EXPLORING ARAB MUSLIM CHILDREN'S HOME AND SCHOOL LITERACY EXPERIENCES IN ONTARIO

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Abstract

In this ethnographic study I explore the cultural practices and literacy engagement of first generation Arab Muslim children who either immigrated to Canada or were born to parents who immigrated to Canada. Responding to an ongoing concern within Boards of Education in the Greater Toronto Area around the underachievement of minority students and their disproportionately high dropout rates (McKell, 2010), I focus on Arab Muslim children since they are repeatedly identified as underachieving and under-researched. Although low achievement is typically linked to demographic markers such as race, socio-economic status and linguistic and cultural background, little is known of how immigrants' socio-cultural practices, in particular religious practices, impact literacy learning in schools. Working from within a situated literacy framework (Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Street, 1997; 2005; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), I explore how three Arab Muslim families, two whose children go to Islamic schools and one whose child goes to public school, engage their children in language and literacy acquisition. Moving beyond the findings of previous studies that document the central role of Islam in the daily lives of Muslims, observational data and interviews from this study highlight the extent to which religion influences and shapes the literacy choices, thoughts, and writing that form the children's worldview. I conclude with a summative analysis of best practices and academic successes from private Islamic schools that provide insight into the underachievement of Arab Muslim children in public schools in the Greater Toronto Area.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The history of literacy research on minority groups in the last decades suggests shifting trends and patterns in defining what constitutes literacy and its practices (Delpit 2006; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Street, 1993; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). The impetus for this shift lies partly with increasingly diverse student populations, as is the case within major cities in Canada, where the achievement gap has widened among minority cultures \Given that *minority* students are often the numerical *majority* within metropolitan cities in Canada and given that the student population will exponentially continue becoming diverse (Hiebert, 2005), it becomes inappropriate to continue approaching literacy education without considering what literacy means to these students and how literacy practice is translated in their homes While schools have been grappling with getting students of diverse backgrounds to the same levels of achievement as their mainstream peers (Au & Raphael, 2000; McKell, 2010), the consideration has always been in getting the minority students to fit into the mainstream literacy practices. We have rarely considered how mainstream can change its strategies to accommodate students' literacy from diverse backgrounds. Changing definitions of literacy have important implications for educating students of diverse backgrounds. These changes underscore the importance of bridging the achievement gap, by providing all students opportunities for learning, not only through mainstream classroom practices but also through avenues that validate and draw on learning in homes and communities (Moll, 1992).

Rationale for this Research

My entry into this research is influenced by three drives. Firstly, while working as a graduate assistant in a large urban diversity program to promote student engagement, I came

across a report stating that among the 25% of students deemed as low achievers who did not graduate and often dropped out of school, children from a Middle Eastern background (McKell, 2010) were included. While *Middle Eastern* is clearly an overly generalized term, especially since this is not how the populations in the geographic Middle East describe themselves, the culture, language and beliefs associated with this demographic *can* shape a set of common practices.

McKell's (2010) report further states that this achievement gap has been prevalent since the 1980's. This was a concern for me as someone with an Arab Muslim background. I could not understand why these children were in a perpetual cycle of underachieving especially as the data showed that their parents had extensive educational backgrounds, with 67% of them having either college or University education (O'Reilly & Yau, 2009). Low achievement is often linked with low parental education (Duncan & Magnuson, 2006; Gamoran, 2001), yet low parental education did not seem to be the case here.

Secondly, part of my graduate assistant assignment was to assess a reading buddy program and conduct a student focus group session. A concluding question in the focus group interview session asked children to suggest one thing they wanted to change in their buddy program. To my surprise two of the children said they would want their buddy to dress appropriately and to not expose their bodies when coming for reading sessions. Both these children were Muslim and one of them was an Arab Muslim girl. Their responses provoked me into thinking how cultural values impacted their literacy practices.

And thirdly, as I took courses in *Educating Young Children* and *Family Literacy,* I found that much of the research conducted on minority groups is American, based and focused on Blacks and Hispanics. There is almost silence on the Arab Muslim group, revealing a gap in the

body of research. It seemed as if this group of minority students did not matter or were insignificant to researchers. These three aspects became catalysts for my research investigation.

The rationale for my work was also spurred by contemporary theory on literacy learning and school achievement. The failure of minority students in mainstream schools is often attributed to the notions that parents lack commitment to their children's education, don't have high expectations for their children, and are unwilling to invest in their children's success (Li, 2003). Blaming the victim has always served in diverting attention from the actual problems that face minority children in and out of school. As with other minority groups, Arab Muslim children face cultural and religious barriers, language differences and contrasting literacy practices. These factors add further complexities to the challenges facing these children. In wanting to understand literacy practices that occur outside the school, and in wanting to validate the literacy of minority groups, I draw on research that addresses home and community as social contexts for literacy learning.

Research on diverse cultural and language communities has been approached in a number of ways. For their part, sociocultural theorists offer principles of direct relevance to the education of minority students. A sociocultural approach transcends academic disciplines and focuses on the link between culture and cognition through a focus upon engagement of tasks and events in and out of school. Within a sociocultural framework, children learn alongside experienced members of the culture in attaining high potential (Vygotsky, 1987) and succeed academically using the home language (Lantolf, 2000). In this perspective, learning occurs in a familiar language and in participation facilitated by teachers, parents, caregivers, families and community members.

Following in this sociocultural tradition, Street (1993) presents a broad perspective on literacy practices that is situated in social and cultural contexts. Street proposes *autonomous* and *ideological* models of literacy. Street's autonomous model posits that the acquisition of literacy will itself affect social and cognitive practices, leading to higher cognitive skills and improved performance. On the other hand the ideological model draws on cultural and contextual features that include a combination of visual, print and other aspects of literacy practices to constitute literacy.

Street (1993) argues against the assumption that literacy is autonomous, that is, that literacy will have an effect on social and cognitive practices irrespective of social and cultural interpretations. He makes the point that much of the autonomous model does not recognize diversity and is power driven, privileging a particular kind of literacy. Strongly proposing that literacy is a social practice and embedded in socially constructed principles, Street (1993) emphasizes the notion of literacy as a practice rooted in engagement with others. This social practice is not only mirrored in schools by teachers who consciously interact with students' literacy learning but is also evident in homes and communities. These homes and communities socialize young children through conversations and activities. Street (1993) opposes the autonomous notion of teaching and learning literacy and proposes a wider view, which he terms *ideological*. This latter approach brings together and recognizes the knowledge and skills of families and communities as valid literacy that contributes to children's literacy learning experiences. In this view, children's skills cannot be measured by standardized tests, as literacy is a complex, socially-contingent phenomenon.

In recent decades, researchers have concluded that minority students' failure is a result of a mismatch between school and home literacy practices (Gibson, 1988; Heath, 1983;

McCarthey, 1997). Heath (1983) observed that these children fail not because they are literacy deprived but because they are literacy different. In other words, schools do not validate the literacy practices that take place out of school. Home literacy is often seen as functional literacy, lacking credibility in mainstream practices. Moll (1992) critiques this view and defines home literacy as "funds of knowledge" to which children have access. He further states that through these resources children have ways of knowing and understanding that enable them to enter mainstream classrooms with sufficient assets to engage effectively.

Differences between home and school literacy practices are also apparent in the literacy experiences that contribute to children's reading achievement and writing achievements in early years. According to Teale and Sulzby (1986), home literacy environments can be a source of rich literacy experiences that provide children opportunities for interaction with adults in reading and writing, engaging with print and observing adults model literate behaviors. Among literacy activities, storybook reading has received much attention. However, the notion that children who are read to regularly, hear stories and look at books are more likely to learn to read easily is challenged by Kelly, Gregory and Williams (2001). They question whether these practices are essential for successful cognitive and early reading development or simply reproduce what counts as literacy in mainstream practices. Although there is ample research on mainstream literacy practices, we do not know how many minority populations engage in early literacy practices. Certain distinctive features that make these groups different include multilingualism at home, more than one writing system, and religious and family cultural values that influence literacy practices. Within Muslim culture in particular, important cultural norms are based on readings of the Quran, with Quran being a common text that is read from the early years (Hirst, 1998). Although Quran reading may not be a practice among all Muslim Arabs, as people vary

in their levels of orthodoxy, literacy work in Muslim Arab communities suggests religion and language, namely, (Sarroub, 2002a) Arabic, are dominant influences in the lives of children (Abu-Rabia & Siegel, 2002; Fernea, 1995; Sarroub 2002a; Wagner, 1993). Importance is given to reading Quranic text as this enables membership in religious prayers and ceremonies at home and in the Mosque.

Further research conducted on minority groups (Delpit, 2006; Gregory, 1994; Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) indicates that academic achievement is embedded in ethnic cultural practices that provide support and engagement in language and literacy development. However, how minority linguistic communities engage and use home language to develop school literacy is still understudied, although we do know that bilingual children fare better when able to use home languages in learning a second language (Cummins, 1984; 1986). As for the early literacy practices of Arab Muslim children, within the limited body of research available, literacy practices emerge as culturally distinct (Sarroub, 2009, 2010; Wagner, 1993). Arab Muslim literacy practices in the Arab world include oral practices with little evidence of story reading (Doubleday & Baily, 1995; Ghannam, 1995; Omran, 1995; Webber, 1995).

How Arab Muslim children construct literacy within the Canadian context is not known. In response to this gap, I seek to explore how Arab Muslim children in Ontario construct literacy, what practices they engage in and whether these practices are similar to or vary from those practiced in their family's home country. Additionally, I will consider how these children navigate between home and school literacy. My study considers Arab Muslim children as children with a connection to the Middle East, that is, children who have either immigrated to Canada or who are born to parents who have immigrated to Canada from the Middle East. I explore how they construct literacy in the early years. Narrowing my focus to Arab *Muslim*

children will help me address a large population yet limit variables such as religion and language that influence literacy practices. According to Toffolo (2008), people in the Middle East refer to themselves as Arabs with Arabic being the dominant language, notwithstanding the fact this population varies with respect to religion, culture and languages.

Historically and Geographically Situating My Research Participants

When looking at Arab Muslim children and their literacy, it is important to take a historical view of the cultural practices that have evolved and impacted literacy in the Arab world. With over 90% of the Arab world population embracing Islam (Greenberg, 2004), the Arab world has been heavily influenced by Islamic culture over the last fourteen hundred years. Greenberg further observes that embedded within Islamic culture are aspects of ethnicity and nationalism that differentiate and separate identities of Arabs. It is therefore important here to provide a working description of Arab Muslim, so as to capture cultural connotations that affect practice.

The term Middle East is part of British nineteenth century political strategy (Koppes, 1976). People within the Arab countries refer to themselves as Arabs and speak of their territory as the Arab world. Culturally diverse, the people of the Arab world share language, history and a common way of life, with Islam being a strong unifying factor (Rubin, 1999; Toffolo, 2008). The Arab world formed the Arab League in March 1945 to secure a common future and maintain a united political voice. The Arab League was constituted of seven member states whose official language was Arabic and whose citizens lived in Arabic speaking countries. These were Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Transjordan (present day Jordan), Saudi Arabia and Yemen, with Palestine as a participating member (Toffolo, 2008). Over time, membership in the Arab League opened to

include countries that shared common religious language practices such as some North African countries (Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Libya), Turkey Djibouti and Somalia.

For the purpose of this study, Arab Muslims will reflect people from Arab speaking countries that share language, culture and religious practices, as suggested by Badry (1983), that is, people from the initial seven member states of the Arab world (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen), and from the Arab League, that is, Palestine and the North African States of Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Libya and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This excludes countries such as Somalia and Djibouti that have become part of the Middle East but vary in language from the Arabs. Language is a strong unifying factor of the Arab world.

With over fourteen hundred years of Islam's influence in the Arab world, Islamic culture has permeated Arab culture and it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the two. To differentiate between these two cultures in this study, reference to *Muslim* culture will indicate Islamic practices, while reference to *Arab* culture will indicate practices that are not necessarily connected with Islam. It is worth noting that Islamic practices are complex and vary across ethnicities; however, an attempt to outline general characteristics will be made. Having provided some geographical and historical background to the Arab world, I return to my discussion on Arab Muslim children by exploring some of their cultural practices and influences on early literacy learning.

Fernea (1995) observes that although Arabs are not a homogenous group and vary according to class and religious orthodoxy, common elements such as childrearing patterns can be seen across Arab families. In exploring literacy as situated within cultural practices, my hope is that my findings prove helpful in providing a better understanding of the problems facing Arab Muslim children's literacy achievement in the Canadian context, as well as add to the academic

scholarship of a minority culture that is far less studied than other groups. I anticipate that as a result of this investigation some insight into the problem of underachievement of Arab Muslim children will be documented.

Research Problem

Islamic cultural practices such as family systems, religious education, child rearing and social etiquette give Arab culture a Muslim identity (Fernea, 1995). Dorsky and Stevenson (1995) note that children in Arab culture are raised and educated for fulfilling specific roles under Islamic practices. Being part of a patriarchal society, Arab Muslim families educate boys to take on the role of the family provider and girls are educated into the role of primary caregivers. Success is not measured only by school success but also in having good values and being loyal to oneself and family (Brink, 1995). Another aspect of success is seen in mastering reading of the Quran in the early years (Halilovic, 2005). Thus it is common to find children in their early years taught to recite and memorize the Quran, as found in Wagner's (1993) study in Morocco. Wagner observed that children’s engagement with the Quran in the early years involves only reading and memorization without much emphasis on understanding the text read. In this sense, reading as defined in Arab Muslim culture contrasts with reading practices in dominant Euro-American discourses. For instance, the mainstream Euro-American practice of shared storybook reading is documented as an organized social routine, in which the function is recreational and not linked to any practical need or purpose. It is for pleasure and delight (Baghban, 1984; Gregory, 1994 ; Smith, 1985). By contrast, storybook reading and reading for pleasure is not common practice within Arab Muslim society, where reciting and reading the Holy Quran is significantly relevant in children’s literacy education.

Zine (2001) observes that Muslim students in public schools in Canada have difficulties navigating religious practice and resist conforming to the conflicting cultural milieu of public schools. When some Arab Muslim children are faced with a new system of education, they find strange contrasting practices in the mainstream classroom, and also find that God and the idea of God has no place in the school's curriculum. Narrating schooling experiences in the United States, Khan (2009) recounts what it meant to navigate these hybrid places, where representations of Muslims or God in the curriculum were uncommon. Walking in two worlds, these children struggle to maintain cultural values crucial to their identity and resist assimilating into a melting pot where the concept of God is absent from educational practices (Sarroub, 2000). Such negotiation of differing practices in home and school becomes a daily phenomenon.

When differing practices collide with mainstream school systems, these children are considered aberrant and perceived as less competent than they truly are (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990: Harry, 1992). This perception results in youngsters from culturally different households being labeled as behavior disordered (Anderson, 1988; Rueda & Forness, 1994), mentally retarded (Ishii-Jordan & Peterson, 1994), or learning disabled (Overton, 1992) – even when they are not. Citing the cultural differences of Muslim students in American public schools, Isik-Ercan (2010) reports how a male Muslim student was graded at a low level for not making eye contact with his female teacher during a presentation, as it was normal for Muslim males not to make eye contact with women. Similarly, referencing anything to God seems fanatic in the current wave of Islamophobia. Documenting narratives of Muslim students, Sensoy and Stonebanks (2009) present written accounts of student experiences in schools across Canada where students describe being stereotyped, isolated and victims of hatred based on their religious affiliation after 9/11's war on terror. These observations reveal that Arab Muslim children can

experience isolation, discrimination, cultural disparities and literary difference as they navigate literacy learning in public schools. In this way, school can become a contested space for many minority students.

