approach the Ka’ba, Muslims circumambulate counterclockwise seven times, initiating a spiritual connection with God (Esposito 2005).

During the following days of *hajj*, Muslims engage in a variety of rituals to commemorate the lives and actions of religious figures such as Hagar and Abraham. Essential to the pilgrimage is a visit to the plain of Arafat, where Muslims reflect on Abraham’s struggles against idolatry, and where they stand before God in repentance for their sins (Smith 2010, Esposito 2005). The end of
the pilgrimage is marked by the sacrifice of an animal to commemorate God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Ismail. This final act results in a three day celebration known as the *Id al-Adha*, or Feast of Sacrifice, during which the meat is consumed and further distributed to the poor and hungry. Participation in the *hajj* joins millions of Muslims from around the world in the worship of their God. This experience is one that transcends social hierarchies, national identity, political affinity, and ethnicity (Esposito 2005, Smith 2010, Smith 2001).

*Everyday Practices*

The practices prescribed in the Pillars of Islam are fundamental to the religion, however, how, when, and to what extent these ritual and religious responsibilities are fulfilled varies. When explaining the rations of food consumption during Ramadan, for example, some girls at the Florida Islamic School (FIS) prefaced their statements with ‘we are *supposed* to’ and concluded with a suppressed laugh and a ‘yeah, *supposed* to, but that’s not what really happens’. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out some of the seemingly unifying factors in these practices. Participation in Ramadan, to any extent, may be considered a universally uniting practice/ritual because the Islamic calendar applies to all Muslims, regardless of their geographic residence. During the same month around the world, Muslims are united through the discipline of fasting and/or through religious and cultural practices, if not at least a by a consciousness of the historical and religious significance of this period of time. In the performance of *salat*, it can be argued that the facing of Mecca is a
universally unifying ritual, as Muslims around the world direct their prayers to the same geographic location (regardless of the number of times they choose to do so, or the time of day). These practices are especially unifying in the Islamic school environment.

Common Challenges

Discrimination

The impact of 9/11 on the Muslim community went far beyond antagonistic portrayals of Islamic schooling. In fact, many have compared the treatment of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 to the treatment of Germans and Japanese in America during the first and second world wars, respectively. Similar to the policies implemented during those times of war and crises, policies adopted by the Bush administration suspended the legal protection and civil rights of Muslim and Arab Americans, as they were considered direct threats to national security (Haddad 2004, Smith 2010). The measures taken to “protect” American citizens from future terrorist attacks have resulted in great challenges with far reaching consequences for the American Muslim community. The most distressing measure implemented by the United States government in response to 9/11 was what is commonly referred to as the USA PATRIOT (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act. Essentially, this government policy took away all legal protection and civil rights of American Muslims and Arabs (and others) by allowing the
government to monitor individuals, organizations, and institutions without notification or warrant, and by sanctioning the incarceration of Arabs and Muslims without trial or evidence (Haddad 2004, Smith 2010). As a result of such policies, Muslims in America have had to live in fear of discrimination, incarceration, deportation, government raids, violence, and the vandalism of personal and community property (Smith 2010). Furthermore, these government policies have served to create and perpetuate, via the American media, what has come to be called Islamophobia, or anti-Muslim sentiments.

According to Nimer (2002), “many Muslims agree that anti-Muslim stereotyping is a serious challenge facing the community” (Nimer 2002:74-175). Often, for example, false terrorist accusations and the exclusively violent and radical portrayals of Muslims in public entertainment and news have resulted in attacks and threats to mosques (Nimer 2002, Smith 2010). Despite the efforts of Muslim individuals and organizations to present moderate, peaceful, and positive images of Islam, Smith reveals polls conducted as recently as 2008 which:

“…make it clear that many Americans continue to be uncomfortable with the presence of Muslims in America... Public voices are still heard on radio, TV, and videos propagating the myth that Muslims indoctrinate their children into a “culture of hatred,” as portrayed, for example, in the 2005 documentary film Obsession: Radical Islam’s war Against the West” (Smith 2010:188).
Smith names the identification of those factors which continue to foster prejudice against Islam and Muslims in America a primary task for American Muslim organizations (Smith 2010).

Muslims have reacted to these challenges in civil rights and discrimination in a variety of ways. First, the Muslim community has recognized the importance of reaching out to non-Muslims to foster a greater understanding of Islam and Muslims in America. This has taken the form of coalition building with globally oriented civil, human, and religious rights groups, engagement with inter-faith organizations, and involvement with environmental and local community groups (Nimer 2002, Haddad 2004). Muslims are also continuing to form public affairs groups and organizations to address issues of civil rights and discrimination specific to Muslims in public and government arenas.

Although some Muslim groups advocate isolation from American politics and institutions (which they consider corrupting and immoral), an increasing number of larger organizations advocate a continued identification with the universal Islamic community in combination with an engagement in politics for a positive contribution to society. Proponents for political engagement believe that the absence of Muslims in public debates has left the community vulnerable to the many challenges discussed above, and promote an increase in Muslim representation for the purpose of including Muslim values and perceptions in the formulation and implementation of public policy and programs (Nimer 2002).
Accordingly, many Muslims are doubling efforts in these arenas, and are finding increasing support in many sectors of American society (Smith 2010).

Religious Accommodation

Islam is a comprehensive way of life (Voll 1991). The secular context of American society is therefore particularly problematic for the Muslim community, whose religion makes no differentiation between the religious, political, and economic spheres of life. Religious accommodation in the workplace and in public schools poses serious challenges for practicing Muslims, as many Islamic practices are not recognized by institutions in the United States, and often, Muslims must choose between violating company or school regulations or abandoning religious obligations (Voll 1991, Nimer 2002). Many employers do not commit themselves to the adoption of company-wide, religiously supportive policies to account for the needs of their Muslim employees. Instead, they settle conflicts on a case by case basis, which delays true institutional transformation and allows for continued, generalized discrimination.

Some Muslims have responded to this challenge by employing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to affirm their religious rights, while others, unaware of (or unable to afford) such legal resources, remain silent and fearful (Nimer 2002). The challenge for Muslims, according to Voll, is to “create responses that will provide recognition of the special character of Islam in both private and public life without creating unnecessary conflict” (Voll 1991:208-209).
The achievement of such a response will be difficult in view of the struggling American economy and increased anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States since 9/11.

In the case of public education, the lack of time or space for religious practices in schools is a genuine concern for members of the Muslim community (Nimer 2002, Haddad et al. 2006, Zine 2008). Some Muslims have responded to this challenge by working with public school teachers to share and spread awareness of their beliefs, practices, and needs; while others are uniting with conservative Christians to advocate for prayer in the public school system (Haddad et al. 2006, Smith 2010). Though the latter succeeds in challenging the separation between public and private religious practice, it is based on a Christian definition of prayer (which Muslim parents fear may “Christianize” or mislead their children), and fails to acknowledge the specific conditions required for regular Islamic prayer. The opposition of prayer in schools, however, is equally unsatisfactory, as such a position would continue to perpetuate the notion of religion as a private matter (Voll 1991).

Due to these limited choices, many in the Muslim community have responded by channeling their efforts into the development of homeschooling materials, and the establishment of private Islamic K-12 schools. These alternatives simultaneously address a variety of concerns of Muslim parents. Beyond the provision of appropriate time and space for regular prayer, Muslim
parents believe that a purely Islamic environment can also shelter their children from the perceived societal ills and pressures present in American public schools (i.e., drugs, dating, sex, alcohol, and crime). Furthermore, Islamic schools are conceptualized as a safe space for Muslim youth, where they are spared discrimination, stereotyping, and bullying based on religious and ethnic identity (Smith 2010, Wormser 1994, Zine 2008).

Muslim Community Identity and Relations

The Muslim American population is exceptionally diverse and growing rapidly. Its members have a great variety of cultural, social, ethnic, linguistic, and national identities, and are products of a multitude of different economic and political environments. Sirin and Fine (2008), for example, ask their readers to consider the differences in the practice of Islam by Bosnian immigrants who have fled their homeland because of genocide, Egyptian gay Muslims who have fled their country for fear of imprisonment, well-educated female Turkish government officials who have come to America so that they can wear head scarves in the workplace, and Iranian immigrants who have fled because of civil war. While all of these individuals may come to identify as Muslim American, the degree to which and manner in which they do so will vary tremendously (Sirin and Fine 2008). Although many Muslim organizations promote respect for the diversity of Muslim practices and perspectives, the heterogeneity of the American Muslim community is a challenge to their unity and to their maintenance of a unified identity.
According to Nyang (1991), there are two threats to the maintenance of Muslim identity in the United States: 1) the aforementioned heterogeneity of the Muslim population and 2) the allure of assimilation into mainstream American society (Nyang 1991:238). Identity in the United States, he argues, is directly tied to language, culture, “race”, ethnicity, and politics. Living in a “racially” and ethnically conscious society, such as that of the United States, therefore often results in the fractioning of Muslims into separate groups. As the number of immigrant Muslims increases, and, “the process of self-identification and self-differentiation begins to be felt”, groups begin to break off according to national origin, ethnicity, and language (Nyang 1991:238). The Saudis begin to branch off from the Egyptians, the Moroccans from the Syrians, etc... This phenomenon, it could be argued, weakens relations in the Muslim community, and therefore puts it at a disadvantage (Nyang 1991).

Muslim Americans may shed ethnic or religious layers of identity for a variety of reasons. The allure of assimilation can be based on global factors such as politics, war, and increased terrorist activities, and/or more local influential factors such as prejudice and discrimination in the United States, the search for employment, the desire to marry outside of the Muslim community, and dissatisfaction with Muslim American community leadership and relations (Smith 2010). Nyang argues that in order to effectively maintain and properly define a strong identity, American Muslims must acknowledge their participation in
multiple circles of identification, for example in both Muslim and secular American communities and organizations (Nyang 1991).