Questioning cultural assumptions within schools, Smith (1985) argues that it is common for schools to assume that their approach to literacy is natural and integral, shared by all cultural groups and that everyone can be assimilated by conforming to the school's practice. Yet work conducted in England by Gregory (1994) shows examples of how literacy is taught differently among various cultural groups. Similarly, research done by Heath (1983) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) within home contexts indicates that children engaged in rich literacy activities are often less visible to communities of power, such as schools, which favor some forms of practice while discriminating against others. Recognizing the cultural knowledge that family members possess and pass on to their children as funds of knowledge, Moll (1992) contends that this resource often remains unknown and untapped in schools.

As diversity increases in Ontario classrooms, critical questions emerge for educators: What are the current best practices for arriving at and implementing inclusive practices in classrooms for culturally diverse students who may learn differently because of their cultural contexts? How can educators learn to understand Arab Muslim children's cultural practices and relate to these children's out-of-school literacy practices? What are educators' views on how literacy is taught and used in these children's lives?

In an effort to understand how literacy is understood, constructed and applied outside school, I propose exploring and documenting literacy activities that take place in the home domain of Arab Muslim children in Ontario who are immigrants or first generation children. As home is crucial to social context, my investigation seeks to make clear how Arab Muslim

children navigate between the literacies of home and school. I seek to answer the following questions:

- How is literacy constructed in Arab Muslim homes and what literacy practices do children engage in?
- What role does the Arabic language and religion (Quran) play in these literacy practices?
- What role does English have within the homes of Arab Muslim children?
- What are the parents/children's language preferences? What language is dominant in the home?
- How do Arab Muslim children navigate between home and school literacy?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature I review centers around three major areas that come into play in terms of children's literacy experiences and Arab Muslim literacy culture. They are presented under the following three main subsections of this literature review: Literacy as a sociocultural practice, Arab Muslim literacy and culture, and the Quran as an important text for Arab Muslim children.

Literacy as a Sociocultural Practice

> Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learnt, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed. Like all human activity literacy is essentially social and it is located in the interaction between people. (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 3)

Sociocultural perspectives convey literacy as a social practice where culture and context are crucial to literacy learning, whether these contexts are in school domains, homes or communities. Research studies focused on homes as sites of learning show variances between the language and literacy practices of minority groups and dominant practices recognized as valid (Brooker, 2002 ; Gregory, 2004 ; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Like many human practices, literacy engagement is essentially the interaction between people and the way text is negotiated and utilized within social contexts. Barton and Hamilton's (1998) view of literacy shows that reading and writing are linked to the social contexts in which they are embedded. Street (1993) further elaborates this concept by describing that the way language is used within social context is based on values, attitudes and social affiliations. According to Street (1993), literacy practices integrate these values, beliefs and attitudes in creating identities that are culturally and socially relevant to people. Adding a cultural

perspective, Purcell-Gates (1995) states that everyone processes information through a cultural lens, and that, within this view, learners grasp and interpret information.

Research within the sociocultural framework focuses on children as active participants in their own learning, in contrast to the view that children's minds are empty and need to be filled (Gregory (2004). Literacy studies conducted in the homes of minority cultures by Heath (1983), Gregory (2004) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) portray homes rich with literacy engagement, yet often less visible to and unsupported by dominant institutions. The practices vary within different cultures where in some homes children learn as apprentices alongside experienced members of the culture (Gregory, 2004; Vygotsky, 1987), while, in others, practices are less observable as they are overshadowed by pressures of the home (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Sociocultural theory stems from the work of Vygotsky (1987), who believed that parents, caregivers, peers and the society at large are responsible for the development of higher order functions. According to Vygotsky (1987), "every function in the child's cultural development appears first on the social level then on the individual level, that is, first between people and then inside the child" (p. 128).

The role of parents as mediators is crucial in initiating children to new cultural practices. Vygotsky (1987) describes the *zone of proximal development* as the distance between actual development level and that achieved under guidance of adults or capable peers. The idea of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) is a result of this notion of the provision of adult support for the child until the child feels competent to be on his or her own. This social structure, captured in the zone of proximal development, becomes a key area for learning for children.

Bourdieu (1997) extends the concept of social structure to include symbolic capital (cultural, social, linguistic), which he states forms the basis of transforming children's

educational achievement. Yet, how cultural capital is translated in schools and with educators varies. Reay (1998) and Brooker (2002) argue that the cultural capital that is required by schools is that of the common practices of mainstream culture, and that parents lacking this culture are disadvantaged and face difficulties at school. Other studies portray certain literacy practices that require parents to adopt customs such as bed-time stories to pass on to their children (Heath, 1983) or to foster attention to print through writing so as to transition to literacy (Clay, 2004) or to develop certain language patterns for successful participation in class (Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984). The connection between school and home is seen as a way of inculcating parents with appropriate school culture required for children's success. But evidence suggests that these practices are not functioning with families whose learning practices might be different from those of the school (Brooker, 2002; Gregory, 2004; Heath, 1983). Educators, being part of a literacy club, as Smith (1985) puts it, may assume that their own practices are a natural part of socialization and integral to the process of learning. However, as Gregory (1994) points out, attitudes to reading vary widely among ethnic and cultural groups.

Arguing for a better understanding of the cultural context, Purcell-Gates (1995) alleges that in order to understand learners, we must first seek to understand their contexts and their relationship with others. With the increasing numbers of minority populations in Ontario schools, the need for re-assessing literacy approaches remains urgent. Proposing the use of a sociocultural lens as the best way of understanding low literacy attainment of poor and minority groups, Purcell-Gates (1995) explains that a sociocultural perspective explores the settings in which these children learn and how literacy gets defined in these settings. She suggests that any understanding of why poor and minority groups do not perform is not possible unless one is able to get inside the learners and their settings and explore the world through their eyes. Contributing

to the sociocultural lens, Barton and Hamilton (1998) provide another angle to social theory, suggesting that practices, events and texts provide the first premise of a social theory of literacy. Stating that literacy is best understood as a set of social practices that is inferred from events and mediated by written texts, Barton and Hamilton (1998) argue the need for examining practices around text within various cultures as opposed to examining how text fits within these practices. In other words, literacy is about understanding about how people use literacy in their day-to day lives and what they do with literacy. Literacy as a social practice, according to Barton and Hamilton, involves looking at activities that people engage in with literacy, the meaning derived from these activities and the texts used in such activities. These, then, are the starting points for sociocultural literacy analysis, and a paradigm shift from the safe haven of structured and patterned classrooms to the diverse realms of homes and communities.

Family Literacy Practices and the Home Context

As long ago as 1966, research by Durkin on first graders concluded that home literacy factors play an important role in children's success. If home is crucial to children's school success, it is necessary to look at factors that contribute to this achievement. One recognized factor in children's success is the role of parents. In an overview of the relevant literature in this area, Ippolito (2015) notes,

> typically, but not always, parent involvement in children's schooling, particularly in the elementary grades, is seen as a predictor of academic success . . . [and while] dissenting views note a lack of empirical evidence and the fact that only certain forms of parental involvement correlate with increased student achievement . . . the prevailing opinion identifies a positive correlation between parent involvement and successful academic outcomes for children. (pp. 3-4)

Further, the level of parental education also correlates with higher rates of reading achievement (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell & Mazzeo, 1999). Family literacy practices in the home environment may be another factor. Some educators have concluded that literacy is best received when it addresses the family as a whole as opposed to the child alone (Benjamin, & Lord, 1996; Edwards, 1990; Sticht & McDonald, 1990).

Family literacy practices have been viewed as solutions to a host of problems related to poverty and society. However, educators differ in their opinion of the relevance of family practices. Commenting on families deemed to be at a low literacy level, Darling and Hayes (1988) and Potts and Paull (1995) suggest that parents with low literacy lack resources to support literacy activities and perpetuate an intergenerational low literacy cycle. Stipek and Ryan (1997) point to low economic status homes as a cause for children having less academic knowledge that is valued by schools, while Lynch (2008) is of the opinion that home experiences shape the differing abilities that children bring to school.

In contrast, Heath (1983), Moll and Greenberg (1991) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) emphasize that children fail not because they are literacy deprived, but rather because they are literacy different and these differences are not valued or privileged in mainstream classrooms. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) base their argument on a longitudinal ethnographic study of families living in poverty. They argue that inequalities within society prevent individuals from attaining educational achievement. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) document important literacy activities of Shay Avenue families where reading practices, although differing from dominant mainstream culture, involved reading for a variety of purposes such as reading official documents, lists and messages from tiny pieces of paper.

Gregory (1994) attributes the failure of minority groups to the failure of schools to recognize the various forms of literacy practices that minority students possess and bring to school. She argues that prevailing interpretations of what counts as reading have led to assumptions of a deficit in minority groups whereby the absence of reading for pleasure indicates that no reading occurs at all. Longitudinal studies conducted on reading in developing countries, such as Scriber and Cole's (1981) study in Liberia; Street's (1984) study in Iran; Wagner, Messick and Spratt's (1986) study in Morocco; Lewis' (1993) study in Somalia; and Probst's (1989) study in Western Nigeria, document literacy practices where reading for pleasure – paramount in mainstream, dominant North American literacy practices – is absent as a primary function. The main function of reading in these international studies is utilitarian, a means of getting things done as opposed to reading for enjoyment. In these studies, literacy materials varied from letters, to forms, to tiny chits of paper, to revered scriptures from the Bible and the Quran. Children's participation took different forms, from story reading practice with parents/caregivers to reading with a larger group. Similar practices were also recorded from research studies conducted in non-mainstream cultures in the United States, for example, Heath's (1983) and Heath and Branscombe's (1984) research on white and black working class groups in the Appalachians; Anderson and Stokes' (1984) study on Hispanic and black Americans; Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith's (1984) research on Vietnamese Americans; Auerbach's (1989) study on Hispanics in Boston; Compton-Lilly's (2003, 2007) longitudinal study on Puerto Rican first graders and their families' role in literacy development and Li's (2003) extensive work on the literacy, culture, and school and home practices of Chinese immigrants in Canada. Rosowsky's (2008) work on the sociology of language, religion and liturgical literacy with several Muslim communities in the UK is especially important for linking the skills acquired

from social and religious practices of community life to acquisition of skills necessary for school literacy practices.

Not only do educators differ on what counts as literacy practices but they also vary in their perceptions of the literate lives of families. As educators fail to recognize the cultural capital of children who do not share their discourse or participation styles, a downward spiral begins for minority children as they are incorrectly placed in ESL classes, receive tuition of poor quality and later fail in literacy tests (Collins, 1987; Delpit, 2006; Michaels, 1986). Understanding the dynamics of cultural capital becomes relevant.

Cultural Capital and Beliefs that Shape Literacy

Families have different ways of constructing literacy and, although the cultural and linguistic practices of many minority groups differ from mainstream culture, their practices have been shown to contribute to children's literacy success (Heath, 1983; Moll, 1992). Moll (1992) suggests that families possess abundant cultural knowledge that educators do not know of and are thus unable to tap into. Describing the process of how this knowledge is transmitted, Moll (1992) states that as children work alongside "experts" who are skilled practitioners of their culture, they benefit from funds of knowledge that are passed on to them. Yet, as Moll (1992) observes, much of this cultural knowledge remains unknown and untapped, as existing views of classroom practices fail to recognize fully what potential minority children possess and bring to the classroom.

Understandings of what counts as literacy differ between mainstream and minority groups. Studies within minority groups reveal that their view of literacy is influenced by its functions and their beliefs (Heath, 1983; Gregory, 1994; Sarroub, 2009; Taylor & Dorsey-

Gaines, 1988; Rosowsky, 2008; Wagner, 1993), whereas the mainstream view of literacy promotes literacy for success in the academic and social world.

While minority groups do not deny the relevance of the dominant literacy, they prefer language that is connected to their beliefs. For example, in many Asian and Arab cultures religious beliefs influence how literacy is approached (Dorsky & Stevenson, 1995; Fernea, 1995; Li, 2003; Sarroub, 2002b; Rosowsky, 2008). Gregory (1994) observes that reading and writing in Arabic and in Bengali is seen as belonging to Islamic culture and necessary for membership to the Muslim religion. She notes that while reading of the Quran is considered a valuable practice and that children are cognizant of the reciting process of the Quran, the process of completing a whole recitation denotes achievement in a child's life. Gregory documents that the manner of reading the Quran is not confined to strategic socializing patterns that involve parents sitting with the child and enjoying a book together. Rather, as Wagner (1993) observes, children's engagement with the Quran in the early years involves reading and memorizing texts taught by a special Quran teacher, without much emphasis on understanding the text read. Rosowsky (2008) states that verses and chapters of the Quran are used on a regular basis for prayers and private devotions.

Dwelling on Muslim literacy culture, Dorsky and Stevenson (1995) document how Arab Muslim children in Yemen are educated for achieving certain roles in their lives. Being part of a patriarchal society, Arab Muslim families educate boys to take on the role of the family provider and girls are educated for the role of primary caregivers, and thus boys are enrolled in schools earlier and have opportunities to pursue longer years of education than girls. Having worked in Iraq, Egypt and Morocco, Fernea (1995) observes similar patterns of children socialized for attaining certain roles within these Arab countries. Fernea (1995) further notes that cultural

practices are influenced by the Prophet Muhammad's advice to raise children in three different stages (birth to seven, seven to fourteen, and fourteen to twenty one), with each stage having certain obligations. These cultural practices have led to specific nurturing patterns among Arab Muslims. Referring to the initial stage, Fernea (1995) finds that it alludes to allowing children to develop freely without much stress on academic schooling or concerted efforts in developing literacy skills. The focus, rather, is on bonding and developing the good character of the children.

Religious affiliations in early literacy development are not only unique to Arab Muslims but are also prevalent among many Christian communities. Duranti, Ochs and Ta'ase (2004) describe how the church in Samoa accomplished initial literacy instruction through teaching the "Pi Tautau," the Samoan alphabet. Getting children to know the *Pi Tautau* is in a sense familiarizing them with the Samoan way of life. While Samoans are largely known to live in their villages, in recent years many have emigrated to the United States (Shankman,1993). These Samoan immigrants have formed strong communities around a Samoan church where religious schools like those of a Samoan village introduce children to the *Pi Tautau*, wanting to transmit their culture and heritage to their children (Duranti et al, 2004). Religious schools are thus seen as having a different relation to the community than public school, as religious schools offer communities the moral values and organization that are crucial for people's identity (Cohen & Lukinsky, 1985; Zinsser, 1986).

The Amish community is another example of a community identified by religious affiliations. The Amish way of living and educating their children is strongly influenced by cultural ways and religious beliefs. Working with an Amish family in Pennsylvania, Fishman (1988) documents a variety of reading practices within the home that were not part of dominant practice. Noting a distinct absence of bedtime story ritual, Fishman found shared oral reading as

core practice in the home. Reading was not limited only to a story text but included readings from religious texts such as the Bible, the *Martyrs Mirror* (a graphical book on the struggles and deaths of early Anabaptists) and songbooks of hymns. Sharing reading time together helped strengthen family values that are crucial among Amish communities. The Amish family was also particular on the content of their reading material and thus scrutinized and controlled the kind of reading material that entered their home. Being a tightly knit community, the upholding of religious beliefs and values among the Amish community is pivotal in their membership in the community. In comparison, membership in Arab Muslim communities is not determined by religious commitment to the religion, as the level of orthodoxy among Arab Muslims varies; instead, its emphasis is on maintaining strong family ties that extend membership to the large extended family and then to the wider Arab Muslim community. Although defining common literacy practices among Arab Muslims can be problematic, as Arabs differ in ethnicity and practice and are also affected by urban and rural lifestyles, certain common practices are found within all Arab communities that subscribe to Arab Muslim membership.