Many Muslims who formerly responded to threats associated with integration and assimilation to American secular society by promoting isolation, now recognize the importance of being more open and receptive to non-Muslim American culture and society (Smith 2010). This is due in great part to their sudden move into the spotlight of American political and public discourse and media after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. According to Smith (2010), Muslims have found themselves in the frustrating position of verbally defending their faith constantly, a performance they experience as exhausting and ineffective. For many, therefore, 9/11 ignited greater action, beyond words, in the form of movements for public acknowledgement of Islam. This has included an increase in various forms of Islamic dress for men and women, an increase in mosque attendance, increased public observation of Islamic holidays, and a greater sense of responsibility to provide a genuine, positive model of Islam through example.

Smith suggests that some Muslims would argue “that for all the atrocity of 9/11 it may have opened some important doors for them...” (Smith 2010:195). These challenges opened doors for Muslims outside their communities, but also resulted in positive opportunities within their communities. As previously mentioned, the heterogeneity of the Muslim population, in most cases, poses a
significant challenge to the unity of the Islamic community. The increased and intensified scrutiny of Muslims in the last decade, however, has left little room for intra-community conflict. As all Muslims have been targets of profiling and discrimination, regardless of ethnic or national origin, they have responded by building bridges and developing new relationships between themselves (Haddad 2004). As Smith writes:

Muslims are looking at each other, “wondering where are the common bonds that render Islam a single faith, albeit with a wide range of possible interpretations and understandings, within the whole complex of multi-faith America”… “there is no question that continuing the efforts already under way to foster better appreciation, understanding, and cooperation among the different groups that constitute American Islam is an issue extremely high on the agenda for Muslims in the United States” (Smith 2010:186,194).

**Muslim Women**

In many cases, Muslim women face challenges specific to their gender and gender roles within patriarchic Muslim cultures, and even face discrimination from both non-Muslims and their Muslim ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ with regard to appropriate dress and behavior. Muslim women who choose to wear the *hijab* and other Islamic dress do so for a variety of reasons, for example to express a religious or spiritual identity, to make a political statement, to signify purity or
modesty, or, for “peace of mind” (Ayah, FIS student). Whether they choose to wear the *hijab* or abandon it, Muslim women must sometimes contend with criticism from any and all sides (Haddad et al. 2006). The subject of Islamic dress is divisive, especially in the American Muslim community. A recent online discussion via list-serve on the topic of *hijab* in American Islamic Schools, for example, sparked a heated debate between Muslim educators on whether or not Muslim women were ever (historically and cross-culturally) forced to wear *hijab*. While one Muslim educator (male) argued that more Muslim women were forced to take the *hijab off*, rather than to put it *on*, another educator (female) responded with a strong argument to the contrary.

Islamic dress was not a focus of this study, and in fact, I never asked participants to disclose their perspectives on the matter. Inevitably, however, it arose as a significant source of tension for the community. One teacher complained to me that someone at Wal-Mart had asked her recently “Aren’t you hot in that?” – to which she responded with a loud and confident Chicago accent “No, I am not hot!” The subject also surfaced often among the high school girls in Islamic Studies. Time and time again they shared stories of being asked publically why they wore “that”, or why one girl was wearing a scarf and the others weren’t if they were all Muslim. Not all of these cases were negative in nature (some people gave the girls compliments on their scarves and were simply curious), but it was clear that as girls who chose to wear a veil, their identity and beliefs were directly and indirectly often under question. Indeed,
Muslim women in America are faced not only with a generalized and growing discrimination against Muslim and Arabs, but also with the popular belief that they are oppressed within their families, communities, and homes (Haddad et al. 2006). When I asked the girls at FIS what kind of information they would be interested to include in materials on Islam for non-Muslims, their immediate response (while tugging lightly on their hijabs) was “Can you please tell them that we are not ‘oppressed’ just because we wear this?”

All Muslim women, whether they choose to identify publically with Islam or not, “are facing the compelling questions of how to understand themselves as Americans and how to define themselves so as to be understood by their fellow citizens” (Haddad et al. 2006:4). Although more conservative families continue to favor and promote women’s roles in the home and with family (especially newly arrived immigrants and first generation Americans), Muslim women in America are increasingly active in social, political, and leadership positions in community and professional life. They are becoming vocal in advocating for women’s rights at home and abroad, and are producing publications in the forms of books, magazines, journalism, poetry, and academic literature (Haddad et al. 2006, Smith 2010). Finally, Muslim women in America, though they differ in ethnic identity, education, culture, professional involvement, and observance of Islamic practice, are engaging in discourse on exactly which elements of Islam are necessary and commanded by Qur’an and Sunnah (the way of life exemplified by
the Prophet Muhammad) and what is most “appropriate and effective” for women living in America (Smith 2010:153).

Conclusion

As American Muslims try to fulfill their obligations to their families, religion, and country, they face many challenges and questions. Although many are pleased and even excited by the rapid growth of their community, Muslims are also frustrated by the variety of issues explored above, including discrimination, religious accommodation at work and in schools, and discord within their own community. To face these issues, they are building support and promoting understanding by reaching across ethnic and religious lines. Furthermore, they are becoming increasingly active on town and city commissions, local school boards, and other civic organizations, which allow them to contribute positively to society as American citizens (Smith 2010).

With regard to private, Islamic education, the importance of identifying these distinct concerns and challenges in the Muslim community lies in an understanding of their potential influence on schools' missions and practices. Schools might respond to these challenges, for example, by developing curriculum and practices which either promote isolation from or integration with secular American communities. For instance they might encourage students to become politically active in order to address the concerns of the Muslim community in America. Also, they might actively engage in reaching across
ethnic and socio-economic lines within their communities for the sake of religious unity, or they might develop practices to protect their own group’s identity from assimilation with other groups. Therefore, as these institutions attempt to fulfill their social function to prepare students for participation in (and contribution to) multiple communities, the challenges faced by Muslims in these communities can play a significant role in shaping the curriculum, practices, and ultimate goals of these schools.
CHAPTER FOUR:
RESEARCH DESIGN AND SETTING

This is an ethnography. Simply stated, ethnography is the study of the culture and daily life of a group of people. It is thought of as both a product of research (a written account of a researcher’s observations and interpretations) and a research process, based on the use of certain methods during personal interaction with participants and their community(s) (LeCompte and Preissle 1993, LeCompte and Schensul 1999). Methods such as observation, participant observation, and interviewing prioritize the researcher’s “eyes and ears as the primary modes for data collection” (LeCompte and Schensul 1999:2). Ethnographers use these methods to learn about what people do, how they do it, and why they do it. Through this process, an ethnographer also hopes to learn about the meanings that people assign to their thoughts and actions.

In order to produce accurate reflections of people and their communities, ethnographers base their descriptions on the experiences, perspectives, and discourse of their participants and pay careful attention to inter- and intra-group variation. Another characteristic of ethnography is that it considers the multiple
factors which may influence the beliefs and behavior of individuals and groups. The combination of such influential factors as history, economics, politics, and environment can be referred to as a ‘context,’ therefore ethnographers aspire to ‘contextualize’ and understand their observations and findings within larger frameworks (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). Finally, ethnographic research is a recursive process, which alternates between deductive and inductive analyses. This allows researchers to design their study within a theoretical or discursive framework in which they develop initial hypotheses and concepts, but also allows new themes and patterns to emerge from data and experiences in the field (LeCompte and Preissle 1993, Merriman 1988, LeCompte and Schensul 1999).

The methods of observation, participant observation, interviewing and focus groups were used in this ethnographic study of high school students across school contexts to provide qualitative insight into the unique and personal perspectives of young Muslim girls in a formal Islamic school environment. This project included two and a half months (11 weeks) of fieldwork at the Florida Islamic School (FIS), during which I observed the morning assembly, various classrooms, and the lunch hour. In-depth interviews, photo-elicitation interviews (PEI), and focus groups were also conducted on campus - some during lunch, others during class time, and others after school. Additionally, interviews with teachers and administrators were conducted to compare their values and efforts, with the values and experiences of FIS’s students. Finally, I also conducted participant observation in extra-curricular activities such as The Eco Club, The
National Muslim Spelling Bee, and various off-campus events. In total, I spent approximately 140 hours at the research site.

The questions which guided these research strategies were the following:
1) How do students at FIS perceive their school environment? 2) In what ways has the formal Islamic school environment influenced the construction and/or maintenance of the religious and community identities of its students? 3) In what ways do students negotiate membership in multiple communities, and what role has FIS played in these negotiations?

Observation and Participant Observation

Spindler and Spindler consider ethnography as a “distinctive approach to the study of education-related phenomena,” and describe direct observation as “the guts of the ethnographic approach” (Spindler and Spindler 1997:65). Furthermore, participant observation “is accepted almost universally as the central and defining method of research in cultural anthropology” (Dewalt and DeWalt 2011:2). Indeed, regular observation of student life at FIS forms the core of this research. It allowed me to discover and explore previously unknown variables and relationships important to this study and allowed salient themes and patterns to emerge from the basic framework of my research questions. By taking part in the daily activities and discourse of the school, I was able to learn about both explicit and implicit aspects of school routines and culture, which allowed me to compare how the high school girls described life at FIS during
interviews and focus groups with what they did regularly in their roles as students. By observing and participating in activities across contexts (formal FIS class time, informal lunch time, and afterschool clubs), I was able to achieve a greater, more holistic understanding of the fundamental processes and practices of the school. Furthermore, this combination of observations and participation allowed for critical insight into aspects of the girl’s lives beyond the school campus, such as family life, friends, personal interests, and unique concerns or aspirations, which also developed and directed my research. Finally, these methods were key to the formulation of new research questions and hypotheses appropriate to the setting and context of FIS.

Notes focused on the number and identities of students present, their seating arrangements, their behavior, their interactions with one-another, their interactions and relationships with teachers, and discourse from teachers which emphasized guidelines for membership in the Muslim and American secular communities (locally, nationally, and globally).

**Interviews**

Informal interviewing is considered by many as the method of choice for gaining entry, establishing rapport, and settling in (Bernard 2002). I employed this approach not only in the initial stages of my research, but also throughout the length of the study. I felt that conversing naturally and genuinely with my participants was critical to an establishment of trust, and therefore crucial to their
peace of mind. The comfort of my participants during informal and formal interviews was of the highest priority in this study.

Much like during normal conversation, questions aimed at clarifying and/or expanding information were employed during informal interviews, which allowed me to gain insight into the perspectives of participants. This allowed for a more detailed discussion of the topics related the study’s research questions, but left the direction of the conversation ultimately in hands of the participant. As the researcher, I simply raised points based on the natural flow of the exchange.

A semi-structured approach in interviewing students, teachers and administrators allowed me to combine the flexible advantages of open-ended, unstructured, informal interviewing with the advantages of organized and directed formal interviewing (Schensul et. al 1999). I chose my participants based on a variety of factors, however, in general, I sought to select student participants who differed in their ethnic heritage, school achievement, and in the amount of time spent in the United States. This strategy was employed to facilitate the exploration of a greater variety of perspectives and experiences. Because the interviews were voluntary, and because participation was dependent on parental consent for minors, students were ultimately chosen based on their willingness (and the willingness of their parents) to be involved in the study. Students who were not interested in participating, did not make themselves available for
interviews. Despite these limitations, I believe I was successful in amassing a variety of data on the perspectives and experiences of FIS’ high school girls.

During my eleven weeks at FIS, I conducted 12 interviews with female students. These 15 – 40 minute sessions revolved around the following questions: What is it like to be a student at this school? How is this school different than others you have attended? What are your favorite things about this school? And, what are your least favorite things about this school? The majority of my interviews were conducted during the lunch hour. This minimized any coordination with teachers or administrators as students were ready and available at this time. In some cases, interviews were conducted after school.

To provide another level of comparison, this study also explores teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of the school’s efforts to prepare students for life after graduation. I conducted three individual, semi-structured interviews with teachers, including one social studies teacher, one English teacher, and one Islamic Studies teacher, and I conducted one interview with the school’s Headmaster. These interviews allowed me to compare teacher/administrator perceptions of the school’s socializing practices with one another and with the perceptions and experiences of the students within this system.
Photo-Elicitation Interviews (PEI)

Photo Elicitation interviews use photography to provide insight to how individuals perceive and understand their world and personal experiences. Participants either present or are presented with images, and are then asked to describe and/or explain the photographs. In general, PEI can be used to encourage and support personal expression (White et al. 2009).

In various studies, this method has been used as an ‘ice breaker’ activity, which helps to build trust and rapport, and serves to minimize power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee (especially with children) (Epstein et al. 2006). By allowing the student to take his/her own photos, and take the lead in their interpretation, students may feel empowered and more confident in their exploration of the research topics. PEI has been used to trigger the memories of participants and has been shown to encourage longer, more comprehensive, and more personal interviews (Epstein 2006, Harper 2002).

This method is also effective in aiding individuals (in the interview process) that are more reserved in nature, especially with regard to sensitive topics, and can be especially helpful when focusing on topics of complex, negotiated identities (Croghan et al. 2008). Most importantly, as Croghan et al. suggest, PEIs offer participants an opportunity to “show rather than tell aspects of their identity that might have otherwise remained hidden”. This method was used in this study to elicit not only additional data, but also data of a different quality.
At the end of the first formal interview, students were asked to participate in a PEI. They were instructed to take a series of pictures which embodied the student experience at FIS for the next scheduled interview. During PEIs, students were asked to describe their photographs, explain why they chose to photograph those particular subjects, and describe the challenges they faced in capturing particular themes or images. Furthermore, students were asked to set apart and explain the photographs which they believed best represented their school, after which they were asked to set apart and explain the photographs which were most important to them.

Only three students successfully completed a PEI. Although many agreed to the assignment, most were unprepared on the day of the interview, having forgotten to take the necessary pictures. With each student who had originally agreed to a PEI, I rescheduled multiple times in order to give them the opportunity to participate. I also gave them many options regarding their participation. They were given the freedom to photograph whatever they liked, and whomever they liked, as long as minors in the photographs obtained parental consent. They were also permitted to take photographs with their cell phones, cameras, or iPads, and were allowed to bring these devices to the interview if and when they preferred this to providing the images in print. They were furthermore given the option of either maintaining or relinquishing their rights to the photographs for the purposes of presentations or publications. All students participating in this study gave their assent and obtained parental
consent to be photographed. Regardless, most of the girls shrugged off the responsibility and simply giggled while they informed me that they had again forgotten to do the assignment. Although I came to question why these students might be avoiding a creative task such as photography, classroom observations and informal conversations with teachers revealed that it was difficult to get many of the high school girls to turn in assignments of any kind. The three completed PEIs nonetheless served to provide rich qualitative data for the study. Due to the low number of these interviews, these data are integrated with standard interview data throughout the findings section (Chapter Five).

Focus Groups

In addition to individual interviews, I conducted 4 focus groups with 5-8 participants each. These sessions were conducted by grade level, including one focus group with grade 9, one focus group with grade 11, and two focus groups with grade 10. Three out of four of these focus groups were conducted during class time graciously offered by teachers, and one was conducted after school. Sessions lasted from approximately 40 minutes to two hours and were carried out in empty classrooms, offices, or in the school’s conference room. The focus groups served to stimulate discussion among the girls, and allowed me to gather a greater number of perspectives in a time efficient matter. Furthermore, I was able to compare what girls said amongst each other to what girls said in individual interviews. Due to the small number of students at the school, participants were assured that their names would not be used in presentations or
publications of this study. I assured them at the start of each session that analyses of notes and collected data, would be framed anonymously in terms of majorities and minorities or in terms of general age. I also gave them examples of how I would write about their comments to be clear and put them at ease: “Most of the girls in Focus Group B felt this way, while a few felt that way”, or “Most older high school girls agreed that this was a problem, while most of the younger girls gave the matter no importance.” In most cases, the girls appeared comfortable enough to be open about their likes and dislikes with regard to Islamic schooling. Only in one case did some of the girls visibly censor their comments, however, this was a result of the particular girls in the group who did not see eye to eye on a variety of issues. In general, the girls were excited to participate, mostly because they were permitted to miss class, but also (I believe) because they enjoyed the opportunity to voice their opinions.

Data Analysis

In the initial and exploratory phase of this project I implemented inductive coding, which allowed patterns to emerge from my notes as I conducted my field work. During the confirmatory stage of this research project, however, I implemented a deductive coding method based on the themes, patterns, and codes identified during the exploratory phase. Ultimately, the combination of these two methods of analysis allowed me to test hypotheses developed before and during the project.
Initial analyses implemented ocular and interocular percussion test methods which require an intimate knowledge of the content and codes at hand, and allow for the visual emergence of patterns (Bernard 2002). Final analyses were facilitated by ATLAS ti, a text management computer software program, which allowed me to search, sift, and organize my notes according to previously identified themes.

**Preliminary Research**

The preliminary research conducted for this study began as a semester project in a Research Methods in Applied Anthropology class. Inspired by literature from my courses in educational anthropology, which sought to examine, cross-culturally, the definition of an ‘educated person’ and the role of formal schooling in socialization and the construction of shared identities, I chose to contact FIS with a simple proposal. Preliminary data collected in the Spring of 2011 included approximately one week of classroom observations and interviews with administrators and teachers on their definition of ‘education’. I was very well received during this small project. The school Headmaster and Principal collaborated to produce a variety of options for my observations and arranged for my interviews with available and willing teachers. A year later I returned to FIS with a full length proposal for a longer ethnographic study, and was again generously and warmly welcomed by a very busy administration.
Consent and Confidentiality

Because this study specifically examines the perspectives of students with regard to their school, its teachers, and its administrators, special care was taken to guarantee the anonymity of their comments. Participants in individual interviews were asked to choose a pseudonym, and students in focus groups were assured that neither their names, ages, nor grade levels would be revealed in any publications or presentations. FIS is a very small school, in which students, teachers, and staff all know one another. Full confidentiality was ensured to all participants so that they might discuss and disclose their opinions and experiences without fear of retribution. Participants were also assured that the name of the school would remain anonymous.

All students, teachers, and administrators were asked to sign the appropriate assent and or consent forms before they were eligible to participate in individual interviews or focus groups. Students under the age of 18 were also required to obtain parental consent for their participation.

Due to the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Islamic institutions in mainstream United States media, I chose not to video or audio record any of my observations. As an outsider to the community, I feared this would be regarded as intrusive and suspicious, and likely compromise my rapport with the students, faculty, and staff. Therefore, data were collected only in the form of field notes.
and photographs, images, or texts provided by the students or teachers themselves.

Positionality

I arrived at FIS as an outsider and a stranger to the Muslim community. As a non-Muslim woman, aware of the current political climate, I expected some suspicion or hesitation on the part of the faculty and staff with regard to an ethnographic project. I therefore took care to introduce myself thoroughly and explain well my objectives and methods to school’s administrators. Fortunately, I was welcomed with open arms and was permitted a considerable amount of freedom on campus. Conscious of the trust and generosity bestowed upon me, I did my best to allow for transparency in my research, and kept the administrators updated on my activities and progress.

FIS enforces gender segregation in the upper classes. As a female researcher and an outsider to the Muslim community, I decided it would be most appropriate to focus on the experiences of high school female students in order to abide by and respect the school’s cultural and religious codes of conduct. I also believed that as a woman, I would be better (and more quickly) able to establish rapport and trust with girls. A focus on high school girls permitted greater access to the classrooms of my participants, and allowed for a greater amount of observation and participation on my part in informal conversations during lunch and extra-curricular after-school activities.
The authors of many studies on Islamic schooling agree to teach lessons or entire courses at their research sites. I chose not to volunteer for any positions that might compromise the student-centered approach which I considered central to this study. For example, I avoided assuming any positions of authority at the school, such as substitute teaching. Instead, I made an effort to repay the school faculty and staff for their kindness by making myself readily available for after-school or weekend events, where I could lend a helping hand alongside students. Throughout my time at the school, I did what I could to minimize my position as an ‘old’ woman and prioritized simply attending class and ‘hanging out’ with the girls at lunch. Creating alliances with the students, and declaring my interest in and loyalty to their perspectives, rather than those of the teachers, administrators, or parents, made the girls feel more comfortable about sharing their feelings and experiences with me.