First of all, standard Arabic (*fusha*) is the official language of all Arab countries and the language of the Quran, and is a common factor uniting all Arab countries (Badry, 1983), even though differences exist in spoken Arabic among Arab states [as in *Misr Arabic* (Egypt), *Imarati Arabic* (United Arab Emirates) or *Maghreb Arabic* (Morocco)]. Thus, learning standard Arabic becomes a crucial identity marker for Arab children and for affiliation with Arab culture. In addition, reading the Quran as an early literacy exercise is seen as common practice among many Arab Muslim children. Although commitment to this practice varies among Muslim societies, research conducted in Arab Muslim communities in the Arab world (Badry, 1983; Fernea, 1995; McAuliffe, 2003; Wagner, 1993) and in North America (Abu-Rabia & Siegel, 2002; Sarroub,

2002b) shows that children's commitment to Quranic reading practice in the early years confirms community membership.

Another commonality found within the body of research conducted within Arab Muslim communities is that oral literacy is a dominant practice in the early years (Al-Haj Hasan & Al-Qattami, 1995; Al-qudsi-Ghabra, 1995; Sarroub, 2010; Wagner, 1993). A focus on oral literacy such as lullabies, chants, folk stories and games (Al-Haj Hasan & Al-Qattami, 1995; Doubleday & Baily, 1995; Omran, 1995) helps convey cultural expectations such as promoting positive social behavior, moral values, respect for parents, loyalty and social interactions that reflect an Islamic way of life. In connecting oral culture to digital media, the Gulf Cooperation Council developed special television programs for Arab children, known as "Iftah Ya Simsim" (Open Sesame), to promote moral expectations and engage children in literacy activities (Al-Khayr & Al-Samira'i, 1995). According to the Gulf Council, this series is similar to that of *Sesame Street* but is specifically produced for Muslim society by incorporating Islamic values suitable for social practice. It is worth noting that where language and cultural transmission from one generation to another may have specific patterns in Arab countries, immigration has affected families in the way literacy is constructed. In circumstances where literacy practices lack the cultural association of a home country environment, transformation of texts and illustrations has helped in retaining cultural values. One such example is documented in (Gregory, Arju, Jessel, Kenner & Ruby, 2007).

Working with Muslims in the United Kingdom, Gregory et al. (2007) document transformations of texts to accommodate cultural requirements. Commenting on two versions of *Snow White*, Gregory et al. (2007) note that the contrast between European and Bengali texts rests in differences of moral aspects of practice. While the European version emphasizes the

physical beauty of Snow White and the Queen, the Bengali version focuses on the moral attributes shown by Snow White as well as the cruelty and bad character demonstrated by the Queen. Instead of kissing her awake, the Bengali version shows the Prince simply laying his hand on Snow White's forehead to bring her back to life, thereby portraying moral practice appropriate to Bengali Muslims. It is not uncommon to find texts that have been transformed to correspond to the expectations of their readers while remaining inherently European in content and nature.

Maintaining culture and home language therefore is seen as vital to religious and cultural affinity. In this sense, it would not be surprising to discover that many Arab Muslim children in Canada are influenced by cultural norms, speak Arabic at home and relate to literacy practices in Arabic. If it is the case, then, that these children enter school having mastered their home language (partly as a function of maintaining cultural and religious practices), how can these home language skills help them succeed in learning a second language, namely, English?

Language Skills of Second Language Learners

Language studies reveal that using a first language (L1) spoken at home can augment second language (L2) learning (Cummins, 1996, 2006). Cummins' work further demonstrates that bilingual learning supports educational achievement as language is linked with cultural identity and self-esteem. A consistent finding in the literature on bilingual literacy is that L1 and L2 are interdependent (Cummins & Schecter, 2003) and that students whose L1 skills are strong and fully developed tend to also do well in development of English (Cummins, 1984). More and more studies reveal that encouragement of L1 does not impede development of L2 (Schecter & Bayley, 2002); rather, actions that contribute to L1 language loss limit cultural transmission of language skills and contribute to lack of language and literacy achievement (Lotherington,

2008). Seeing literacy as multidimensional and as an integrated aspect of students' lives in and out of school, Chow & Cummins(2003) explore ways of working with students with a core belief that reading in any language develops reading ability. Creating a context for multilingual learning, Chow and Cummins (2003) provide opportunities for sharing cultural knowledge among children and parents. Using their linguistic knowledge, children in this study demonstrate cognitive engagement and identity investment. Bilingual activities used in the study give children opportunities to use and extend bicultural knowledge and, using their L1 linguistic capital, children are able to create their own literature.

The long-term benefit of bilingual learning is further demonstrated by Thomas and Collier's (2004) portrayal of dual immersion students who have above average success because bilingual activities give children opportunities to use and extend bicultural knowledge. Kenner (2004) observes that children's bilingualism leads to metalinguistic awareness because children who are more comfortable using both languages are able to transfer concepts using their own language. The use of the L1 as a resource has been repeatedly shown to produce success as it builds on prior knowledge (Cummins, 1991, 2000; Edwards, 1990; Smyth, 2003). Despite success, bilingual approaches have yet to be used on wider scale in schools, as educators are unclear how bilingualism works. Some educators agree that bilingualism is an asset (Chow & Cummins, 2003) but are unsure how bilingual strategies can be used in classrooms when they themselves do not speak the minority languages. Yet other educators are reluctant to recognize cultural differences in the learning practices at all, as the debate on linguistic and cognitive deficit and difference persists (Marx, 2002). With mixed views from educators, strategies for helping minority children with mainstream literacy acquisition remain a challenge, as in the case of Arab Muslim children.

Arab Muslim Literacy and Culture

In this second section of my literature review, I will look at the literacy practices of Arab Muslims and consider factors shaping these practices. Literacy practices among Arab Muslims are largely understudied in the Euro-American world, specifically in area of early literacy, and thus these practices remain largely unknown to educators (Sarroub, 2010). Researchers who take into account social contexts where literacy practices are embedded (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) also consider cultural practices that influence and sustain literacy. Within the limited body of available research, Arab Muslim literacy practices emerge as distinct in construction and usage from those which are common in mainstream Euro-American culture (McAuliffe, 2003; Sarroub, 2009, 2010; Wagner, 1993),. It is therefore important when looking at the literacy practices of Arab Muslims to ask how literacy is constructed in the early years, what counts as literacy and how literacy success is measured. Notwithstanding the fact that intercultural differences occur among Arab Muslims and cultural practices vary according to political and religious affiliations as well as with rural and urban demographics, some common elements cut across practices (Fernea, 1995). Examples of common cultural practices include the use of Standard Arabic as the common language of all Arab states and Islamic beliefs and child rearing patterns that influence literacy construction. And like all cultural phenomena, cultural practices are shaped and influenced by histories. Therefore any understanding of Arab Muslim early literacy practices must be situated within the historical context of the Arab Muslim culture.

Arabs can be seen as a diverse group of people, having Semitic origin but strongly unified by their language (Al-Khatib, 2000; Yazigy, 1994). The Arabic language spoken by over 190 million as a mother tongue in a variety of dialects is by far the largest Semitic language

spoken (Comrie, 2009; Crystal, 1990) and Arabic is a national language of 21 countries (Ryding, 1994). Besides language, the religion of Islam is another factor that unifies 95% of all Arabs (Crystal, 1990; Dawn, 1973). Language and religion are fundamental factors that have contributed to shaping literacy and cultural practices in the Arab world.

The Arabic Language and Its Nuances

Yazigy (1994) observes that Arabs have a strong identification with their language as they associate with its rich vocabulary and structure, and give due respect to its literary tradition. These feelings Yazigy (1994) describes are shared among all Arabs who ascribe the Arabic language with religious value, and consider it the sacred language of God as revealed in the Quran, pure and unique in style and perfect in origin. The notion of sacredness with the language of the Quran has helped preserve the form of Classical Arabic from any change or alteration; the language has been transmitted down from generation to generation. While Classical Arabic remains the language of the Quran, and used in literary texts, it is not commonly used as formal language for writing and speech. Instead Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is a literary variety, is commonly used in writing and speech today in Arab countries. Also, Arabic dialects spoken in homes and neighborhoods further differ from literary Arabic based on national or regional demographics (Al-Khatib, 2000; Ayari, 1996). This linguistic phenomenon is referred to as diglossia (Ferguson, 1991; Saiegh-Haddad, 2003)

The dynamics of the diglossia are difficult to comprehend, yet important to note. Explaining the diglossic situation, Ferguson (1991) states that diglossia occurs where two varieties of the same language are used side by side for socially distinct functions. Learning to read classical Arabic for reading the Quran without understanding it or speaking it as a common language is an instance of diglossia. Literary Arabic, commonly known as al-fusha (the

eloquent), is a modern version of Classical Arabic (the language of the Quran) and used officially in schools, public functions, religious sermons or news broadcasts (Levin, Saiegh-Haddad, Hende, & Ziv, 2008). The colloquial or common version known as ”al-ammiya” comprises a multitude of local vernaculars. It is used for everyday communication around the home and community (Salim Abu-Rabia & Taha, 2006). Standard Arabic and al-ammiya are also valued differently. While local dialects of Arabic hold little value and are associated with ignorance and illiteracy, and viewed as lacking the potential to express complex and abstract concepts (Ayari, 1996; Payne, 1983), Standard Arabic is considered a prestigious and eloquent language that is shared by literate speakers in formal settings and institutions (Abu-Rabia & Taha, 2006; Saiegh-Haddad, 2003).

Researchers of Arabic exploring the distinction between local dialects and literary Arabic suggest that speaking one Arabic variety and having to read and write in another Arabic language variety poses challenges in language acquisition (Abu-Rabia & Taha, 2006; Ayari, 1996; Payne, 1983). Ayari (1996) argues that children in diglossic situations have to cope simultaneously with reading and writing in two language varieties, a practice that often hinders acquisition of basic literacy skills in the early stages of learning. This discrepancy is further perpetuated by the problem of Arabic French bilingualism in North African countries (Payne, 1983; Wagner, 1993). Decades of colonial rule led to French and English becoming official languages alongside Arabic and influencing the social and educational system. French in many North African schools has become the medium of instruction and as some researchers observe is connected to the poor academic achievement of Arab children (Maamouri, 1983, Payne, 1983). According to Maamouri (1983) for instance, the French/MSA dichotomy in Tunisian schools contributes to high school drop-out rates because foreign language structures differ significantly

from literary Arabic. Similar structural patterns are observed in the English writing of Arabic students who exhibit rhetorical features of oral discourse, and thus fall short of their English counterparts (Allen, 1970; Ayari & Elaine, 1993; SA'Addedin, 1989).

These observations are in contrast to Cummins (1989) and Cummins and Danesi (1990) who suggest being fluent in two languages is not an impediment to the development of reading or syntactic and memory skills; rather, it provides support for second language learning. Although no studies have been conducted to look at the transition from literary Arabic to French or English language schools in the Middle East, Abu-Rabia (2000) concurs with Cummins (1989) and notes that the exposure of preschool children to literary Arabic (that is, the Quran) in diglossic situations has value as it enhances reading ability and comprehension.

The Arabic Language and Religious Connotation

In the last fourteen hundred years Islam's influence in creating the Arab world has been strong and is reflected through the language and teachings of the Quran (Fernea, 1995). Al-Khatib (2000) observes that among Arabs, literary Arabic and Islam are unifying forces that involve 95% of the Arabs. Learning the language of the message of God has thus received much prominence in the Arab world. The culture of literacy in the Arab world precedes modern schooling by a millennium, since being literate is highly condoned and considered noble. Describing the value of being literate as a divine and prophetic act, Rayshahri (2009) states that the culture of learning and educating oneself is oriented around Quranic teachings and the Prophet Muhammad's recommendation of seeking knowledge from cradle to grave.

It was commonly understood among the Arabs from early fourteenth century to today that to be a good Muslim is to understand the Quran and be literate in Arabic (Wagner, 1993). This belief gave prominence to traditional Quranic schools being established and providing a network

of centers that spread across the Arab world. At a time in the early tenth century when the provision of schools for young children was not a practice around the world, the Arab world had established schools that taught children to read literary Arabic (Anzar, 2003). To this day, in traditional parts of Morocco and other Arab countries, people are considered literate if they have memorized the Quran, are able to recite it well, and can perhaps write a few verses even though they are unable to grasp what they have written or read (McAuliffe, 2003). The religious relevance of reading in Arabic as a form of literacy provides a rationale for Islamic schooling since many children and parents believe that learning literary Arabic is part of education within formal school settings. It is therefore common to find Arabic and teachings of Islam in school curricula and to some extent in government policies that shape the code of social practice in promoting Islamic values within social contexts in countries such as Saudi Arabia (Bird, 1995), Kuwait (Al-Haj Hasan & Al-Qattami, 1995), Palestine (Al-qudsi-Ghabra, 1995), Egypt (Omran, 1995) and Iraq (Al-Khayr & Al-Samira'i, 1995).

In many Arab countries, linkages between Arabic and Islam are evidenced by the spread and domination of Islam in the Arab world (Wagner, 1993). Wagner (1993) documents that in Morocco, Islamic schools were set up to propagate the teachings of Islam and educate the population on Islamic teachings. What began as the language of the Quran in Quranic schools was later adopted as the official language in the Arab world due to its commonality.

Even though they had existed for over a thousand years, Quranic schools in the Arab world saw a shift in dominance with colonization in the late eighteen and early nineteen century. Countries such as Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria that were colonized by the French saw a decline of Quranic schools as they were replaced by a French schooling system (Yazigy, 1994). Efforts to eliminate dependence on Arabic became evident in Arab countries that were colonized.

However, one has to realize that Islam is not just a religion: it is a way of life. Although colonization impacted many generations, it was not able to completely erase the Arab attachment to the Quran. In many Arab countries colonization brought about an awakening that presented resistance to a foreign language, seeing it as detrimental to cultural and religious upbringing (Mohd-Asraf, 2005).

Wagner (1993) reports that although there was a decline of Quranic schools during the French rule in Morocco, in 1968 King Hassan launched a campaign to reinstate these schools. Known as "Operation Quranic School", children in Morocco were required to attend Quranic preschools for at least two years. However, there was a significant difference between these preschools and traditional Quranic schools (Wagner, 1993). Quranic preschools adopted the structure of a modern education system where student-teacher ratios are smaller, teachers are mainly women and lessons allow for children to engage in hands-on activities. This differs from traditional Quranic schools that require children to sit for long hours and memorize texts from a chalkboard. Quranic teaching in preschools was structured such that it occupied only part of the day's sessions, allowing for other subjects such as numeracy and Arabic language and writing to be taught. The change from traditional Quranic schools to modern preschool education provided balance in the secular and religious education while maintaining literary Arabic in schools. Morocco was one country that led this movement in restoring literary language to their schooling system.