My position as an outsider, a student, and a non-Muslim woman, put me in a fruitful position for learning. The girls were curious about me, and many were eager to share with me their thoughts, hopes, fears, and experiences. They enthusiastically explained activities and rituals to me, and ardently clarified what they considered common misconceptions about Muslim women. They also took advantage of my presence to ask me many questions about college, SATs, and career choices, which allowed me the opportunity to learn more about their world and their perspectives on life.
Gaining Entry

Teachers, students, and their parents, asked me regularly where I was from. Despite my denials, many were convinced that somewhere along my lineage there must have flowed Arab or Turkish blood. In the cafeteria, parent volunteers asked one of the girls sitting next to me, if I was an older sister visiting the school. Other comments included: “You look 100 percent Arab!” “You look exactly like my niece”, “You remind me of my daughter”, “You do look Turkish”, “You look Moroccan!” “Unbelievable, you look like my family!” The importance of these perceptions falls in the realm of gaining entry. I do not know if my ‘familiar’ looks contributed unconsciously to my establishment of trust with FIS students, faculty and staff, but I feel that I had little difficulty in establishing sufficient positive rapport to conduct my research. There were of course teachers and students who remained suspicious of my presence and intentions at the school, but in general, I found myself in a very loving environment, where considerable interest and support for the study was expressed.

More important (I believe) to the building of rapport with FIS’ diverse faculty, was my multi-cultural upbringing, and my various experiences studying, working, and traveling abroad. Although I do not speak Arabic, my fluency in Spanish, French, and German, was interesting to the girls and their teachers, and the fact that I had learned two of these foreign languages as an adult, seemed to accurately convey my genuine love of language and culture. When asked why I had chosen to conduct such a study at an Islamic school, it was
therefore fairly simple to convince most students and teachers of my open-mindedness and simple desire to learn about and experience different ways of life.

Setting

A supermarket, a gas station, an eye clinic, a fast food joint - these are establishments you might pass on any street in any American city. In this town, a brief deviation from the main road will lead you to a tall chain-link fence and a narrow entrance, where you will be greeted by a prominent beard and a warm white smile. Florida Islamic School (FIS) (pseudonym) is one of two private PK-12 Islamic schools in the area. It has been in operation for almost ten years. The campus is small, housing a few new, lightly colored buildings, a portable classroom or two, large play areas, and a small masjid (mosque) in the very back. Approximately 400 students attend FIS, of which one fourth attend the high school. There are 25-30 students at each grade level, except for the twelfth grade, which has only ten students. Approximately 60 percent of the high school students are girls. According to the Headmaster, 99 percent of the high school students at FIS are Arab. The remaining one percent are predominantly of Asian or Middle Eastern ethnicities.

At the front desk, Sister Lyla displays abounding, endless patience. Her desk is constantly under siege by students, teachers, and parents. She tirelessly and intermittently writes tardy slips, accepts checks, answers questions, hands
out pencils, and answers phone calls. She never raises her voice, she is never rude, she is always helpful, and she commands her share of respect. She easily does the job of two or three people.

Most classrooms at FIS are characterized by the same off-white concrete block walls, decorated sparingly with posters in Arabic and English, and pin-up boards displaying rainbow borders, classroom rules, and class projects. At the front of each room there is a white board (or two). Left of most boards is a small American flag. Flat-screen TVs are mounted near the dark and broad teacher’s desk, and are used to display power-point slides, to conduct quick Google searches, and especially to watch YouTube videos. In the back corner of some rooms, there is an old plywood laminated bookshelf containing tattered Qur’ans. With their spines torn at the extremities, they lean against one another for support, awaiting the moment they are called upon to inspire.

Older students roam the campus in pairs or trios, girls with girls, boys with boys, giggling (or complaining), while teachers lead small children in meandering lines from one building to another. Male students wear uniform navy blue slacks and school Polos or t-shirts, while female students wear uniform navy blue, full length, long-sleeve, jilbabs (a full length outer garment) or closed abayas (a dark robe covering the full body), and hijabs (head coverings) from the fifth grade and up. Monday through Thursday, the girls wear either white or grey hijabs, but on Fridays they boast hijabs vibrant in color, material and pattern. Like uniform-
wearing students at any private school, students at FIS distinguish themselves from one another creatively through their backpacks, socks, cell phones, and chucks (or other footwear). The hijabs of female Muslim teachers range from dark, solid colors to vibrant leopard print, further adorned by a pair of large designer sunglasses. The clothing of the male teachers and administrators simply pale in comparison. The diversity of the student body, staff, and faculty is discernible in appearance but also in language. As you wander between spaces, you will hear an array of accents from around the world, including American accents from Chicago, and New York for example, and the fluid and frequent interjection of Arabic in greetings, narratives, and school lessons.

School days at FIS begin with an assembly held in a community center adjacent to the masjid. At eight in the morning, students trickle in to the sound of Qur’an recitation by the Vice Principal. They take their time - sometimes dragging their feet, or pilling into the bathroom to delay their entrance. Slowly, they seat themselves in the beige, white, and green plastic garden chairs, arranged in rows of seven on both sides of the room. Girls sit on the left, boys on the right. In between the two is a five foot-wide walkway from the entrance of the room to the stage, where the Vice Principal and sometimes the Principal and/or Headmaster address the students from behind a podium. “You need to wake up,” the Vice Principal often interjects, demanding participation in the morning recitation. Male teachers remain on the boy’s side, female teachers on the girl’s side. During announcements, they take attendance and collect the cell phones and keys of
their students. Twenty minutes later, the Vice Principal ends the assembly: “It's going to be a great day, say inshallah (God willing)!”

High school students attend 33 class periods a week, each lasting 45 minutes. This includes five periods of each core course: Math, English, Science, and Social studies, three periods of Arabic, Islamic Studies, and Qur’an, and four periods of electives. Similar to college students, FIS students have a different class schedule to follow every day of the week. While core courses are restricted to students of the same grade level and either honors or standard academic achievement, elective courses are open to students of all levels.

At the beginning of class, students often re-arrange the chairs and desks to accommodate their gender segregated groups. In most cases, the space between the sexes is minimal (2ft), sometimes they are simply in neighboring rows. Nevertheless, boys and girls do interact with one another in class, especially those who are more extraverted. In general, however, these interactions are limited. In some cases, Islamic studies classes are entirely gender segregated so that boys and girls have different teachers and class rooms.
CHAPTER FIVE:

FINDINGS

“That song is old!” – Jimmy, student
“So! Your mom is old and you still listen to her!
That song is old and I still listen to IT!” – Brittney, student

When I requested permission to observe the high school girls at the Florida Islamic School (FIS), the Principal shook his head with a chuckle and warned me that the experience would be interesting. Indeed, between the quick wit, high energy, and sass launched between the girls, their peers, and their teachers, there was rarely a dull moment. The most extraverted girls often rapped or sang their favorite lines from the latest Top 40 hits, and discussed heart-throbs such as Drake or Zayn Malik from One Direction, who’s hair ‘looks so good you could eat it’. They talked about TV, comedians, and movies. When asked in class what technology they could not live without, students answered cell phones for Facebook, and cars, because it’s embarrassing to be dropped off by your mom. Like most high school girls, many young ladies at FIS worried about their weight and were conscious of their looks. They ate candy and pizza nonetheless, and they enjoyed shopping at the mall and going to the movies together.
In the classroom, FIS girls sat close. Often, they leaned into one another, shoulder to shoulder, head to head. At times, they rested their heads on the shoulders of their neighbor, or scratched each other’s backs. They shared everything from lip balm and perfumed lotion, to homework assignments and answers. Some hugged enthusiastically before class, or, in the middle of class.

Depending on the teacher and the day’s lesson, their behavior ranged from a quiet and respectful attentiveness to a rowdy resistance to learning: “I’m just not in the mood to study anything,” “Is it going to be longer Brother, because it gets soooooooooo boring,” “No sister! Why!” “I’m not learning anything new!” While some girls worked diligently, others walked around class socializing, copying from each other’s notebooks, and talking through the teacher. It was common for students to come to class unprepared and without their books, and often, they did homework for other courses during class or studied for tests to be taken later in the day. It was clear that in some courses, it was the teacher who had full command of the class (the most respected teachers), while in other classes it was the students who were in control. For example, in one class when the teacher was seen quietly standing at the front of the room, visibly exhausted by the unruly behavior, a female student finally said “Aww Sister, you’re so cute, are you waiting for us to do our work? Ok, I’ll do it”. In this case, the student seemed to be making it clear that she was going to decide when she was ready

FIS is a small school, in which students, teachers, and administrators are well acquainted with one-another. In order to protect the identities of participants, the ages and names of participants are therefore not disclosed. Accordingly, participants chose or were assigned pseudonyms.
to work. This same class, however, in the presence of a highly respected teacher, would be on task, listening, and completely silent. In general, girls participated less in class than boys did when in the same classroom. Teachers encouraged them to contribute, however they often declined: “Just pick one of the guys.” In one case a girl actually bargained with the teacher to read one rather than two verses from the text (as the boys had done). Amongst themselves, the girls were competitive academically. They expressed an appreciation of the positive reinforcement and acknowledgement they received from teachers for good grades, and said they enjoyed topping one another’s high scores.

In interviews and focus groups, FIS girls were asked “What are your favorite things about FIS?” To this question, the girls responded almost unanimously that it was the sense of community and/or the family-like atmosphere that they appreciated most about their school. Second, students named the safety they felt in the school’s Islamic environment. Third, FIS girls appreciated the opportunity to learn about their religion, and gave great importance to the moral instruction they received. When asked what they liked least at FIS, the girls (not surprisingly) mentioned discipline and rules and regulations, but then also related insightful perspectives on academic resources and opportunities, the school’s honor system, and perceived gender or ethnic favoritism.
In this chapter I will address student perspectives on life at FIS, and relate FIS girls’ opinions to the study’s research questions: 1) How do students at FIS perceive their school environment? 2) In what ways has the formal Islamic school environment influenced the construction and/or maintenance of the religious, ethnic, and community identities of its students? 3) In what ways do students negotiate membership in multiple communities? and What role has FIS played in these negotiations? I will explore: a) family and community at FIS, including family ties, family-like behavior and communication, ethnicity and identity, and integration and exclusion to ‘the family’; b) student perspectives on the safety of the school environment, including an exploration of the preparation FIS girls receive to live ‘Islamically’; 4) discipline at the school, including rules and regulations, and surveillance. Finally, I will discuss student concerns relative to the academic resources and opportunities available at FIS. The opinions of teachers and staff members in relation to these topics are addressed throughout the chapter.

Family and Community

“It takes a community to build and fund the school.” - Ranya, alumnus

Students at FIS were often reminded of their membership in the school and greater communities, and this sense of community was often linked with family. In the morning assembly, for example, the Headmaster once said: “I have one word for you this week – IMPACT. How are you going to impact your families...
and communities?” On another occasion, the Vice Principal addressed an incident of vandalism in the following way: “Someone who does this does not belong to our community. They do not belong to our school.” Also in the classroom, a teacher noticed that somebody had colored in a wide dent in the wall and immediately commented on the money paid by hard-working parents to maintain the school: “Whoever did that, they’re disrespecting their family”. FIS is a private institution, and it is clear from the quotes above that students are reminded of the communal and familial foundations of their school.

“You’d be surprised, you figure out somehow you’re related.” - Noor, student

Notably, many of the students and teachers at FIS were literally related. The female high school students I interacted with had as many as four siblings at FIS, and as many as six additional siblings who were known at FIS because they had either once attended the school, were planning to attend, or had participated in school events. Some students were also cousins. In class, teachers sometimes accidentally referred to students by a sibling’s name and often asked about older brothers and sisters. Even I did not escape family-related conjectures. When I attended lunch with the girls, a cafeteria helper (usually mothers) asked whether I was an older sister visiting the student sitting next to me. Both teachers and staff brought their own children and grand children to be educated or to teach at FIS. Often, I was introduced to grandsons and daughters on campus. When a teacher became ill in one of the classes I observed, for example, the substitute was one of the teacher’s five daughters. School events
also included extended family. For example, on Fridays and on special occasions, the grandfather of one family prepared and sold delicacies, falafel, and gyros outside the masjid (mosque), and young men and women often helped him unload his van. Many mothers were also actively involved in school life and activities, including bake sales and the cafeteria.

“We are like a family” - Sarah, student

When I asked the girls what they liked most about their school, their first responses revolved around the family-like environment and relationships at FIS. Indeed, teachers were considered and treated as older sisters, mothers, aunts, uncles, and friends. Female teachers were called ‘sister’ and male teachers were called ‘brother’, which also contributed to the familial atmosphere of the school. Students often told their teachers that they loved them, and it was common to see teachers and students hugging one another and/or shaking hands at the beginning or at the end of class. When a teacher had returned after being absent for over a week, she began class by saying “I missed you guys” and the students replied with “I love you sister!” and “We missed you too!” On another occasion, as a young girl helped a teacher with her things and gave her an enthusiastic embrace, the teacher chuckled and said “You love me more than my own husband!” Some students even felt that their teachers knew them better than their parents did, and one student in a focus group, Soraiya, even referred to FIS as her “first home”. When another student attempted to correct her by saying
“second home”, Soraiya refused the correction, stating: “We spend more time here than at home.”

It was clear from interviews, focus groups, and my observations that most students at FIS felt cared for by their teachers: “They all treat us like their children,” “They want us to go to heaven”. Many girls also drew connections between this affection and their academic success: “I love how supportive they are, if I don’t understand something, they’ll go over and over it until I do,” “They’re always pushing you,” “If they know you’re struggling, they tell you and help you,” “They make you want to do good”. In and out of class, teachers were often heard referring to their students as habibi/ti (my love / my beloved).

“Here you can be your teacher’s friends.
You can call teachers names and joke with them.” – March, student

As in any large family, good natured teasing was a part of daily life at FIS. In one class for example, students and even the teacher would make fun of fair-skinned Muhammad who would turn red when stared at. On one occasion everyone one in the room looked back at him to incite this reaction, waited, and giggled hysterically when they had succeeded. Muhammad was a good sport about it and the lesson proceeded quickly afterward. On a particularly rowdy day, the same FIS teacher said the following: “Every time my husband asks me to go to the zoo I say no, I’ve seen enough animals in my life!” The students exploded with laughter and simply continued with their raucous behavior. In another class,
the following banter occurred between a female student and a female teacher: T: “What is that, a dog’s tooth? (necklace) It’s ugly.”, S: “You’re ugly!”, T: “It’s ugly!”, S: “You’re ugly!”.
Playful teasing also occurred between students. During a focus group, for instance, Ayah called Lama a donkey in Arabic, after which Lama called Ayah a dog. “Don’t worry,” they told me, “It’s ok. That’s family!”

FIS girls defined family as “love and support,” “brothers and sisters,” and “a mother and a father.” When asked to explain how FIS was like a family, most girls did in fact stick to the above mentioned parameters: “We all grew up with each other, like brothers and sisters,” “We help each other out,” “We’re all close,” “We support one another,” “You can feel it, everybody cares about each other,” “When someone is ill, everyone prays,” “Teachers are like our mothers,” “Everyone knows everyone,” “A lot of love.”

Of the support they received from teachers, FIS girls especially liked that they could consult some teachers after school about personal problems. One such teacher revealed in an interview that teachers at FIS did in fact have “a personal interest” in their students: “They get a genuine love from teachers, they’re our kids.” and furthermore stated that this particular kind of relationship between a teacher and a student “fosters greater respect.” This teacher was also of the opinion that FIS teachers had “a certain connection with the family” because they prayed with the parents of their students. Even the Headmaster revealed that students often “chased” her with questions, and wrote her even
after years of leaving the school: “Kids feel very connected to the school… We keep very close relationships with our kids”. The Principal, too, when addressing parents at a reunion, spoke of the role of teachers as secondary parents.

Finally, class curriculum also served to support notions of love, support, and family at FIS. In a high school English class, for example, students were asked to write about and discuss “What makes a happy family” and “How do you contribute happiness in your family?” In another class, a teacher said “If you love someone, then you love anyone related to him.” This was said in the context of the day’s lesson on the family of the Prophet, however, it is a strong reflection of the value placed on family and community at the school. Indeed, the consistent description of the school environment and school relationships in familial terms made it apparent that family was the means by which FIS girls and many of their teachers of understood community.

Ethnicity and Identity

“Everyone comes from the same background.” – Brittney, student

Many students drew connections between the familial environment at FIS and the ethnic backgrounds of its teachers and students: “Most of us look the same, most of us speak Arabic”. According to the Headmaster, 99% of the high school student population was Arab, and I learned quickly that Arab identity was

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2 Seeing the girls’ emphasis on familial relations as a way of expressing a sense of community was suggested to me by Dr. Napora.
indeed a source of pride for most FIS girls and their teachers. Arab ethnic identity was reproduced and maintained by teachers and students through informal discourse in and out of the classroom and at school events. For example, teachers and students often joked about being on “Arab time” and would qualify their actions as being “typical Arab (Arab)”. At an event for parents and school volunteers, the Headmaster welcomed everyone and pointed out that 80 people had shown up when only 30 had been invited: “That’s typical Arab” she said, and then commended everyone on being “secure” in their identity. In the classroom as well, when a student told a story about how a minor conflict with his uncle turned into a full family affair, the teacher affectionately said: “freakin' Arabs!” and incited laughter and agreement from the boy and his classmates. Even I was told multiple times by students, parents, and adults that I looked “100 percent Arab!” Finally, while discussing various career options in class, the teacher validated student opinions on the medical field but reminded them that “business is already in your blood” (that Arabs are especially talented in business is a belief held by the community).

Data collected during observations and interviews revealed that the shared Arab ethnic identity at FIS contributed strongly to its familial atmosphere. Also conversely, the strong sense of belonging to the ‘family’ contributed to the construction, reproduction, and maintenance of the Arab identity. Finally, the sense of community at FIS was enhanced by both the shared ethnic identity of the majority of its students, and their sense of family.
"You can’t be Arab and not speak or understand Arabic. The word Arab is IN the word Arabic!" – Paris, student

Arab identity was also maintained through the use of Arabic in both formal and informal settings at FIS. High school students were required to take classes in Arabic, whether they spoke the language at home or not, and many Arabic greetings and expressions were used by all students, teachers, and staff, including those who were not Arab. Outside of the classroom, code-switching occurred on various levels, from fluent English with a few interjected Arabic words, to fluent Arabic with a word here and there in English. The high school girls spoke mainly English, but interjected Arabic words often.

In the classroom the language of instruction was English, except in advanced Arabic class, in which instruction was entirely in Arabic. In Islamic Studies, some teachers would take the liberty of speaking more Arabic, followed by an English translation. Students and teachers often debated the meaning of Arabic words, and sometimes cultural and linguistic debates were inspired by class curriculum. In English class, for example, the Arabic tradition of calling elders ‘uncle’ out of respect was discussed in relation to the characters in The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini. Also, sometimes when students were unsure of a word’s definition in English, this teacher would use the Arabic word she thought was most similar to convey the word’s meaning. Use of the language was relevant and important to many students, as they often asked one another and their teachers about how to say or express certain things in Arabic. While in
home economics, for instance, one girl asked about the word for yeast and the teacher clarified to me: “The girls like to hear things in both languages.” Indeed, many students listed the opportunity to read and write in Arabic as one of their favorite things about FIS.

Arabic’s intimate tie with Islam also made it a significant factor in the construction and/or maintenance of a Muslim identity. Every classroom and hallway contained posters with Arabic writing from the Qur’an, and accurate pronunciation of the language was highly valued in class. One assistant teacher explained to his students that the pronunciation of Arabic is important because it alters the meaning of the words in the Qur’an. As he corrected and guided readers, he reminded them that since the words in the Quran are “from Allah and perfect… we don’t need to put our two cents in and change things.” Accordingly, when a young girl read in Arabic from the text book correctly, and in a melodic and smooth tone, she was highly praised for her talent. When asked whether the Qur’an could be read in English, the teacher responded “Yes, but you should try to read in Arabic.”