Restoring culture and language has been a matter of dispute for many since independence from colonial rule. Arabs are divided in their opinions on maintaining Arabic language in schools. Many felt that English was becoming the world's language of technology, commerce and communication (Swales & Lipsyte, 1983) while others felt it threatened their ideology

(Yazigy, 1994). A movement in Beirut eliminated imperial influences by promoting what it called "Arabisation". This movement removed colonial language in the education system and regained Arabic instruction. It gained prominence in many primary schools ranging from Lebanon (23%) to Libya and Aden (37%) (Yazigy, 1994). More recently, Saudi Arabia has seen heated debate over the teaching of English (Al-Harbi, 2002). Whereas some believe it is a basic requirement, others find it harmful to their cultural and religious practices. It is common today to find schools in the Arab world divided in the language of instruction in schools with a large number still using Arabic as the medium of instruction for the earlier grades and then shifting to English/French at higher levels or offering English or French as an elective (Karmani, 2005; Malallah, 2000; Wagner, 1993; Yazigy, 1994). Although concerted efforts have been made to eliminate foreign language dominance in Arab countries, Arabic today faces challenges as it lacks, for example, vocabulary to cope with developments in the technological and hard sciences. This is coupled with beliefs of urban populations who associate French and English with the elite, a language of modernity and of universities (Yazigy, 1994).

Amidst these socio-political and religious complexities, teaching English, specifically in the post 9/11 context, has raised strong sentiments among Arab populations who see English as a tool for importing foreign ideology (Karmani, 2005; Malallah, 2000). For many Arabs who consider Arabic language and culture to be more than just a belief, but a way of life (Mohd-Asraf, 2005), language and culture become identity markers that relate to being Arab and Muslim. Resistance to foreign cultural practices and strong identity beliefs embedded among Arabs can be contributing factors to the poor school performance of Arab Muslim children living outside the Arab world. Ogbu (1987) suggests that minority children's poor performance in

schools is not due to the language mismatch between home and school; rather, resistance to the dominant white culture and fear of losing their identity prevents these children from succeeding.

Cultural Practices Commonly Observed in Arab Muslim Communities

In addition to the unifying influences of language and religion, shared cultural patterns can be observed among Arab Muslims, patterns that shape early literacy practices. One such pattern commonly found among Arab Muslims is that of strong family structures and a code of moral behavior. Arab Muslims believe in maintaining strong family systems, give importance to caring for their old, and take specific care in promoting a value system that incorporates generosity and hospitality. These cultural practices are not only prevalent among Arab Muslims but are also common with other Muslim communities globally (Drury, 2004; Gregory, 1997; Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009)

Arab Muslims educate children on functional roles assigned to them as members of the Muslim society (Davis, 2009). Being a patriarchal society that subscribes to the teachings of the Quran, Arab men are assigned the role of provider for their family. This role favors men in obtaining education, as it requires them to be the primary wage earner for the family. Priority in educating boys relates to family expectations in Arab culture, where a son having a well-paid job is seen as having the ability to sustain his wife, parents and children. On the other hand, women take up the role of caregivers of family structures that are seen as crucial to children's educational stability (Davis, 2009). Bird (1995) states that it is not uncommon to find girls trained at an early age to take responsibility and assume the role of caregiver. Although this practice does not prevent girls from getting an education, it influences the kind of education a girl receives and duration a girl spends at school. This is reflected in the large number of women

in Arab societies who do not pursue education after high school and opt for taking up the house and family role (Abu-Rabia, 1997).

Researchers working in Arab countries such as the Arab Gulf states (e.g., Ebraheem, 1995), Morocco (e.g., Davis, 2009), Egypt (e.g., Hoodfar, 2009) and Jordan (e.g., Shami & Taminian,1995) found that Arab children in the early years do not have structured patterns for literacy learning at home. Much of children's learning comes from social interaction within extended families and neighborhoods that forms a fundamental circle for children's early socialization. Within this social setup children listen to stories, lullabies, poetry and songs and engage in games and skits that impart pertinent lessons (Dorsky & Stevenson, 1995; Early, 1995; Ghannam, 1995; Omran, 1995). Documenting children's early learning patterns in Yemen, Dorksy and Stevenson (1995) state that children are educated through folktales and anecdotes. Parents believe that children are not capable of significant learning until the age of four and thus it is common for schooling to begin at the age of six or seven with higher enrolment of boys than girls. Protecting the honor of the family is seen as an important aspect of Arab culture that contributes to girls dropping out early from schools or not enrolling at an early age. The practice of maintaining honor stems from protecting women from having free social interactions with the opposite gender, other than family members. This is based on the religious requirement of segregation (Buisson, 2013). Additionally, with few opportunities for employment for women in Yemen, Dorsky and Stevenson (1995) report that parents have little investment in their daughters' education.

Another way of constructing literacy in Arab Muslim communities is through games and dance where children practice rhyme and songs. Some of the songs invoke play and fun yet others form a religious chant that is a prayer to God. Documenting children's songs from

Tunisia, Webber's (1995) anthology reveals norms of cultural and religious aspirations that are embedded in these songs. Similar themes emerge from children's theatre exhibits in Syria where messages of nationalism, Arab unity and historic themes inform children of their culture (Early, 1995). Themes tend to vary demographically. In research conducted in Palestine, Alqudsi-Ghabra (1995) documents poetry themes of homelessness, land and loss of loved ones. Despite the various themes that emerge, oral literacy plays a significant part in constructing literacy among Arab children.

However, television is augmenting traditional oral literacy practices in the Arab world. The Gulf Cooperation Council of the Arab Gulf countries has invested heavily in children's television programs, similar to Sesame Street, to provide for the needs of Gulf and Arab Muslim children (Al-Khayr & Al-Samira'i, 1995). The Sesame Street series that began in early eighties is still a quite popular form of media literacy today (Faour, 2010). The goal in the series is to educate Arab Muslim children on Islamic principles, to offer moral and social etiquette relevant to Islamic culture, and to teach the Arabic language. These programs that include cartoons and puppet shows drawn from the Arab cultural traditions of Syrian and Egyptian puppetry (Al-Khayr & Al-Samira'i, 1995) have become very popular in the Arab world.

Although early years education in the Arab Middle East has received little investment and support from governments, because much of the focus of government support has been around health and care in early years, recent developments show some Arab states looking at ECE as part of their schooling agenda (Faour, 2010). Sesame Street, which continues to dominate children's cartoon learning, now competes with other television series, which are interactive and bilingual. The ministry in Jordan, for instance, prides itself as being the first with its introduction, in 2004, of Kidsmart for the Arab world. (Faour, 2010).

Compared to literacy practices in Euro-American dominant societies, Arab Muslims' literacy culture stands out as relatively different. Difference is observed in the preference for a diglossic language, despite its challenges, and in leaning on the constructs of poetry and rhyme that depict cultural norms. It is uncommon to find literature that promotes fantasy or fiction without having a moral lesson inserted. Within Arab Muslim culture, religious attachment to the Quran has ensured literary Arabic is read, practiced and memorized even if children do not understand what they are reading. Comprehension in the early years is of little significance; yet, reading the Quran remains the most common early literacy practice of the Arab world. As such, it is necessary to look at the dynamics that dominate this practice as children construct literacy in their early years.

The Quran as an Important Text for Arab Muslim Children

In this third and final section of my literature review, I discuss the role of the Quran as a literacy exercise within Arab Muslim cultures. To begin, researchers working with Muslim communities often consider learning the Quran a cultural practice and not a literacy exercise (Drury, 2004 ; Gregory, 1994; Wagner, 1993). For this reason, little is known about Quranic literacy and its learning implications for Muslim children. Used as a reader, book of reference, narrative scripture, and almanac of *do's and don'ts*, the Quran has, over centuries, remained the most common and widely read text among Muslim children and is as ancient as the coming of Islam to the Arab world (Badry, 1983). Wagner (1993) notes that the oral pedagogical tradition involved with learning the Quran has been in place much longer than English pedagogy, and is well defined in its pedagogical structure, having its roots in Islamic practice. Learning Quran begins primarily as oral recitation that later advances to the complex reading practice of Arabic by joining letters. A key aspect of oral tradition in Muslim culture has been in maintaining

accuracy in recitation as it relates back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad when he received the Quran orally. It is believed by many Muslims that oral transmission has helped maintain the accuracy of the revelation since then.

Engaging with Quranic Text

Muslim children engage with Quranic text in different ways: physically, orally and/or auditorily (McAuliffe, 2003). Working with children in Morocco, Wagner (1993) found that children's first formal schooling experiences were in Quranic schools where recitation was the first instruction they received. Children often see adults and peers read, recite and engage with the Quran and, as such, it becomes a familiar text, more so than any other. Engaging with the Quran is not limited to the home: children hear it at cultural gatherings in the form of inaugural recitation and in daily prayers in their mosques (McAuliffe, 2003). Further, the Quran becomes an important text at events such as the birth of a child, during an illness, at weddings and funerals. The multifunctional scope of how Quranic text is used extends to art, with artistic writings displayed on the walls of houses and as calligraphy in mosques and other public spaces. Referencing the representation of architectural ornamentation of Arabic script in the form of calligraphy, Burckhardt (2009) observes the aesthetic affect it has on Muslims who see this formal style of writing as a manifestation of the sacred script. With the prohibition of images in Islam, Arabic calligraphy is widely celebrated as a distinctive art form among Muslims, serving to promote the discipline of writing as well as the teachings advocated in the Quran.

Besides providing literacy instruction, Muslims look to the Quran for advice on parenting roles. For example the Quran 2:233 (Translated by M.H. Shakir) offers precise instructions on infant care such as the time duration for breast-feeding and when to wean the child off the breasts. Similarly the Quran (73:41) emphasizes the learning of the Quran. While learning the

Quran is not limited to the early years and is considered a lifelong practice, recitation and memorization are two common methods of teaching Quran. Recitation is promoted using different vocal styles that have pleasing and tranquil effects on the human mind and body Memorization is seen as engaging the mind and exercising the heart. As a narrative it offers the best of stories (12:32) and emphasizes engaging in critical reflection of the text (47:24). Promoting non-fictional narrations that address and appeal to young children, the Quran has stories of baby Musa (Moses) put in a basket and left to float in the river (28:73); of twelve year old Yusuf (Joseph) thrown in the well by his siblings and his adventurous journey to Egypt; and of baby Isa (Jesus) speaking from the cradle (19:29), among many others. What defines stories from the Quran is the fact they are presented, unambiguously and deliberately, *as* moral lessons, and they are set within and form part of a broader religious practice. The narrative style in which the Quran offers guidance and its style of prose rhyme has influenced oral discourse, such that one finds similar patterns in Arabic society in songs, lullabies and stories that rhyme and project advice, lamentation of injustice or admonishments to curb children's behavior (Alqudsi-Ghabra, 1995; Doubleday & Baily, 1995; Omran, 1995).

Todeva and Cenoz (2009) observe that it is not only enough for Muslims to recite the Quran, as it constitutes the daily prayers, but it is of great importance that the recitations are accurate and beautiful. Although children successfully master memorizing verses from the Quran, they are also expected to learn reading the Quran using a written text, as generative rules of *tajweed* (intonation) are not visible in oral recitation and need to be internalized (Gade, 2004). Represented by 28 letters that are mostly consonants, the Arabic letters are often read without any vowel indications but articulated by their own *makhraj* (correct sound pronunciation) given that letters take different sound formation and are pronounced by varying tongue positions

(Abu-Rabia & Taha, 2006). *Tajweed* rules denote how certain letters change pronunciation when combined and, thus, reading the Quran with proper *tajweed* involves careful reading and pronouncing of letters with correct pauses and stops (Gade, 2004). Whereas practicing *tajweed* is more important when reading the Quran, reading harmoniously or with *tarteel* (melodious voice) receives great respect.

Anyone who has been to the Middle East knows that Quran recitation is a normal melody to the ears as one travels about different cities in the region. A person walking through the streets of any Arab city is bound to hear the Quran being recited from various sources such as the shopkeeper's kiosk, the television and radio stations, the taxis, restaurants, mosques and homes. McAuliffe (2003) compares the melodious recitation of Quran to music in Euro-American culture as both tend to arouse a moving experience with listeners. Whether reciters are Arabs or non-Arabs, emphasis on accuracy of the words and on correct pronunciation during oral recitation is heavily stressed as correct recitation alludes to portraying the correct meaning of the text read.

Quran and Its Oral Literacy Culture

Studies of Muslim communities show that from an early age children are made to memorize short chapters of the Quran through recitation (Gregory,1994; Hussain, 2004; McAuliffe, 2003;, Sarroub, 2002a; Wagner, 1993). Oral literacy is a key contributor to early childhood learning and socialization in family systems. A common way to familiarize children to cultural norms has been through rhymes, poems and lullabies that portray an Islamic view (Yamani, 1995).

Memorization of Quranic passages is encouraged at an early age, as it is associated with religious and cultural identity markers of Arab Muslims. According to Al Ghazali's theory (as

cited in Quasem, 1979), memorization is a skill that requires effort and concentration in order to recall and recite passages correctly. McAuliffe (2003) describes a process of memorization that requires precise articulation of each phoneme, stating that Arabic reading has elaborate rules for assimilation, prolongation and articulation of vowels and consonants. The skill of listening and clear articulation of Arabic passages becomes an important factor for Arab Muslim children in their early years. Careful listening is honed in developing flawless oral conveyance of the Quranic text that has been maintained from generation to generation in preserving the exact words of God (McAuliffe, 2003). As such, efforts with aural experience are emphasized, as the very name *Quran* in Arabic means recitation.

Arab Muslim fathers closely embrace children and recite a few words in the children's ears. This practice is nurtured during the early years as children begin reciting small passages from memory or *hifz,* later moving on to larger passages with some memorizing whole chapters (Badry, 1983; Gade, 2004). Similar to the spelling bee phenomenon in North America, *hifz* competitions are prevalent not only in the Arab world but in all places where Muslims live, including Ontario. At a higher level, memorization becomes a prized ability as young children compete in memorizing and reading Quran in its entirety on a global level. These youngsters command special reverence and respect from adults and scholars (Halilovic, 2005).

Differences in Arabic and English Literacy Cultures

When researchers compare English literacy learning to Arabic literacy learning, they find major differences in approach, function and application (Drury, 2007; Gregory, 1994; Wagner, 1993). Yet, drawing comparisons between these two systems is problematic as core principles differ. Whereas English literacy is based on developing reading, comprehension and writing skills, Arabic literacy rests in mastering reading and recitation in the initial years, with writing

following later. Comprehending the message of the Quran is not a requirement in the initial years as this broad exercise requires deeper understanding and normally comes later in adult life. Therefore, it is common for children to read the Quran without actually comprehending what they are reading. McAuliffe (2003) observes that skillful reading and reciting of the Quran receives admiration from family and community members as it creates sensational feelings among listeners. It is a family's pride to have their children as a *qari* (good Quran reciter). Besides promoting melodic recitation, emphasis is given to accurate pronunciation (*Tajweed*) of every word as words convey meaning and meanings change when letters are pronounced differently. Tajweed is known to improve or make clear the words pronounced so that meanings are maintained (Nasalla, 2016). For example when the letter *q* is pronounced correctly in the word *qalb* it means *heart*. However, when one changes the pronunciation of [q] to sound as [k], so the word *qalb* is pronounced [kalb], the word changes its meaning from *heart* to *dog*. Reading is thus a precise exercise based not only on recognizing words but also on correct pronunciation. One can therefore understand the relevance of maintaining accurate recitation of the Quran since, as well as conveying the accurate message of the Quran, it also preserves the holy text for future generations. In maintaining this oral tradition, Quranic schools serve as centers for continuation of this practice.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the last 25 years discussions on literacy crises have often been accompanied by calls for improving schools, having more rigorous curricula and emphasizing reading and writing at school (Schultz & Hull, 2002) . Yet many of the problems facing minority students can be attributed to differences or discontinuities between home and school, especially concerning the use of language (Au & Mason, 1981; Cazden, John & Hymes, 1972; Heath, 1983; Jordan, 1985; Philips, 1983). This evidence spans a literature base now over 40 years old, from Cazden et al. (1972) to the present (Sarroub, 2010). My work on cultural literacies draws from literacy theories relevant to out-of-school contexts that view language and literacy as sociocultural practices. It also draws on an anthropological view of culture. The work of anthropologists leans on documenting how humans make sense within their particular contexts (Fife, 2005). Using an anthropological view provides me an opportunity to see how literacy is used within Arab Muslim contexts and how Arab Muslims make sense of literacy activities they engage in. An anthropological lens further allows me to look beyond school settings into the realms of homes and communities for cultural patterns that populate Arab Muslim homes. It offers a broad panorama for looking at cultural knowledge that families consider valuable and worth passing on to their children.

Under a sociocultural framework, three theoretical perspectives inform my work: ethnography of communication (Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1987) and new literacy studies (Gee, 1996; Street, 1997, 2005). Under the broad framework of sociocultural perspectives, these theories consider social and cultural contexts as primary settings for language and literacy acquisition. Given this lens, a sociocultural perspective looks at the role of social interactions and organized activities that help

shape and influence membership within a social context which is affiliated with norms of language and literacy learning, social roles, beliefs, values and behavioral practices (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Using the sociocultural perspective in exploring Arab Muslim literacy practices provides a broad spectrum for looking at literacy activities in Arab Muslim homes as it is not limited to a narrow understanding of literacy

Ethnography of Communication

Ethnography of communication is an approach to language research with a view that culture to a large extent is expressed through language and that language is a system of cultural behaviors (Hymes, 1974; Geertz, 1973). It draws on the anthropological field of ethnography that looks at the analysis of communication within the contexts of social and cultural practices and beliefs of members of a particular culture or language. Speakers' ability to communicate in their own contexts using language and codes is viewed as not only appropriate but also valuable to their cultural norms. Heath's (1983) research on literacy events uses the anthropological view of culture to explore relations between language and social practice. Working with three neighboring communities for over a decade, Heath (1983) demonstrates how each community – a black working class community (Trackton), a white working class community (Roadville) and a racially mixed [blacks and whites] middle class community (Townspeople) – socialized their children into different language practices. Documenting these practices in *Ways with Words,* Heath (1983) found members from each community differed strikingly in their literacy practices. The adults in the white working-class community had newspapers and magazines in their homes and believed in the value of reading, yet for most individuals of this community reading was not a daily practice. However, their belief in the value of reading ensured that their children were

surrounded by print and were provided with ample reading and writing resources. As such, reading and writing for the white community was mainly for functional purposes (Heath, 1983).

In contrast, in Trackton, members of the black working-class community did not surround their children with reading resources but rather integrated reading into their day to day activities and interactions within their social settings. For example, storytelling reinforced the community's church related practices as adults narrated stories of themselves. Heath (1983) further observed that children in Trackton were talked to, not read to, and encouraged to be creative storytellers who could relate to ongoing conversations. Verbal play, playsongs and challenges were a regular feature of Trackton, where children were not given books but rather used reading as a competition and a way of exploring the bigger world around them. For its part, in Townspeople reading and writing mirrored the expectations of the school as parents engaged children in reading and writing activities and conversed with them from birth. Heath (1983) concluded, "the place of language in the cultural life of each social group is interdependent with the habits and values of behaving shared among members of that group" (p. 11).

Children from Trackton and Roadville faced challenges on entering school due to differing literacy practices between home and school. By contrast, schools considered children from the middle-class community, Townspeople, as privileged because they had language practices similar to those of the public school. Children from Trackton and Roadvillewere cited by the schools as having deficits.

Drawing upon their understanding that literacy was best understood in the context of practice, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) observed the Shay Avenue families living in the inner city of a major metropolitan area. They wanted to find out more about the coping strategies and social support systems that needed to be in place if reading and writing instruction was to

become a meaningful activity for young black children living in poverty. In the process of their review, the authors came to dispense with their own misconceptions and ethnocentrism, adopting new sensitivities that replaced wrongly held stereotypes. The families helped them to understand the social, political and economic forces that shaped their lives. According to the authors, human beings have a basic need for food and shelter whether they are literate or not. While these families came from broken homes, did not finish high school and some dropped out of school, there was no denying they came from literate homes. Speaking of the process of becoming literate and what they learned from the families about literacy, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) state, "we speak of literacy as a social process, yet we rarely look beyond the literacy events and linguistic transactions that take place. So much of the process remains buried" (p. 200). They further reiterate that being literate is a uniquely human experience that does not come through a mechanical process. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines' (1988) work extends Vygotsky's (1987) view that learning is a socially mediated process dependent on the support of adults and peers.

Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory

The sociocultural theory looks at the important contributions that society makes to individual development. In the Vygotskian (1987) perspective, human activities must be understood in their cultural settings, and specific mental structures and processes traced to interactions with others. Vygotsky (1987) believed that cognitive development stems from social interactions, specifically, children's learning,is guided by caregivers who co-construct knowledge within them in context. Sociocultural theory is a theory of mind, based on Vygotsky's (1987) belief that psychological functions can be accessed through mental, physical and linguistic activities in their environment. According to Vygotsky, the level of consciousness in individuals is related to the level of engagement with the surrounding environment. An

important aspect of sociocultural theory indicates that performance is co-constructed and never stands alone. This suggests that one's behavior and cognitive functioning is mediated by others or by cultural artifacts that are internalized. As such, knowledge, ideas, thoughts and values are first shared communally and then processed individually. Social contexts, such as homes and communities, thus offer learning practices that are culturally appropriate and significant to the learners in the construction of knowledge. The notion of culture and learning as inseparable points to learning practices transmitted from generation to generation (Lantolf, 2000).

Vygotsky's (1987) work emerged in a time of social upheaval where different social and ethnic groups merged in the same educational arena. In this way, issues of literacy as well as diversity were salient. Addressing diversity in a social context, Vygotsky (1987) saw caregivers as mediators of knowledge who helped co-construct learning and served as tools for children to reach higher levels of mental functioning. He considered home and community as crucial contexts for developing children's mental capacity, an idea directly relevant to my study.

Vygotsky's (1987) work illustrates the power of written language as an instrument for thinking and supports the notion that literacy and schooling promote cognitive development. However, in adding a nuanced layer to sociocultural theory, Scribner and Cole (1981), in their work with the Vai in Liberia, challenge this notion. These authors did not find significant shifts in mental functioning between school-literate Vai and those trained in Quranic literacy and Vai script literacy; rather, they found that particular writing and reading skills fostered specialized kinds of cognitive skills related to the nature of practices that required them. As such, Scribner and Cole, as ethnographers of communication, define literacy as a construct with multiple aspects, rather than a unitary one, that develops in relation to specific functions required for social and cultural needs (Schultz & Hull, 2002). While the focus of my study is not on cognitive

development, the sociocultural aspect of Vygotsky's theory that stipulates the importance of caregivers or mediators provides a lens for looking at the role parents play in children's learning.

New Literacy Studies

Understanding literacies as multiple and located within social and cultural practices and discourses is a construct of the New Literacy Studies (NLS). The core NLS assumption is that literacy practices are socially embedded and thus cannot be understood in isolation. In this sense, the object of literacy studies is located in various social settings. Literacy research seeks to understand social and cultural behaviors towards literacies that function in practice. Through an anthropological research design using an unobtrusive, unstructured mode of observation, the NLS recognize literacies that function for various purposes (Gee, 1996; Street, 1993) and build on the ethnographic tradition of documenting literacies in local communities, portraying literacy as a social practice rather than a psychological skill. Accounting for the context of culturally and linguistically diverse societies, the NLS perspective extends the scope of literacy to consider different pathways to literacy learning. Among the first to support multiple ways to literacy was Street (1984), whose notion of an ideological model of literacy is rooted within social and cultural contexts where literacies are practiced and valued.

Challenging the autonomous model used by schools that imposes dominant concepts of literacy by favoring one form of reading and writing as the only valid literacy, Street (1984) argues that the use of the autonomous model of literacy is purely a desire to dominate and marginalize other cultures. The autonomous model works from the assumption that the acquisition of literacy will itself affect social and cognitive practices, leading to higher cognitive skills and improved performance. Research in social practice challenges this view and suggests that dominant approaches based on autonomous model simply impose mainstream literacy onto

other cultures (Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Robinson-Pant, 2004). Street (1997) proposes an alternative model that offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices. His model posits that "literacy not only varies with social contexts and with cultural norms and discourses such as identity and gender, but that its uses and meanings are rooted in relations of power" (p. 48). Arguing that much of the literacy in school is based on an autonomous model that is not catered to understanding diversity, Street (1995) further proposes the need to develop models of literacy and pedagogy that capture the richness of literacy that extend beyond the school boundaries and which consider the home not as a deficit but as an agent of learning and identity-creation. Similar to Street's (1995) view of understanding literacy from a cultural perspective, Barton and Hamilton (1998), who worked in the neighborhoods of Lancaster, offer an alternative discourse on the role of literacy and describe it as cultural ways of utilizing written language. Like Street (1995), they acknowledge the rich cultural variation of literacy practices. For his part, Street (1995) cites the need for validating and bringing together elements of literacy research that are situated in social and cultural contexts, in and out of school, to address the issue of diversity in schools.

While all three theoretical strands presented in this chapter consider literacy a social and cultural construct and use an anthropological research orientation, they differ in principle on how literacy is defined and approached. These differences help me think through my data in responding to my research questions. Firstly, ethnography of communication brings into view normative cultural values that are embedded and practiced through the spoken language my participants use. These cultural values that are transmitted to the children further contribute to my understanding of literacy practices from social contexts. Secondly, while my focus was not cognitive development specifically, I use Vygotsky's (1987) view of literacy practices as tied to

interactions among members of cultural settings such as home, community and school. This sociocultural frame provides insight into relationships in literacy learning and how knowledge is constructed. Thirdly, Street's (1995) ideological model allows me to look at cultural norms that are functional and form part of the participants' literacy practices. Street's perspective accommodates diversity in literacy and, while his view maybe open to critique, it provides an avenue for studying and understanding minority populations.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Through the anthropological lens of ethnography, the study of culture hinges on observing human behavior in its setting and in recognizing things that are different but taken for granted (Spradley, 1979; Wolcott, 2008). With context and pattern being key in ethnographic research (Fife, 2005), ethnographic research challenges the researcher to identify a pattern that would otherwise be questionable or go unrecognized within a given context and time. Although ethnographic methods are commonly used by anthropologists, ethnography in the social sciences has, in the last several decades, gained recognition as a valid qualitative methodology and has been used by social scientists in conducting cross cultural research aimed at gaining insights into minority cultures (Wolcott, 2008). Ethnographic research is based on the assumption that knowledge of all cultures is valuable (Spradley, 1979).

Many of the literacy studies examining out of school contexts have used the ethnographic method to capture unexamined practices that can only be observed with participants in their own contexts. Geertz (1973) describes how long term immersion within the context helps the researcher to develop the ample description needed to understand how people within a cultural group construct and share meaning. Therefore, in my study using ethnography in investigating the cultural and literacy knowledge of Arab Muslim Canadian children in their home contexts becomes well warranted and applicable.

Wolcott (2008) defines ethnographic research as a "way of seeing" (p. 46) that goes beyond just being an on-hand observer. Rather than seeing ethnography as a method, Wolcott portrays ethnographic research as more of a process that uses multiple research techniques to disrupt the mind, a process which goes beyond just looking to a particular way of seeing.

Differing from fieldwork, Fife (2005) portrays ethnography as a method that involves participant observation, interviewing, note taking, recording of patterns and engagement in conversations with the community being observed.

Fetterman (1989) suggests combining participation in the lives of the people that are being studied with maintaining a professional distance to allow adequate observation and data recording. Highly personal in nature, ethnographic research can be stressful for the researcher as it involves a delicate and frequent dance of getting close to subjects and then pulling away to take the role of a participant observer. Requiring a constant level of restraint, the role of participant observer requires maintaining a conscious awareness of research requirements as one shifts between participation and observation. Important to conducting ethnographic research, as Spradley (1979) suggests, is going in with a conscious attitude of ignorance and being fundamentally concerned with understanding the meaning of actions and events of the people being studied. Ethnographic study comprises the understanding of behaviors and practices whether they are expressed directly in words or indirectly communicated through words and action.

Fife (2005) suggests not limiting oneself to one method but rather having the flexibility of adopting several methods in documenting the culture that is under observation. Stemming from this perspective, conducting ethnographic research within an Arab Muslim community allowed me room to draw on a combination of techniques in recording data, as multiple means of data collection contributes to research trustworthiness, or validity, which in turn increases the credibility of the research (Glesne, 2011) .

Data Collection

To get to the core of cultural understanding in qualitative research, three main data gathering techniques dominate practice: observation, interview and document collection (Glesne, 2011). Tedlock (2000) finds the term participant observer contradictory as it urges engagement and at the same time distance. Elaborating on participant observation, Tedlock further points out that as much as participant observation tends to create tension within the researcher, it poses problems for the participants who may view the researcher's role as that of a spy and come to resent his or her closeness, causing others to question his or her motives. The tension I encountered was not that of participating or observing; rather, I was cognizant of the privilege accorded to me as an insider that gave me access to these homes, and I was careful in not ruining this opportunity as it took quite a struggle to gain access. Using Spradley's (1979) view of participant observation, of learning from people rather than studying them, my role as participant observer was in a continuum, moving in and out of participation and observation without a fixed notion of either. I moved in and out of various activities such as from simply observing to having conversations, to taking field notes, to conducting interviews, to participating in activities. This flexible contextual approach allowed me to document literacy practices sensitively in these homes.

Gaining Access

My initial step in the ethnography was to identify participants from the school where I worked as a researcher during the first three years of my graduate studies. Being familiar with the administration and the staff, I hoped to identify at least four children from Grades 1 and 4 whose parents were willing to participate in my study. Although four families seemed a small number, similar studies in ethnography have generated rich data using two families (Taylor &

Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). I planned how I would meet up with parents from these schools at the end of the day and, if that strategy did not work, I would resort to snowball techniques. Snowball sampling, according to Glesne, is useful in getting started when there is no other way to source participants (Glesne, 2011, p. 45).

I thought I had all these strategies mapped out and failing one I would adopt the other. All these strategies were good on paper, however, in reality it was another picture altogether. I will document the trajectory of sourcing participants and the implications it had on my research design.

Finding participants. Gaining access was the most difficult task of my fieldwork. I did not foresee the huge amount of time it would take me to source participants. According to Van Maanen and Kolb (1985), gaining access is a crucial step in ethnographic research that requires careful planning and perseverance as well as constant negotiations with an environment that is unfamiliar to the researcher. Although I felt that I had planned my strategies well, I was not prepared for the long search that stalled my work. I began searching for participants in August 2013, after receiving ethics approval, and nine months after that I was able to identify only one participant who eventually withdrew. Documenting the process of gaining access will highlight the challenges of conducting an ethnography study in people’s homes. My initial plan to source participants from a public school proved disappointing, as the principal was not available to schedule any appointment to discuss my work or provide access to her school. I am not certain whether she was avoiding me or had her hands full because the VP was on sabbatical. However, after several requests for an appointment with no response, I decided to move elsewhere in search of participants.

Researchers have suggested that talking to many people and building rapport with them

puts one in a position to source participants (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003). Cognizant of my social skills and the relevance of using these to reach out to people, I was constantly nudging people as I talked to them, seeing if they qualified or could point to any Middle Eastern families. My desperation was affecting my social life, as my research topic became central in my conversations. Many times, the people I approached led me to others who were affiliated with Arab families, but I was ultimately unsuccessful.