Students were encouraged by teachers and the administration to express their gratitude to Allah through the use of Arabic. For example, they were encouraged to say Alhamdulillah (praise be to Allah) if they did well on their tests, or whenever they were successful. Islamic phrases were used often by teachers, whether they were Arabic speakers or not, and all students learned thereby to
speak in a way that was “pleasing to God”. They said Inshallah (God willing) when they were hopeful, and when they were impressed by someone’s achievements, they precipitated their compliments by saying Mashallah (whatever God wills). One teacher explained that rather than simply thank students for doing something kind in English, she preferred to use the Arabic phrase Jazaka Allahu Khairan (May Allah reward you with all good) because it connected religion with daily life.

“Family?! We’re not in the family!” – Azizah, student

FIS was sometimes referred to as an Arabic or Arab school, rather than an Islamic or Muslim school. This was a clear indication that the Arab identity was more dominant in some cases, than the Muslim identity. Some of the non-Arab students who participated in interviews and focus groups disliked this and felt that they were treated unfairly at times by teachers, students, and administrators. They shared stories with me and one another about favoritism, and being lightly bullied or excluded from social circles by “popular” Arab students: “They think they rule the school! No one can say anything to them… they think they should be respected,” “The teachers, they treat them like royalty too. They treat us like lower.” In one such story, a non-Arab student, Sarah, explained that both she and an Arab student had failed to do the homework for one of their classes. According to Sarah, the teacher told her that she would have to give her a zero, but later whispered to the Arab student that it was ok, and that she would give
her 100. Another minority student also felt that administrators were more lenient with some students than others when it came to punishments.

When I asked how the “popular” Arab girls excluded non-Arab students, they gave the following examples: When the popular Arab girls bantered or “got smart” with teachers, their friends and classmates would laugh in support of the behavior, however, when the non-Arab girls attempted to fit in by making similar comments, Arab girls would remain completely silent. Also, while the “popular” girls would help each other cheat and break rules in school, they would lend no such helping hand to minority students, and criticized them hypocritically instead. Accounts of bullying included being made fun of, laughed at, or taken advantage of: “I’m very nice, polite, so when I’m asked to do something, I’ll end up doing it, and they take advantage… they’ll say Hey, let’s use her!” Even notions of beauty at the school, one minority student explained, were tied to the Arab phenotype, for example “big Arab eyes”. Data collected during these conversations, interviews, and focus groups indicate that a sense of being excluded from ‘the family’ negatively affected students’ sense of belonging in the school and their perception of the school in general.

Non-Arab students who managed to permeate ethnic barriers at the school were said to have “a little bit of Arab in them,” and these students would say, for example, “Sometimes I act a little Arab”. Indeed the ethnic Arab socialization was so strong at FIS, that one Asian student I spoke with confessed
to having “a little Arab in her” after spending years at the school, and another student was reported to identify fully as Arab, “She says she’s Arab now,” although she was from the Caribbean. In both cases, the student described her adoption of the Arab identity (or elements thereof) positively. It was also apparent that their accommodation of an Arab identity played a positive role in their successful integration and/or feeling of belonging in the school.

Even the non-Arab students and teachers who were successful at integrating into the Arab culture at FIS spoke of the difficulty, time, and adjustment required to achieve a certain level of comfort and acceptance. They reported difficulty in adjusting to “Arab humor” and “Arab pride”. The Arab students who brushed these topics in conversations or interviews with me were of the opinion that only students weak in character had difficulty assimilating to the school culture. One Arab student admitted that “A lot of other cultures are afraid to walk in”. Those that did attend the school but did not succeed in integrating simply left. Nevertheless, it was clear that the students and teachers who adapted and integrated successfully to the FIS environment, enjoyed strong, loving bonds with their peers.

3 Notably, FIS did not have a single Black African or African American student in the high school.
Environment

“We are like in a bubble.” – Qaila, student

All students, regardless of ethnicity, agreed that they felt safe at FIS. When I asked them what it was like to be a student at the school, the girls in focus groups responded “Like being a student at any other school, only not as hazardous,” “We’re preserved from dating and drugs,” and “There are no guns here.” Other students commented on the “safety of the environment,” saying that they felt comfortable around everybody, and that they didn’t have to worry about harassment from students or male teachers. These comments resound with other studies on Muslim youth, in which Islamic schools are considered a safe haven from the discrimination, drugs, alcohol, and dating found in public schools. Indeed, FIS girls appreciated that they did not have to explain why they fast, pray, or why they wear a scarf: “I can talk to anyone here, and they won’t look at me weird.”, “I like that everyone prays, so you’re not the only one.” They also felt that they could open up and say whatever they liked, without being judged.

“Are Mohawks haram (forbidden)?” – Batraa, student

My observations of FIS class time supported student perspectives that most girls felt at home in their school environment. This was evident in their behavior and in their relationships with their teachers, but also, and especially, in a certain practice they often engaged in during class time. In my notes, I came to code these practices as a Forum, or, as QFP, Questions of Faith and Practice.
Especially in Islamic Studies, but also in courses such as English, students asked questions relevant to their lives as Muslims in the United States. They sought guidance from their teachers, and felt safe enough to ask them personal questions about Islamic beliefs and practices. Munisa, for example, once asked Brother Abdullah about what Allah does when she feels lonely and prays for guidance, “What does he do?” Brother Abdullah responded by relating to Munisa - by putting himself in her shoes, and by giving examples from his own life. Hammed once asked about life after death, in the grave: “What will it be like, if you are in the grave for thousands of days with only your deeds to talk with? Won’t that be weird?”

Many questions addressed the acceptability or morality of certain practices, and began with “Is it haram (forbidden) to…” or, for example, “Is the stock market haram?” Questions about rituals were common as well, such as what to say when beginning a prayer, and whether praying after the sun had already risen was acceptable. Finally, they also discussed the difficulty of remaining loyal to Islam and its principles, when choosing their apparel and while attending parties. The practice of such forums seemed to provide a safe space for FIS girls and boys to ask questions related to judgment day, heaven, and daily life as a Muslim. They seemed to find comfort, understanding, and support from their peers, and appreciated the candid responses they received from teachers when they shared their own life experiences.
Living Islamically

“Public school teaches you and then you go home. FIS teaches you your religion and teaches you to be a good person.” – March, student

In addition to the family-like atmosphere and the safe environment which fostered these supportive and familial relationships, FIS girls appreciated the religious and moral instruction they received: “I like that that we get know more about our religion... I also like that they have prayer,” “I think it helps me (Qur'an and Islamic Studies),” “One thing I love about this school is that we’re taught to be modest,” “It makes me better in my religion.” One student, Diana, liked that the school thought beyond the present and “on a larger scale” by preparing her for college and life ahead. When I asked her to give an example of how FIS was preparing her for life ahead, she said: “By constantly teaching us our religion, it’s a way of life.”

“Try to be honorable, noble, upright.” – Brother Abdullah, teacher

Teachers and administrators at FIS instructed students on how to live their lives Islamically. Morning assemblies often included short talks on appropriate Islamic behavior. For example, on the topic of neighbors, the Vice Principal said: “You need to help them if they need help... you need to feed them... you need to smile at them and greet them at least... this is part of the religion, no matter if your neighbors are Jews, Christians, or Muslims.” On the topic of judgment, the Vice Principal spoke of students who had come to his office, complaining that
they had visited friends and seen behavior that they disapproved of. He gave the examples of a mother that does not “cover” (wear hijab), a father that smokes, and the act of “listening to things they shouldn’t be listening to.” He reminded students that it was not up to them to judge, that judgment, is up to the Lord, Allah – he reminded them that their duty was to do good deeds – whether people are poor or “doing things that you don’t like, do not judge them!” In the classroom as well, students were often encouraged to be understanding and compassionate. They were also encouraged, as Muslims, to volunteer or contribute financially to local and global charities for the poor and the hungry. One teacher suggested volunteering at the battered women’s shelter, or the Red Cross, for example.

Students were so confident in their knowledge of Islam and its principles that they even challenged their teachers and administrators on the acceptability of behavior, or the accuracy of historical depictions. On more than one occasion, for example, I witnessed students correct their instructors on the details of a story on the Prophet. One student, Sonia, even told her story of confronting the Vice Principal about his habit of “calling children out” during the morning assembly. The Prophet would never call people out in public and embarrass them, she told him, instead, he would pull them aside privately afterward.
“Are you prepared to die?” – Brother Abdullah, teacher

Living ‘Islamically’ was often tied with the preparation for death and Judgement day. When Brother Abdullah asked “What do you think is the best thing to prepare you for the hereafter?” students suggested reading Qu’ran and Sunnah and having good consciousness. The teacher, however, sought a simpler answer: “Two words” he said, “GOOD DEEDS.” Preparation for death was then directly linked to daily behavior, choices, and actions. As Brother Abdullah stated in an interview: “We try to prepare our students for this life and the hereafter.”

Class materials, such as texts and videos, often dealt with repentance, facing death, and faith. One such video titled You Only Live Twice, featured a young Muslim man, Robby. He is handsome, fit, and clean cut. He is first shown exercising (to the delight of the girls), then praying, then on the phone with his (assumed) girlfriend while driving. Suddenly, he is killed in an accident. The video then repeats itself, however now with a bloodied Robby in the background pleading the living Robby to stop listening to music (considered haram), to slow down his prayer, to stop smoking (considered haram), and to stop talking to the girl on the phone, because he should control his desires for the opposite sex. The video reminded students that they would answer for all of their sins when they died, and that death could be just around the corner.
A video shown by another Islamic Studies teacher depicted images and video creations of the end of the world. The narrator was a man with a loud, forceful, and passionate voice, who relayed graphic descriptions of people on ‘the plain of resurrection’ on Judgment Day. They were described as holding their own intestines, their own limbs, or their private parts on their heads, flowing with blood and puss. Images of the world, cities, and towns being destroyed by natural catastrophe, fire, earthquake, and meteor showers flashed on the screen, while he described what was in his view the degradation of society and its values, for example violence against parents, popular music, fornication, homosexuality, incest, and rape. Again, the video reminded students that the Day of Judgment is coming, and that to save themselves from “Hell Fire”, they should be morally upright and honorable.

“You should only show your face and your hands.”