It is important to employ strategic planning in gaining access (Wasserman, & Jeffrey, 2007), however, convincing people to participate proved a major challenge. I guess I was running out of luck, as Van Maanen and Kolb (1985) suggest: they consider luck necessary in gaining access. Using snowball sampling (Glesne, 2011), I conducted an aggressive search for participants, reaching out to friends, acquaintances and members of the community and university for help. For instance, I talked to Muslim students at York University who came to the Scott Religious Centre for prayers. They seemed keen when listening to my research interests and offered to look for participants. I approached the Middle Eastern Student's Association (MESA) at York University, and they ran an advertisement for me in their newsletter, seeking participants for my research study. I also approached the Canadian Arab Society to source suitable Arab families. I spoke to Arab colleagues from my community center to help me find at least one family among their Arab friends. Although I had strategically planned and proposed using several options of gaining access, all my planning seemed very theoretical when it came to actually sourcing informants – it was not the same in reality. It became very distressing and was often a disheartening process, especially when people did not respond to my requests. I began questioning my own motives for conducting research in this context. Many times, I felt I should probably revisit my options because I was not sure what I was doing wrong. As time moved on,

I was getting desperate and some of the responses that I received from people made me realize that the wordings of my proposal were giving people a wrong idea regarding this study.

The chair from the Canadian Arab Society stated that I should try the Arab immigrant center, suggesting that academic failures to date could be associated with newcomers and not those who had been in this country for a while. My friends seemed surprised that any Middle Eastern student could be among the dropouts. These responses made me revisit my information letter that was going out. I amended the message and, instead of drawing attention to the underachieving trends of Middle Eastern children as reported by the TDSB, I highlighted the gap in literature that necessitated this study.

Persistence and flexibility. After a couple months of searching for participants, an Iraqi friend volunteered her brother's family, which met the participant criteria of having a child in the early years category attending public school. I spoke to Sarah, Hamud's mother, on the phone and briefed her about my study. We agreed to meet at her house to discuss the research further and negotiate timings. Sarah was enthusiastic about my study and received me warmly. She had prepared a sweet drink especially for me. As we talked and discussed the details of how I would observe Hamud after school, her 3-year-old son was watching Arabic cartoons. After school was a busy time for her (she tutored other children in Quran reading), but she was happy for me to come and observe Hamud. She even offered to have her husband stay in their bedroom while I was around, as their apartment was small and it would not be appropriate for us to be getting in each other's way. I was elated to have found my first participant. However, my excitement was short lived. I had verbally explained to Sarah about her involvement in this study, had mentioned how the data would be collected and stored, and had also made her cognizant of her ability to withdraw at any point if she was uncomfortable (See Appendix A & B). Since I did not bring the

consent form with me, I offered to send it to her before we met again. Having sent the form, there was a long period of silence from Sarah. When she finally got in touch she apologized, stating she wished to withdraw from participating. After reading the ethics form, her husband became uncomfortable with their family's participation, as it required me to be around their home for a long period of time and he felt that it would be intrusive. Although we had verbally discussed that my visits would be based on their convenience and not necessarily have to be biweekly, as suggested in the form, the detailed consent form raised questions about the kind of information I would be gathering, and the study was perceived to be an invasion of their privacy.

I was back where I'd started, feeling pessimistic about the whole process. I decided to listen to my friends, who suggested that I needed to revisit the duration of my study because it was discouraging people. Feldman et al. (2003) suggest adopting flexible strategies when communities do not open doors, and I realized I once again had to change some criteria to improve my scope. Thus by May 2014, after nine months without success, I decided to drop the idea of sourcing children solely from public schools, and resorted to opening the study up to include private schools in order to facilitate access. Although access issues had impacted my research design and altered the kind of informants I was seeking, my research interests remained the same.

Gatekeepers. Having followed the step-by-step textbook strategies of what seemed to be a simplistic method of gaining access, I was disappointed to find the reality did not match up. Gaining access involved a dynamic process of crossing multiple thresholds and was not as simplistic as just getting past the door but rather getting through several doors and finding the one that not only allowed access once, but offered information as well as allowing repeated visitations (Feldman et al., 2003). I found myself persevering in my search forinformants. The

shift from public to private schools offered some hope with my community school, as I had volunteered at the school as a supply teacher, a spelling bee judge, and the leader of a bullying workshop. Using my status as an educator, I sought help from the school's administrative secretary, who had access to the Arab parents within the school. As a gatekeeper, she was able to talk to a couple of parents and vouch for me, too. She managed to find three willing parents and provided me with their email addresses. I wrote to all three, and two responded. Eventually, only one became a willing participant.

I found my second participant through a workshop at the Muslim community center. During her presentation to raise environmental awareness, Saba drew my attention when she mentioned her visit to Beirut. In conversation with her after the workshop, I raised the issue of sourcing Arab participants. Apparently, my colleague had contacted her earlier, but she did not qualify because her children were not in public school. When she realized I had changed the criteria, she was willing to help out. Although still apprehensive, I was able to finally breathe a sigh of relief after months of waiting and anxiety about gaining access.

The process of access in fieldwork. Gaining access was not only about getting in, but also making sure I could sustain the visits for some time. Many models have been developed to guide access to fieldwork, such as Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman's (1988) four-stage model of getting in, getting on, getting out, and getting back, and Gummesson (2000) three types of access, namely, physical, continued, and mental. Using Gummesson's (2000) model of the three different types of access meant that, after gaining physical access, I had to work on maintaining a good rapport so I could continue having access through my visits. Maintaining rapport was not too difficult, as the families I was researching were open to sharing their experiences. The challenging step was that of mental access, which required an understanding of what was

happening on site and why. Sharing similar experiences of mental access, Measor and Woods (1991) document barriers encountered while conducting research. Whereas access to one school was physically possible, a simple miscommunication that occurred with one of their researchers blocked any further development in their study and thus ruined the possibility of gaining trust in their relationship. Reading similar experiences made me realize that I was not alone in struggling with such issues. Understanding that what took place at my site didn't happen entirely on site, I was able to make some sense of why things happened the way they did when I began reading and reflecting on my field notes. However, as I continued to work with the data and make sense of what took place, I found myself extrapolating different understandings each time.

Data Sources

The data sources of this study were observations of three participants and their families in their homes. All participants were from Arab families and were in Grades 1 to 3. After much struggle and the experience of having sourced and lost a participant, I was excited to begin my work but also anxious to retain the participants, and thus I was flexible in accommodating the parents' wishes. The participants were Lebanese Arabs, and although this sample narrowed the scope of Middle Eastern diversity, it met the criteria of having participants within Grades 1 to 4. After beginning my home visits, I continued searching for more participants to reach my target of four families, but I was not able to find any more participants.

Another data source was an interview with an Iraqi mother and daughter who had immigrated to Canada in the past year. Being of Iraqi background and attending public school, Anisa was a perfect candidate for my study. I interviewed Anisa and her mother once. Although I could not engage in a prolonged ethnographic study with her, I was able to capture sentiments

regarding Arabic literacy that contributed to the richness of the data by complementing the ethnographic data on Arab families.

According to Fife (2005), interviewing helps researchers by providing specific information and opening up other avenues for further investigation. Fife further explains that this process allows for the comparison of responses from members of the group in relation to the same issues. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Glesne, 2011). With regard to structured interviews, most ethnographers do not agree with getting participants to answer questions about complex practices in a multiple choice questionnaire, as multiple choices provide overly simplistic responses that do not allow for nuanced understanding and defeat the purpose of understanding culture. The option in ethnography therefore, rests between semi-structured and unstructured interviews and, within these choices, the option of open- or closed-ended questions (Fife, 2005).

The semi-structured interview that I conducted offered the opportunity to develop conversation beyond the normal chatter, as it served to gather information in particular areas, yet at the same time offered space for open and free dialogue, rather limiting the exchange to a simple interrogation. With regard to open- and closed-ended questions, open-ended questions allow respondents to develop conversations in particular areas with some focus, while closed-ended questions are useful in providing demographic profiles: basic information about family members in the home. My questions (See Appendix C) reflected themes such as useful literacy practices, use of home language in literacy learning, parents' views on literacy, school literacy, and the use of Quranic text and Arabic. These themes provided information on how parents and children use language and literacy in their lives. In ethnography, conducting interviews

triangulates and validates what is observed through participant observation and recorded in field notes.

Fife (2005) suggests conducting the first interview after having spent several weeks in the field, to allow the researcher to move ahead from the initial period of observation to a more focused period of study. As the number of my visits varied with the two families, I was able to schedule the first interview after some visits with Saba's family, but with Kaifa, where home visits were fewer, I conducted the first interview on the second visit and the second interview on the last visit. I avoided writing while I was interviewing, and audio-recorded the interviews.

The last pieces of data collected were personal communications with the principal and one teacher at an Arabic School that operated on Saturdays in Scarborough. Although I was unable to find any participants from the Arabic school, my discussions of the needs of the students and the Arabic curriculum provided insights that informed my inquiry into resources that support Arab children's learning outside of school.

Participants

I worked with three families, two Lebanese and one Iraqi. From these families I observed four participants, three boys and one girl. One family had two siblings participate as working with one proved challenging. All names generated in this study are pseudonyms and have no relation to any of the participants. A standard informed consent procedure (Appendix B) was used in gaining parental and participant consent.

Amir and Hani

Amir[1] (10 years) and Hani (8 years) were first generation Canadian boys born in Montreal who spoke mainly English as well as some Arabic and Gujarati. They spoke Gujurati with their paternal grandmother and Arabic with maternal grandparents. Although their mother talked to them in Arabic occasionally, the boys chose not to respond to her in Arabic but used English instead. Both Amir and Hani attended private Islamic school in a suburban area of Toronto. Amir and Hani's parents were immigrants who had settled in Montreal. Their mother, Saba, was an Arab from Lebanon and their father, Mikail, was an Indian from Uganda. Their parents were from different ethnic backgrounds and did not share the same home languages. Saba spoke Arabic while Mikail spoke Gujurati and read Arabic but did not speak the language. Due to the cross-cultural marriage, the mother explained, the family used English as a dominant language at home. Maintaining home languages (Arabic and Gujurati) was an important issue in Saba's home, but she was aware of the fact that, although the children understood both home languages, they found it difficult to converse in Arabic and Gujarati and opted to respond in English when conversing at home.

Majid

Ten year old Majid was born in Toronto to Lebanese parents. Majid and his sister attended private Islamic school in a suburban area of Toronto. His mother, Kaifa, born in Lebanon, married Isa, his father, and moved to Toronto to finish her high school. Kaifa graduated with a high school diploma and stayed home to raise her children. Kaifa spoke fluent Arabic and conversed in Arabic with her children at home. While Isa was born in Canada to a Lebanese dad

and a Goan mother, the cross-cultural marriage of his parents meant that he faced a language bind and could not speak Arabic. He spoke English with Kaifa and the children. However, not being able to speak Arabic had made Isa more inclined to ensure that his children learned it. Kaifa mentioned at one point that, when the children were still young, Isa had considered sending her and the children to stay in Lebanon for a while so that Majid and his sister would learn Arabic faster. But that didn't happen. It became evident that language loss was disturbing for Isa, as he realized that English offered a poor substitute for Arabic, especially when he read the Quran**.**

During the course of my observations, I saw a shift in the family's decisions about maintaining the Arabic language. When I first met Kaifa, she mentioned that they attended the community center affiliated with her children's school because it was easier for Isa to understand the speakers, who normally delivered sermons in English. However, this decision changed within the year, as Kaifa decided to take her children to a Lebanese community center where she felt that, being among other Arab children, they would learn to speak Arabic better.

Conducting ethnography with the two Lebanese families was intriguing, as each family followed their own trajectory. Whereas ethnographic studies demand conducting observation of participants in the designed context, one family followed the rule by the book by allowing several visits to their home, while the other proposed visits to home and school to conduct these observations. Kaifa's suggestion of observing Majid at school was due to her tight schedule after school and not being able to accommodate home visits during the school term. With two children younger than Majid, Kaifa's hands were full, and thus the home visits were scheduled during school holidays and PA days. Whereas scheduling visits with Majid required careful planning, scheduling visits with Amir and Hani's family was fairly simple. Saba, a working mother, was

flexible and accommodated visits after supper on weekdays and during the daytime on weekends.

Anisa

A seven-year-old Iraqi girl, born in Dubai, who had immigrated to Canada less than a year earlier, Anisa attended a public school in Mississauga. Her parents were Arabs of Iraqi descent and had worked in the Middle East before migrating to Canada. Anisa spoke fluent Arabic with her family and friends and was beginning to read the Quran. She could not read Standard Arabic, having recently migrated to Canada, but was enrolled in extra Arabic language classes on Saturdays. These classes were offered by her public school as an initiative to maintain home language. Anisa's mother, Fatima, spoke English with an Iraqi accent. As a professional, Fatima was awareof the role of the English language in the western world. She prepared her children by enrolling them in an English-medium international school prior to immigrating to Canada. The international school helped prepare the children for English literacy, what she described as a "global requirement." Table 1 offers a brief synopsis about the participants and their families.

Table 1 Participant's Information

Child's name	Hani	Amir	Majid	Anisa
Age	6	9	8	7
Gender	Boy	Boy	Boy	Girl
Grade	1	4	3	1
Birth place	Canada	Canada	Canada	Dubai
Number of years families have been in Canada	Over 20yrs	Over 20yrs	10	1
Languages spoken	English/Gujurati/ Arabic/French	English/Gujurati/ Arabic	English/Arabic	English/Arabic
Languages read	English/Arabic	English/Arabic	English/Arabic	English/Arabic
Languages written	English/Arabic	English/Arabic	English/Arabic	English/Arabic

Mother's name	Saba	Saba	Kaifa	Fatma
Father's name	Mikail	Mikail	Isa	Mohamed
Mother's birthplace	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon	Iraq
Father's birthplace	Uganda	Uganda	Canada	Iraq
Mother's occupation	IT Project Manager	IT Project Manager	Business associate	Doctor
Father's occupation	Product Manager	Product Manager	Business Manager	Doctor
Number of siblings	2	2	2	3
Ages of siblings	14 & 9	14 & 7	7 and 1	13, 12, & 9
Gender of siblings	1 Girl, 1 Boy	1 Girl, 1 Boy	1 Girl, 1 Boy	2 Girls, 1 Boy

Conducting Fieldwork

Although there are no concrete guidelines for ethnographers when working in the field, the "writing of people" or cultural groups, as the term ethnography suggests, is key (Mitchell, 2010). The element of writing in fieldwork thus becomes crucial in this process, as it allows for statements and descriptive accounts to be documented in context and for broader meanings to be thereafter derived from these social processes. Researchers have indicated that being immersed in a setting and making a detailed note of events taking place allows for the portrayal of what is happening (Glesne, 2011; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2011). My ethnographic material is mainly derived from sporadic visits to each family over six to nine months. Myengagement with the Arab Muslim families did not reflect the classical anthropological fieldwork of being deeply immersed, I relied greatly on being granted access and went in and out of each site whenever possible. The duration of my visits may be a limitation of the research study in terms of credibility in anthropological discourse; however, I defer to Fabian's (2007) argument that time is not necessarily a concluding reason for good anthropology; rather, the evaluation and reflective process that one encounters becomes integral to one's work. It was mostly after each encounter that I wrote down my observations, and there were also times when I was not able to see much from my writings immediately. However, after going back to these notes over and over

again and reflecting on them, I began to see patterns and themes emerge.

Field Notes

Every researcher documents observations in different ways, be it in the form of field notes, journaling in a notebook, or typing on a computer. These field notes become an important exercise that captures events, conversations, activities, reflective thoughts and ideas that occur in the field (Faubion & Marcus, 2009). Writing in the field happens in various forms such as mental notes, jotted notes and full field notes as described by Lofland and Lofland (1995); yet, it is prudent to understand which notes are appropriate in what context. For example, taking full notes while on site is not deemed appropriate because of its extensive nature, thus making mental notes or the taking of memos of notable events necessary. Whereas note taking has often been regarded as an important recording tool, Fabian (2007) highlights the role of memory as an equal contributor to fieldwork. Memory is seldom recognised as a tool for fieldwork, but in reality it plays a major role in taking field notes. There are times when I left the site at night and was not able to immediately sit and jot down my notes. As I would later sit to write my notes, I found myself recalling what took place and remembering the conversations that had occurred. Memory, in my field experience, has played a key role in my writings.

While conducting observations, my research focus was to explore literacy practices these Arab Muslim families engaged in. Therefore, during my visits, I targeted and documented languages used; reading patterns; engagement with media such as television; attitudes, and beliefs towards language, literacy and school work; and the kinds of literacy resources available in these homes. Having these onset pointers helped provide a framework for conducting my observations to the best of my ability within the limited time. However, these pointers did not limit my focus in looking for only these things as I was also open to document anything that

surprised me or fascinating me that was related to literacy practices. For example, on my third visit to Hani and Amir's house we decided to look at their reading books. However, since the visit coincided with the end of the month of Ramadan, the excitement of what happened in Ramadan occupied a big part of our conversation, as the boys were keen to show off the awards they received in memorizing and fasting. I spent an hour listening to the boys talking about how they competed in memorizing the Quran and what prizes they got (See Appendix D). Leaving their house I felt good, as the boys were getting comfortable as they freely conversed and shared their experiences with me. Table 2 shows a summary of the data collection process.

Table 2 Summary of Data Collection

Participants	Type of Contact	Frequency	Duration	Venue
Amir & Hani	Observation and conversations	5	40 mins, 3x 2 hrs; 90 mins	Home
	Interviews	2	20 mins; 30 mins	Home
Majid	Observation and conversations	3	7 hrs and 10 mins; 2 x 5 hrs	School
	Observation and conversations	2	2 x 2 hrs	Home
	Observation and conversations	1	40 mins	Library
	Interviews	2	20 mins x 2	Home & library
Anisa	Interviews	1	20 mins	Community Center
Saba	Meetings & conversations	6	15 mins; varied times while at home	Community center & home
	Emails	several		
	Interviews	2	25 mins x 2	Home

Kaifa	Meetings & conversations	5	20 mins; varied times at home and community center	Tim Hortons, Home & Community Center
	Interviews	2	25 mins x 2	School and Community center
	Text message	several		
Fatma	Meeting & conversation	1	15 mins	Community Center
	Interview	1	25 mins	Community Center
VP of Arabic School	Meeting & conversation	1	40 mins	Arabic School
Arabic Tutor	Observation and conversations	1	25 mins	Home
Non-starter	meeting	1	60 mins	Home

Visual data

Besides field notes, photography and videos have been used by researchers to extend observations. One advantage of data gathered through film is that it can be revisited repeatedly, and the process of observation is different from that recorded in the fieldworker's notes (Collier & Collier, 1986). Similarly, Widlok (2010) states that writing can no longer be limited to words as a form of linear presentation of data, but is open to multifaceted representation with the integration of multimedia visuals that are integral to research.

I had only planned to use visual data in recording art pieces on the field site, but I was prompted to take pictures by the participants, who wanted me to record their achievement in a Quran competition. As I went through the visual data, I was able to see visual cues, facial expressions and body language that I did not notice while on site. These visuals helped to recap moments that would have otherwise been lost. If I were to conduct this field exercise again, I would certainly use more visual data, as it provides specific information that can be missing from

written notes.

Emotional anxiety

I had prepared myself for the normal physical fatigue that researchers experience from burnout in the field (Glesne, 2011), but nothing to the extent of feeling hopeless of ever gaining access. However, once I had gained access, I found myself being cautious of doing or saying things that might offend or jeopardize my position by invading participating families' privacy. My mental anxiety was particularly evident when visiting Majid's family, as I had limited time for visits and it was difficult to fit in with the family schedules, observe and accommodate the siblings' attention, and make relevant notes. It made me anxious while being on site, and I feel I may have missed observing some salient aspects that may have occurred. In this situation, photographs would have served to capture cues that my own recording missed.

Other sources of anxiety were centered around maintaining a good rapport with the families and taking notes while on site. As I observed, I made a mental note of what was displayed in their home, the literature items such as books on the shelves, and hangings on the wall. I was able to take photographs of the art displayed in their living rooms (See Appendix H, I, & J).

Participation

There has been debate over whether a researcher should maintain a marginal stand or interact freely, or as Horowitz (1986) suggests, "engage in negotiation between the researcher and the researched" (p. 410). Researchers are often faced with the challenge of how to maintain a participatory role while in the field. Maintaining marginal participation that is seeing things without drawing much attention to oneself is promoted in conventional ethnography (Horowitz,

1986); however, Scheper-Hughes (1992) notes that researchers who choose to remain marginal have the potential of being alienated in the field. Her experience in conducting observations by being both marginalized and fully immersed brought feelings of alienation and discredit when she chose to maintain the peripheral role. I was inclined to adopt a middle approach (Fetterman, 1989; Spradley, 2016) that brings a researcher to the field with two purposes: to engage in the activities of the lives of participants while also maintaining a professional distance to observe and record data. Using this balanced approach allowed me to decide when to take up the marginal role and when to get fully immersed. For instance, observing Majid in his classroom, I adopted a marginal role so as not to draw the attention from the rest of the students, but while at home, I found that I was able to participate with the families in ways that helped open conversations and allowed free communication to take place, while also withdrawing to observe. Given that my visits were spaced out and not very frequent, I had to utilize my time in the field in the best possible way by arranging and planning with the mothers. This helped me engage with the children and collect my data.

At this point, I would like to situate my position as a researcher in this study. As a female Muslim educator having experience working with marginalized Muslim groups, my insider role as a Muslim accords me a critical understanding of issues that are sensitive and that specifically challenge Arab Muslim communities. Discussions of the researcher's membership suggest that insiders gather data with the assumption that one knows nothing about the phenomena studied (Asselin, 2003). However, this was not possible all the time while on site, as the families expected me to understand without having to explain certain practices. The assumption that I should know things as a Muslim, and especially as an educator, disrupted the concept of assuming unawareness in documenting events. Nevertheless, an insider position offered me in-

depth insights into my participants and understanding of subjective dimensions that were likely to be overlooked by outsiders (Hamnett, Porter, Singh, & Kumar, 1984), a situation that would not have been accessible to a non-native researcher (Acker, 2000; Kanuha, 2000). While my positioning as an informed participant raises questions about objectivity and reflexivity, of one knowing too much and being too similar to those studied (Kanuha, 2000), I believe that my insider positionality as a female Muslim educator accorded me legitimacy within spaces that are normally private to outsiders based on my participants' beliefs, and accorded me acceptance by the families as one of "them". Drawing from Hamadan's (2009) concept of reflexivity, I applied the notion of insider/outsider roles of conducting research. Hamadan (2009) cites Subedi's explanation of the discomfort created in being an insider and the ethical issues of compliance when conducting research within minority communities. As an insider, I shared with the participants the discomfort of conducting ethnographic studies and the tensions underpinning my role of maintaining distance while conducting observations. The cultural and religious values that these Arab families hold are not different from my own, and knowing the value of reciprocity, how could I refrain from responding to their hospitality? How does one assume the role of an outsider when one is a frequent visitor who is welcome and comfortable? How does one keep one's distance when gestures of hospitality are meant to break all such barriers? These acts of reciprocity helped build stronger relationships between the families and myself. Adopting a feminist interviewing approach that acknowledges reciprocity and human relationship (Oakely, 2016), I was able to connect with the Arab Muslim mothers and build a good rapport that allowed for open and free communication regarding their cultural and religious understanding of the nuances that accompany faith and gender roles pertinent to Muslim cultures. Using an approach sensitive to the gender of the participants challenges the notion of

maintaining social relationship between researcher and the researched and the concepts of gift and friendships as components of this relationship. Accused of failing to follow the conventional way of not answering questions when interviewing, Oakely (2016) argues that it is counterproductive to treat the interview purely as a means of data collection, as relationships are built on elements of friendship and trust. Finding myself in a similar situation when interviewing the Arab Muslim families of which I shared the same faith and gender, it was beneficial to adopt the feminist approach as it allowed for open and free conversation between mothers and myself. Since my participants spoke English reasonably well, I was able to gather my data in English without having to translate from Arabic.

Data Analysis

Organization of Data

All my observations in the field, reflections, and memos were recorded in my notebook and eventually transferred to the computer. I sometimes think that, had I typed these observations straight into the computer, it would have saved me time, but I find myself functioning well with a paper and pen in hand and believe there is merit to what some research suggests: that writing stimulates the brain (Bounds, 2010). Transferring my notes to the computer was not difficult, as I used the dictate function on my computer and dictated my notes straight to a word document. Having audiotaped my interviews on my phone, I needed to transcribe them, and accessing data from different places became cumbersome to manage all at once. I needed to organize and store all my data in one place. Although I had intended to use the software program Nvivo to store and analyze data, I found Scrivener to be a better alternative and more economical to purchase, as it did not limit my usage to a yearly license. In Scrivener I could store all the data (e.g. field notes, memos, transcription documents, audio files, visual data and research articles) all in one file. It

also had dictation facility, annotation options, highlighting and split screen functions. Although it took several sessions of training to figure out how best to use this program, I managed to get by using its major functions. This program allowed me to back up all my data, and enabled me to annotate the data. Having all the data on one screen was useful during the writing process, as I was able to access all the resources instantly, and have one resource displayed on one screen while I typed on the other. The whole process of writing, rewriting, listening, and transcribing meant constantly manipulating the data, and that helped me to understand and digest it better.

Working with Data

Working with my data was an ongoing process. The process of reading, reviewing and reflecting occurred throughout my fieldwork. Although arranging the data was driven largely by my own organizational skills, making sense of it developed into weeks of reading and memo writing, coding and recoding to bring out themes and look for patterns relevant to my research questions. Ryan and Bernard (2003) note that there are different ways in which researchers can approach data analysis, ways such as narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis, among others. Whereas there are no definite strategies specified in handling data in qualitative research, it is entirely the researcher's decision based on the kind of data involved. I was inclined to use thematic analysis, as I needed to draw comparisons between the families I was studying. Thematic analysis focuses on coding the data and searching for themes and patterns that emerge (Glesne, 2011). Themes normally emerge after two or more cycles of coding, depending on the codes used.

Coding Data

Having organized all the data, my next step was to begin making sense of it. I knew I had to start coding in a systematic manner so that I would be able to connect the categories to themes

as they emerged. Although my understanding of the coding process was analyzing notes and coming up with one or two words, the reality was different (Saldana, 2013). I soon realized that the coding process was like entering "code mines," as it involved working through layers and layers of data (Glesne, 2011, p. 194). It involved reading and figuring what to code, how to code, and understanding what to do with the codes once they had been formulated. A coding technique that is entirely exploratory has no distinct procedures. For some, coding is perceived as shorthand and abbreviation, whereas others consider it as a combination of data summation and complication (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), but Charmaz's (2006) metaphor captures it all as a process that "generates the bones for analysis … [I]ntegration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton" (p. 45). Often viewed as an interpretive exercise that comprises the categorizing of peoples' perceptions, values, attitudes and belief patterns, approaching coding effectively thus seemed crucial for my data analysis.

With all the data in front of me, I was faced with deciding what to code from each data source. Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006) outline units of social organization that can be identified for coding. Out of the things they identify, I looked at cultural practices, roles, relationships, groupings and lifestyle. Having my research questions in front of me, as suggested by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), and using the list of questions proposed by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011), I began my first cycle of coding:

- "What are people doing? What are they trying to accomplish?
- How, exactly, do they do this? What specific means and/or strategies do they use?
- How do members talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on?
- What assumptions are they making?
- What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes?

• Why did I include them?” (p. 146)

Although there are many suggestions one can consider while coding, limiting the scope to a workable size was key in my coding process. In addition to the list of questions, I also took note of aspects that surprised, intrigued and disturbed me, as suggested by Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2011). These notes helped with developing themes and analysis. The basic coding process followed is based on Saldana's (2009) codes-to-theory model. Figure 1 illustrates the process followed in coding my data to derive themes, concepts, and analysis.

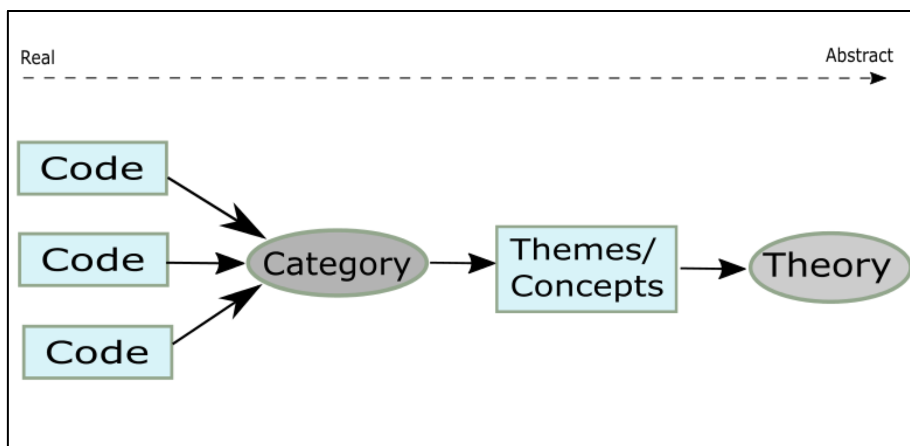

Figure 1. A codes to theory process

However, I was not able to generate categories after the first cycle of coding and therefore undertook a second cycle that helped bring out the categories that I grouped into my three major themes. I chose to manually work with my data using Microsoft Excel, as opposed to using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CASDAQ) software, for a couple of reasons. Looking at the size of my project, my time availability and my expertise with using the software, as Basit (2003) suggests, I found that working manually was a better option. Considering that my study involved just three families, and given the time limitations of familiarizing myself with the computer software, I was quite comfortable coding my data manually using basic computer skills and Excel. I was able to acquaint myself thoroughly with the contents of the data through

constant reading and re-reading. Having worked through the codes and categories several times, I was able to construct themes from my findings. These form the structure of my analysis and discussion chapter.

Limitations

Although I speak and understand Arabic with moderate fluency and anticipated some form of language barrier in participating within these families, I had no problem with language as parents conversed in English with me. I entered this research fully aware of the gender sensitiveness of male and female interaction of Muslim communities and anticipated that that my participants would be mainly female. As a Muslim researcher, I am aware of cultural conundrums and appropriateness that revolve around interacting with males in Arab Muslim societies. Sarroub (2002b) encountered similar situations when working with Yemeni Arab youth in Dearborn, Michigan and resorted to compiling data on women only. Being aware of these practices myself, I was not disappointed when I got to interact with mothers only. Having gained access was a privilege in itself, and I was not going to push beyond limited boundaries. Therefore, the data reflect mothers' views, who, in Arab culture, are key childcare givers.