- Sister Fadwa, assistant teacher

Appropriate grooming, dress, and behavior for Muslims was addressed both formally and informally by teachers. One class spent weeks on the topic of haya (shyness or bashfulness) for example. During this time, FIS girls were instructed on the differences between good and bad haya, including how to be shy or modest and with whom. Aside from curriculum, these topics were also discussed in other classes. One assistant teacher once told students, for example, that girls should only show their faces and their hands. To this a male student responded in shock “You can’t show your toes!?” The assistant shook
her head and confirmed that it was true. This same teacher also declared that men had beards to distinguish them from women, and that women should not cut their hair as short as men. When Suhayma questioned frightfully whether her short haircut last year was considered acceptable, the teacher nodded and said “but you didn’t shave it”. Sarah admitted that she had in fact shaved it in the back, to which the assistant teacher hesitated and responded “…but not in the front right?” Sarah agreed this was true, and in the end, the teacher came to the conclusion that it was acceptable. This is a good example of the type of negotiating many of the teachers seemed to do regularly with regard to what they did or did not consider *haram*. My observations also revealed that teachers differed in their opinions of what was or was not acceptable. FIS girls were therefore on some counts exposed to more than one perspective on *haram/halal* dress and behavior.

On the topic of veiling teachers often told students that they did not have to wear *hijab* to be Muslim. However, they conveyed through tone and additional comments that wearing *hijab* was associated with greater piety. They might follow a phrase denying an obligation to wear *hijab*, for example, by saying, “but *inshallah* (God willing) you will wear it”. Informally, therefore, teachers encouraged the use of the veil, and expressed true disappointed when they heard of a girl that did not ‘cover’. They also did this formally through the use of texts or videos created by Muslims in support of veiling. The perspective of Muslims who choose not to veil was not presented in the classes I observed.
“I do what I want anyway.” – Elizabeth Angel, student

FIS girls did not always accept the cultural and religious guidelines they received from school teachers and administrators passively, but rather interpreted and sought to accommodate these rules based on their personal experiences and opinions. The quote above reflects this perfectly. Elizabeth Angel expressed this in her Islamic Studies class, making it clear that in the end, she would decide what was or was not acceptable dress and behavior. She disliked the hijab, for example, but felt strongly about praying during the day, regardless of where she was.

In class, FIS girls sometimes unabashedly expressed disapproval of certain moral guidelines of modesty, behavior, and gender roles, and displayed resistance to the opinions of teachers. In one such case, girls were being told that they should be shy, even around other women. The area from the belly button to the knees, they were told, should not be shown. The girls immediately resisted this guideline, “What about breasts!?” and challenged the teacher by questioning how showing your stomach or belly button could be forbidden but not breasts. Although the teacher explained that the rule was such due to breastfeeding practices, the girls were clearly not convinced.

On another occasion, teachers and students disagreed on what they described as the accumulation of bad *deen* (religious way of life). Some students and the teacher were of the opinion that if one girl rolls up her sleeves or puts on
makeup and thereby influences another to do the same, she would carry her bad *deen* as well as that of the person she influenced. Diana (student) rejected this completely, stating “Everyone has their own mind and makes their own decisions, I’m sorry.” She rejected the concept of communal responsibility, and believed instead in individual responsibility for one’s actions. In another class, Soraiya expressed her disapproval of giving beggars money (as suggested by the teacher) by stating “I don’t believe them”. By this she was insinuating that she did not believe that the beggar truly needed money, or did not believe that the beggar would use the money for food, rejecting the teacher’s suggestions to give indiscriminately.

Some students questioned whether they should lose sleep in order to pray before the sun rose, and Ayah even questioned the good in prayer at all, if it is done just for good *deen*, rather than sincerely. Batraa once cleverly asked, “You know how we are supposed to love all prophets equally? Why do we put so much emphasis on Prophet Muhammad?” When asked who among them had “it in them to serve and love the family of the Prophet more than our own families”, the girls challenged this by saying “We don’t even know them,” thereby questioning the logic of loving and supporting strangers.

FIS girls also sometimes questioned or challenged teachers’ claims from the perspective of scientific facts: “So if Jesus didn’t have a father, where did his DNA come from? Was it all his mothers?” In another class, students challenged
the teacher’s claim that Allah powerfully made the sun rise every day by reminding him that the sun doesn’t rise, the earth rotates. FIS girls made it known that they were not simple sponges, but rather clever and opinionated students. They developed their own perspectives and sometimes openly questioned or dismissed the opinions of teachers. Although the school administrators and teachers had a fairly tough stance against listening to music, for instance, the girls clearly rejected this standpoint, and often sang or rapped lyrics from their favorite hits.

**Discipline**

When asked to discuss what they liked least about the school, FIS girls offered their perspectives on a variety of topics, including discipline, surveillance, rules and regulations, and academic resources and opportunities. Initial comments were always relative to the dress code. In almost every interview and/or focus group, the girls expressed their frustration with the administration’s strict policies on socks! This was very amusing to me, but the girls were truly flustered by the fact they would get in trouble for something as simple as wearing colorful socks.

On the subject of rules and regulations, students said “*Some stuff’s just stupid,*” and commented on getting in trouble for “the stupidest things”. Elizabeth Angel, for example, complained that she was once reprimanded by the Vice Principal for giving high-fives: “*That is not part of our religion!*” he said. Several
students also complained that they had been reprimanded for smiling. In one of these cases, Aalia shared that she had been asked whether she was smiling because she was happy, or smiling because she was flirting.

More than one student felt that the administration sometimes favored boys over girls, and was more lenient with them. When asked to provide an example, a focus group told the story of a boy who was caught with a knife and quickly forgiven “but girls get in trouble for wearing colorful socks!” One student, Haleema, also felt that there was a double standard for gender-related regulations for teachers and students: If a boy and a girl were found talking alone in a room, for example, they would be penalized, however teachers seemed to get away with such behavior unpunished.

“At all points of our life we had 50 eyes on us!” – Paris, student

Students also expressed their dislike of being so strictly monitored. According to the girls, the school boasted 35 cameras, and a room full of computer screens where the Vice Principal surveyed student behavior in the hallways and on school grounds: “It’s like a hawk… it’s kind of annoying.” Several students did in fact describe and refer to the Vice Principal as a hawk, and were aware of his presence at all times: “Some days you know that Brother [Hawk] is going to be patrolling so you’re extra careful.” During my time at the school, I witnessed student reactions to the Vice Principal and heard him refer to the
school cameras himself: “Don’t push each other… I can see you in the cameras!” (heard over the hallway speakers).

During one classroom observation, I noticed that the boys in the class suddenly stopped punching themselves in the arm even though the teacher still had his back turned to the class. They sat still, and were quiet. As I tried to decipher their behavior, I noticed out of the corner of my eye, that the Vice Principal was standing directly in front of the classroom door’s window. As soon as Brother “Hawk” continued his rounds, the boy’s antics resumed. Despite their dislike of the school’s surveillance practices, FIS girls were not terribly concerned with or disturbed by them. They were accustomed to them and found them “annoying” at their worst.

In general, FIS girls felt that the rules were “exaggerated”, and disliked that the administration often jumped to conclusions and “assumed the worst.” As a result, the girls felt that they were sometimes wrongfully accused, and disliked that parents were sometimes called before the student herself had been given the opportunity to explain the perceived transgression. One group gave the example of a girl who had been wrongfully accused of flirting with a male teacher. In a personal interview, I asked Paris whether she had encountered any challenges while taking pictures for our Photo-Elicitation Interview (PEI) and she said “Some things you can’t take a picture of, like emotions. Sometimes I get
very angry. The administration makes decisions on their own and don’t support or explain them.”

“Even when they’re tough it’s for our own good.” – Karima, student

Although students agreed that they found FIS rules “frustrating”, they also often agreed that the rules were beneficial: “Some things are for our benefit,” “I know they’re to protect us,” “FIS keeps me in a good environment,” “This school keeps you in your place,” “Keeps me behaved”. Even one of the most rambunctious girls who was often in trouble admitted: “In the end, I know I’m gonna thank him (the Vice Principal), he knows what’s right, obviously.” FIS girls therefore expressed trust in their teachers and the school administration to make decisions that were in fact for their own good.

**Academic Resources**

FIS girls said they felt inspired by the teachers and administrators who demanded excellence in academics. They appreciated the positive reinforcement and the acknowledgement they received for good grades, and enjoyed competing with one another for the title of student of the month. They also liked that dual enrollment at the local community college was explained as early as the 10th grade, and highly encouraged. Many students, especially seniors for example, attended courses on the HCC campus and/or took courses online for college credit.
Despite this, many students were aware that in some cases, the school had only limited resources at their disposal. Many students craved the opportunity to take elective classes such as journalism, driver’s education, photography, painting, technology, and drama, and lamented the fact that their school could not (and in some cases would not) provide such opportunities. Several students also expressed an interest in a greater number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and admired local magnet schools with special programs in medicine and technology. FIS girls even expressed a desire for a more varied selection of activities in Physical Education, in which they complained that every year they covered the same four sports/activities.

Other, more insightful students felt that although they learned many facts in school, however, “that whole critical thinking... we’re not good at that”. These students expressed a desire for improved teaching practices and more qualified teachers. FIS girls were also interested in establishing more student clubs and organizations on campus.

Most students especially felt underprepared for the English portion of the SAT and expressed an interest in receiving additional guidance with regards to attending college: “What we do need is a college counselor.” Some students do not score high enough on the SAT to attend university directly, for example, and therefore first attend the local community college. Although FIS girls appreciated the sheltering nature of the school environment, some also confessed anxiety
regarding life outside the school, for example in college: “We’re scared,” “Teachers tell us our bubbles are going to be popped... that our minds are innocent,” “We’re really naïve.” In my classroom observations I did in fact hear teachers telling their students that their “bubbles” would be “popped” when they graduated. This was usually in the context of discussing alcohol consumption, drug addiction, or violence. It is clear that these statements had a profound impact on the girls, who also wondered how people would “react” to and “interact” with them in college. Accordingly, many students expressed the desire to visit the nearest university and to receive academic and scholarship counseling.

While some teachers felt that they were preparing students morally for college, others felt that they were falling short socially. These teachers worried about the “culture shock” students would experience in college when exposed to newly found freedoms and peer pressure. One alumnus spoke positively of students having “more room” to socialize with members of the opposite sex at FIS, a practice that she admitted was difficult for men and women of her generation but beneficial for the children. She shared her opinion on the matter as she remembered the shock and stress she encountered in college, when unable to develop healthy friendships with male students. Another alumnus also brought up the “culture shock” experienced by friends and acquaintances who had attended only private Islamic schools. The growing number of Muslim
organizations for children, she added, discouraged the type of integration with non-Muslims that she had experienced in her youth (for example sports clubs).

The honors system at FIS was disliked by many of the students and some of the teachers I interviewed. Students were labeled as either honors or regular students, and were limited therefore to either all honors courses, or all standard courses. Girls found this system unfavorable to their academic success, since many were talented in one subject but not another. One teacher expressed her belief that some students did poorly because they were not adequately challenged and therefore simply bored in some of their standard courses.

Like most Islamic schools, FIS is limited by teacher availability. In focus groups, for example, some girls spoke of classes in which they had had multiple teachers in one year (for one course). During my time at the school I witnessed the difficulties the hard-working administration faced while scrambling to fill positions for the day or for the remainder of the semester. This is likely one reason for the honors system in place in the school. If the school were able to attract and maintain more teachers (especially those with higher qualifications), then students might have a greater number of course options. Alumni and students both agreed, however, that the school had dramatically improved in recent years, and that it continues to improve from year to year. The school offers more electives and more AP courses than before, as well as more student clubs and organizations.
Conclusion

When asked to describe FIS in three words, the most common terms used by participants were family, safe, Islamic, and frustrating.

Family

Data collected during interviews, focus groups, and observations revealed that relationships on campus were family-like. For example, students described their relationships using family-related terms, and teachers and students often expressed their affection physically and verbally to one another. Data also revealed that this sense of family was enhanced by the majority of students' shared Arab ethnic identity, which was maintained and reproduced in a number of formal and informal ways both in and out of the classroom.

Safe, Islamic

Students felt sheltered from violence, drugs, peer pressure, and religious discrimination at FIS. Additionally, my observations revealed that students felt safe enough to ask questions about faith and practice in and out of class. They appreciated the opportunity to discuss topics relevant to their lives as Muslims in America, and especially valued the opportunity to learn about their religion.
As would be expected, the girls disliked many of the rules and regulations at the school. They were closely monitored for example, especially with regard to their apparel and communications with the opposite sex. Interestingly, however, participants in focus groups and interviews usually agreed that the school’s rules were probably for their own good.

Finally, the implementation of mixed-methods revealed that FIS girls were actively involved in both the reproduction and the resistance of certain cultural and religious identities, perspectives, and practices. For example, students would discourage school-defined unacceptable behavior amongst themselves by saying “Guys, haram!” They also often qualified each other’s actions as “Typical Arabi”, and used Islamic expressions in Arabic which were encouraged by the faculty and staff. However, students also asked questions. They challenged teachers in class. They expressed disapproval of certain practices or perspectives, and sometimes they made it very clear that they would decide what they would or would not consider haram.

It is the student-centered approach used in this project which made it possible to elucidate the dynamic characters of these girls and their perspectives. By spending time with them in and out of class, speaking with them individually and in groups, and observing their classes, I was able to achieve a greater
understanding of the many ways in which they interpreted and attempted to accommodate the many values to which they were exposed daily.
CHAPTER SIX:
CONCLUSION

This study explored adolescent Muslim girls’ perspectives on Islamic schooling within the cultural contexts of their religion and communities. Furthermore, it examined both the formal and informal socializing practices of the Florida Islamic School (FIS) environment which might influence identity construction and development. The following questions guided this research: 1) How do students at FIS perceive their school environment? 2) In what ways has the formal Islamic school environment influenced the construction and/or maintenance of the religious and community identities of its students? 3) In what ways do students negotiate membership in multiple communities, and what role has FIS played in these negotiations?

Girls at FIS described their school’s environment primarily as family-like, safe, and Islamic. Indeed, when asked to discuss what they liked most about FIS, their first comments always revolved around the family-like atmosphere of the school and the family-like love and support they received from their teachers and peers. The consistent use of familial terms in their descriptions of the school and
in their descriptions of school relationships revealed that talking about family was
the students’ way of talking about community.

Data collected during interviews, focus groups, and observations revealed
that this feeling of belonging to “the family” was strongly associated with the Arab
identity shared by the high school student majority. The construction and
reproduction of the Arab identity was influenced by both formal and informal
discourse and practices, in and out of class. Arab identity socialization on
campus was in fact so strong, that some students who were not ethnically Arab
attempted to adapt their identities by “acting a little Arab” in order achieve a
greater sense of belonging in the school. Those who were successful in adopting
‘Arab behavior and values’ considered themselves (and were considered by their
Arab peers) to “have a little Arab in them.” Ultimately, the shared ethnic identity
of the high school majority and the sense of family worked together to enhance
the sense of community at the FIS.

In and out of the classroom, students also learned about how to act and
speak as Muslims. The school achieved this through formal curriculum and
through the examples provided by teachers and administrators. Students were
addressed as Muslims and instructed on Islamic beliefs, practices, and
appropriate behavior. They were also encouraged to use Islamic expressions in
Arabic, whether they were native Arabic speakers or not. Most FIS girls
expressed a sincere appreciation of the moral and religious instruction they
received. Several students even credited the school for “keeping them behaved” and for influencing them to wear the hijab full time and to pray regularly.

This study found, therefore, that the FIS environment played a significant role in the construction and reproduction of various identities, especially Muslim and Arab identities. Findings also reveal that the degree to which FIS girls achieved a sense of belonging in their school community was determined at least in part by their ability to adopt or balance these identities.

In accordance with literature on the social function of schools and Islamic education, this study found that FIS is affected by economic and political phenomena and aims to provide students with the general education they need to contribute socially and economically to society. As a private school built and funded by a minority community, however, it has an agenda which differs from state-run institutions, one which is based on Islamic but also cultural principles and beliefs.

Consistent with relevant literature on reproduction and resistance in schooling (Durkheim 1956, Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Willis 1981, Giroux 1983), this study found that FIS girls were in fact engaged in the reproduction of some values endorsed by FIS, but also found that these same students expressed resistance to and actively rejected other values. Interview, focus group, and observation data indicated that FIS girls did not always accept the
cultural and religious guidelines they received from school teachers and administrators passively, but rather interpreted and attempted to adapt these rules through their personal experiences and opinions. They also expressed disapproval of certain moral guidelines of modesty, behavior, and gender roles, and challenged the opinions of teachers in and out of class. Accordingly, and in line with relevant literature on adolescence, this study found that FIS girls were actively engaged in a complex mediation of multiple cultural and religious values, as they sought to accommodate various aspects of American culture within the framework of Islam.

Muslims face a variety of challenges as a religious minority in the United States, and many of these are related specifically to Islam and its practices. In accordance with research on other Islamic schools in North America, FIS clearly offers families and their children a space in which some of these difficulties are eased. The school allots space and time for salat (prayer) for example, and promotes Islamically appropriate behavior and apparel. Students often expressed their appreciation of the Islamic environment at the school, in which they felt at ease and at home. They felt safe, accepted, and understood in terms of their religion, and were grateful to be sheltered from peer pressure and the anti-Muslim sentiments and discrimination they had experienced and/or heard of at public schools.
Unlike other studies on Islamic schooling, which focus on the perspectives of parents and teachers, this project prioritized a student-centered approach, and thereby presents unique data on the perspectives and experiences of teenage Muslim girls in an Islamic school. Furthermore, data collected primarily during observations revealed the dynamic characters of these girls and provided descriptions of their behavior in and out of class. Most studies fail to provide this important combination of interviews, focus groups, and observations, resulting in a more limited understanding of students attending Islamic schools. They fail, in fact, to describe students as complex teenagers. The girls in this study listened to rap and pop music. They talked and giggled about boys. They ate pizza. They went to the mall and painted their nails on the weekends. On other weekends, it was henna. They also enjoyed learning about the history and practices of Islam. They prayed. They appreciated moral instruction. Some wore hijab (veils) outside of school, and others did not. Some wore shorts and tank tops on the weekend and others wore abayas (a dark robe covering the full body). Some were shy, and others were extraverted. Some wore chucks and skinny jeans under their school uniforms. Some were loud and talked back to teachers, while others rarely spoke a word in class. They worried about the SATs. They worried about what they would study in college. They worried about how non-Muslims would react to them in public schools. They wondered about their future husband and how they might meet him. They worried about their weight. – such descriptions are simply absent from similar studies.
This study contributes to literature on anthropology, education, and adolescence. It provides qualitative data which revealed the diverse characters, interests and perspectives of Muslim teenage girls attending an Islamic school in Florida. Furthermore, this study contributes greater understanding of the role of Islamic schools and their practices in the shaping of these identities, interests, and perspectives.

It is the intention of this researcher to further disseminate the conclusions of this research via professional publications and presentations. This study will also be shared with FIS administrators. Finally, efforts are already underway to apply findings of this research to address some concerns expressed by participants. Specifically, I hope to address students’ expressed desires for college, scholarship, and career counseling by working with FIS administrators to create an internship position at the school for a local university student specializing in counselor education. Accordingly, I am working to foster collaboration between FIS and the College of Education at the nearest university to fill this position.
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APPENDIX A:

IRB APPROVAL LETTER
April 5, 2012

Vanessa Martinez Anthropology

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review IRB#: Pro00007308
Title: Schooling, Community, and Identity: The Perceptions of Muslim Girls Attending an Islamic school in Florida.

Dear Vanessa Martinez:

On 4/5/2012 the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above referenced protocol. Please note that your approval for this study will expire on 4/5/2013.

Approved Items: Protocol Document(s):
VM Thesis Proposal 3/1/2012 10:44 AM 0.01
This study involving data pertaining to children falls under 45 CFR 46.404 – Research not involving greater than minimal risk

Consent/Assent Documents:

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Please note, the informed consent/assent documents are valid during the period indicated by the official, IRB-Approval stamp located on the form- which can be found under the Attachment Tab. Valid consent must be documented on a copy of the most recently IRB-approved consent form.
It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

John Schinka, PhD, Chairperson USF Institutional Review Board

Cc: Various Menzel, CCRP USF IRB Professional Staff