The data may have been different if I had access to more families and with different ethnic backgrounds. However, due to the limitation of the sample size, the best thing was to gather data to a point of saturation within the small sample available. Yet reaching a point of saturation was also not totally at my discretion as my visits were dependent on each family's schedules. It was working around these schedules that I was able to gather as much data as I could in my study. Due to privacy issues, my observations were limited to home and school and I was not able to observe the participants in their community centers or places of worship. This would have provided an interesting view of how learning takes place in these contexts. My

findings were thus based on the data collected from observations, interviews, and conversations held with participants and their mothers in the home and school environment.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

I began this research with indicators that led to my research question, "How do Arab Muslim children construct literacy at home", and the notion that Arab Muslim children were among underachievers in TDSB schools. I emerged from this ethnographic study recognizing that safe spaces, opportunities for exploring and creating self-identities, and freedom of expression are crucial factors contributing to children's literacy success. Although the context of this study shifted from public to private school, as discussed in Chapter 4, the shift helped to expose sociocultural aspects of literacy education beyond the classrooms and in the contexts that the Arab Muslim participants inhabited. Home, Islamic school, Arab community school and community centers, the locations that largely formed the landscape of these children's contexts, were all peppered with signifiers of their beliefs: verses of the Quran as art hanging on their walls, the sound of the *moezzin* [2] at school during lunch hour, starting the school day with a short prayer. These all served as silent instructors for their literacy practices. God was found in family conversations, art murals and social events, as moral values guided their choice of television programs, holiday venues and the literature read. But to allow these signifiers to identify the participant children and families as religious in Islamic discourse would be misreading the reality, as Islam is a way of life for many Arab Muslims. In Islam, a person who is considered religious is known to have deep feelings and dedicated commitment to following not only obligatory religious laws but also recommended traditions. However, for many Arab Muslims, recommended religious practices such as praying, fasting and reading the Quran are embedded in

[2] Caller to prayer

their landscape and very much part of their day-to-day life. For the participants in my study, the context of Islamic school helped reinforce these practices as it provided the safe environment that promoted self-expression and helped reveal the children's evolving identity as they navigated in and out of these contexts.

The homes of these participants reflected certain literacy practices common to Arab Muslims in the Middle East in engaging with Quranic text and Arabic language, but they were not limited to these practices. Although Quranic practices may be common to many Muslim homes, it is important to understand the ethnic diversity exists in practice within various Arab cultures such as Lebanese, Iraqi, Moroccan, Tunisian, Saudi and others. Further, notwithstanding a degree of religious affiliation among factions, divergences do exist: the Sunni Muslims' principal focus is on the Quran, while Shi'i Muslims attach themselves to the Quran and Du'a, which are supplications from the twelve rightly guided Imams who became successors after the Prophet (Shomali, 2003). These cultural, religious and ethnic factors influenced the Arabic learning process of these children.

These homes were not limited to Arabic learning, but also used literacy practices common to western culture such as reading storybooks, watching English-language cartoons on television and communicating in English at home. Whereas the storybook reading of the children studied was not a bedtime practice, bedtime was filled with cultural practices that helped create bonding in parent-child relationships. Although these homes did not lack reading literature, the participants showed sporadic reading patterns, especially the boys. The topic of storybook reading and boys has its own complexities (Jacobson, 2016; Lipsyte, 2011), but a specific focus on this element is beyond the scope of this study.

Importance was given to learning Arabic language and to reading and memorizing the Quran. Parents made special efforts to provide after-school access to private tutors and to enroll children in Arabic school. Having their children in an Islamic school brought parents a sense of relief and comfort, as the school context helped shape children's linguistic and religious practices. Besides promoting Arabic language and Quran study, the school assisted with the parenting role of nurturing children with an awareness of their religious identity. The safe environment of the school not only allowed freedom of literary expression, but also permitted safe practices of religious rituals. This aspect, often mistaken for physical safety, made me reflect on my pre-study public-school experience where the Muslim students' discomfort with their reading buddy's dress code became a distraction in their engagement experience. They were in a context in which they were uncomfortable in the space in which they were supposed to learn. The reading buddy children, who were not from an Arab background, had one common element: they were Muslims, and as such they were connected in their religious beliefs.

The Islamic school visits combined with home visits provided a rich insight into the dynamic literacy practices of these Arab Muslim children and their affiliation with the Arabic language. The shift from public school context did not change the perspective from which I looked at these families and how they engaged in literacy, but rather this ethnographic study helped illuminate and clarify the literacy culture of these families by offering an understanding of the linguistic culture, language choices and religious values and beliefs that intertwined and informed practice.

Working through the data with a reflexive lens helped bring out common themes that captured practices relevant to the literacy learning of these families. The thematic categories of my data can be grouped under three headings: a) linguistic culture and religion; b) social worlds

(home, community and school) of Arab Muslim families; and 3) language choices and teaching styles of Arab educators.

The Linguistic Culture and Religion of Arab Muslims

The families I visited and interviewed spoke Arabic at different levels, and although parents were cognizant of language loss occurring among their children, they were determined to provide opportunities and support in learning and preserving the Arabic language. Arabic was not only associated with religion as the language of the Quran, but it was also considered a rich language for which English offered a poor substitute when translating what was actually portrayed in Arabic.

Preserving the Arabic language

Maintaining the Arabic language at the homes of the two Lebanese families I visited and the Iraqi family I interviewed was a pressing concern for the parents. While the fathers of the Lebanese families had varying knowledge of Arabic, families were determined to maintain the Arabic language, and mothers played the key role of language educators in the homes. Being immigrants with a bilingual education background in Arabic and English/French, the mothers sought to retain, cultivate and pass on Arab identity to their children. Understanding the rich linguistic heritage, the dynamics of diglossia in Arabic and its connectionto religion, they made concerted efforts to provide extra support in language learning to their children outside of school hours. Fatima felt passionately that language was necessary to transmit their history to their children:

> You know Arabic is a very extensive language, there are many books in Islam for the religion. So I want them to read fluently, how we read, what we know about our culture, about history, everything we know is in Arabic. So this is my aim, to keep the mother

> language so they will have opportunity to learn things in Arabic the same way they will learn in English.

Although Arabic was taught at the Islamic school that the participants attended, mothers had mixed feelings about the level taught at school. Kaifa felt that the level taught was mainly to enable the children to read and understand the Quran and not converse in Arabic, whereas Saba felt the school supported the parent's role in teaching Arabic and Quran, even if it was at beginner's level. Yet, both these parents wanted their children to go beyond the basics of Arabic reading and writing and become fluent in communicating and engaging in dialogue, and also accessing Islamic literature that offered richer understanding in Arabic than in English. English translation of Arabic was considered a shallow substitute and could not fully express versions of Arabic text. Kaifa describes the English translation of the Quran and *Du'a* (supplications):

> So then I started thinking about it, at first I was thinking that there is Quran in English and there is *Du'a* in English and after that I started thinking about it. And the language right now is my main concern, other than that we have to hold onto our background language, it's purposely for religion. Because I read Quran in English, I read *Du'a* in English and it doesn't have the same feeling. I feel there is much more meaning to it when you understand it in Arabic.

The linguistic nuances of the Arabic language make it difficult to adequately translate Arabic to English, and Kaifa recognized this, especially when it came to comprehending Standard Arabic. Kaifa's view of understanding Arabic could also be related to maintaining her identity as she felt strongly about her Arab identity. Aware of the dynamics of maintaining

Standard Arabic with little time available after school, Fatima and Kaifa realized the challenging task of retaining the Arabic language. Fatima expresses it this way:

> Since they [her children] grow up in the Middle East, they are talking in Arabic, but the challenge that I am feeling I will face is the academic understanding of the language. The academic understanding is not the spoken and the accent one. You know, the academic one, is the language of the Quran, the language related to religion, to read books. They will have problems with that.

Cognizant of these challenges and fearing language loss, parents supported their children's Arabic language learning through private tutoring, after school classes and Arabic school on Saturdays. Language loss was more profound with Saba's family due to the bicultural family structure, but Saba had not given up and continued to provide language support to her children after school and on Saturdays.

As with most Arab Muslim families who have immigrated to North America, Arabic is not only affiliated with religion, it is an important source of identity construction. The language choices that parents make contribute in shaping their identities. Ability to speak in Arabic accords membership to one's community. Kaifa chose a community center where Arabic was promoted. Her main priority was that her children could identify and communicate in Arabic and thus improve their language skills. She said,

> |In the last two years I started taking my kids to the Lebanese center and this is when I started concentrating on the Arabic language, and then I see they are learning the Arabic tradition plus the program and the speaking too. That is when I started noticing that the kids are catching the Arabic language and mixing with people speaking only Arabic, so I thought for them it was better.

The Arabic language also influences religious affiliation. It shapes where families attend community services and what religious practices they engage in. Whereas Kaifa identified herself with the Arab Lebanese community to accomplish her language and religious needs, Saba and Fatima attended another Muslim community center that, while not predominantly Arab, satisfied their religious requirements. The community center where Quran was discussed and taught became a common affiliation for these Arab Muslim families.

The level of Arabic literacy skills among the participants in this study fell in a continuum, with participants at different levels. Majid and Anisa could speak comfortably in Arabic, but struggled with reading, writing and comprehending Standard Arabic. On the other hand, while Hani and Amir could not converse in Arabic, they were able to read Standard Arabic without fully comprehending it. The participants recognized the challenge in Standard Arabic of reading and understanding the Quran where one gained expertise with age:

> Researcher: What is the difference between a child reading the Quran and an adult reading it?
>
> Amir: The adults are understanding it more, because they are older and it is easier for them to learn the Quran because as they don't have to learn the alphabets.

Amir viewed age as a factor for gaining expertise with the Quran because it allowed for constant practice over time. Amir was aware that Quran reading, unlike normal reading, had to be done correctly. He thus related that when he read with his friend, his father listened and corrected their mistakes. Despite the challenges faced in learning Standard Arabic, as teaching methods were still teacher centered, the participants did not resist attending these classes: they realized the significance of standard Arabic in their lives. As Amir observed, "Quran has so much information that it helps you in your life and it has so many morals and it is really useful."

Learning the Arabic language was closely linked to Quranic literacy and, for this family as with other Muslims, this education was observed as an essential exercise of home literacy engagement. For these Muslim Arab families, the role of learning Arabic was closely linked to learning the Quran. It is therefore appropriate to look at the role of Quranic literacy as a separate section in the lives of the participants.

Quran: An important Literacy

Parents introduced the Quran to their children in different ways. As the alphabet of the Quran is in the Arabic language, parents often taught the Quranic alphabet without distinguishing it as either Quranic or Arabic. Saba used different ways to familiarize her children with the Arabic alphabet, she recalled using rhymes and song as an informal way of introducing them. She practiced these Arabic letters on car rides when picking up and dropping off her children at school. She also used nasheeds (chants), similar to learning the ABCs in English, to familiarize her children with the sequence of Arabic letters. Her aim of teaching Arabic was to make her children familiar with the Quran. She stated,

> Well for me, I want my children to learn Arabic mostly for the Quran. We do not live in the Middle East and I don’t see myself living in the Middle East, only Allah knows when. So the Arabic is really mostly to feel comfortable when you read the Quran.

Learning Arabic in the introductory stage includes learning every letter, its sound and various shapes, then blending with long and short vowels to make syllables and words. Being phonemic, letters are used to represent consonants, with vowels denoted as diacritics markings above or below the consonants. When most children master basic decoding skills, diacritics are dropped from texts (Abu-Rabia, 1997). However, as reading Arabic goes from basic to comprehensive,

learning also becomes complex. Parents understand the complexity of this learning and are content with children applying their reading skills to reading just the Quran.

From an early age, participants recognized the importance of the Quran and showed reverence to this text. Majid felt that the Quran was important because it was a text from Allah:

Researcher: Do you think reading Quran is an important exercise for you?

Majid: Yaaah. [Question repeated again] Yaah. [We laugh]

Researcher: You are not convinced.

Majid: Yaah, yaah.

Researcher: Why?

Majid: It has stories about the Prophet and it's written in Allah's words….

He also felt that reading Quran should be done respectfully:

Researcher: If I were to walk in and observe you reading the Quran, what would I see?

Majid: Quietly

Researcher: Not loudly? Reading to yourself?

Majid: Yah, and sitting nicely and not holding the Quran like not holding it by the pages.

Amir was more elaborate in explaining how guidance from the Quran was useful in his day-to-day life: "English books give you some morals and some adventure, whereas the Quran has so much information that it helps you in your life and it has so many morals and it is really of use." Meanwhile, Anisa associated Quran reading with her Muslim identity:

Researcher**:** And is it, reading the Quran is it different from reading a storybook?

Amir: (Nods)

Researcher: It is? How?

Amir: Because in the Quran there is Islamic words and in storybooks there are no.

Researcher: And is reading Quran important for you?

Amir: (Nods) It is!

Researcher: Why?

Amir: Because we are Muslims.

Unable to translate the Arabic language of the Quran while reading, children understood the complexity of the language and leaned on the lessons derived from the stories of Quran as taught in school.

The importance of Quran was further reiterated when parents measured school success through achievement of Quranic and Arabic studies. Kaifa noted that, while performing well in other subjects was necessary, having Majid excel in Quran and Arabic was her priority, as she considered it a God-given responsibility. In Islamic culture, children are considered to be God's blessings, and the concern of being accountable to God for his blessings translates into making sure children are informed about God and appreciate his message of the Quran. Sharing similar sentiments as his parents about Quran, Majid expressed his feelings on its importance:

Researcher: If you were to change one thing about what they teach you what would you change?

Majid: Have gym half of the day and reading for the rest.

Researcher: So you would like to play more?

Majid: No half and half.

Researcher: Half and half?

Majid: No, no half Gym and half Quran reading.

Researcher: And No English?

Majid: And Quarter English, yah, no one period of it.

Researcher: Really, and more of Quran reading? Why?

Majid: Because Quran is more important than English.

Parents' and children's views on the Quran reflected sentiments that differed from school literacies. Quran was considered a revered text from Allah that could not be equated with school literacy. Its benefits were not purely rooted in the physical world, but were also related to their belief in a higher realm. Saba stated that listening to Quran brings "peace and calmness," suggesting that its effects were beyond just a literary gain. The reality of learning Quran, as Saba suggested, goes beyond the lived realm of simple literacy engagement: it benefited her family spiritually in this life and the hereafter, making it significant in its pursuit.

Despite the challenges of understanding Quranic Arabic, parents continued teaching their children the basics of the Arabic language, the language of the Quran that would help them understand its narrations. Saba admitted,

> You will never understand the Quran fully, I don't, but at least I would say 60% of it is basic where you could understand even the Du'as and stuff like that. When you understand it, it is very different the way it touches you, than when you don't.

Whether the Quran is fully or partially understood, engagement with this text is considered a necessary part of belief in Islam. Children are nurtured with these sentiments as they grow up. A popular method of engaging with the Quran is the oral aspect of memorizing chapters (*suwers*[3]) of varying lengths, a practice common to many Muslim cultures.

[3] Chapters of the Quran. There are 114 in total.

Literacy Anchored in Oral Tradition

In keeping with Arab practices in the Middle East, the children in this study orally practiced memorizing the Quran. While Majid chose to do it solely for his school requirement, Amir and Hani competed with peers at the community center. Amir and Hani could not contain their joy in ranking among the top ten in the competition held at their center. The community encouraged this practice by holding various competitions with attractive prizes to encourage the young ones to participate. Hani ranked first in the memorizing category for under-seven-year-olds, and won an iPad, whereas Amir made it through the first round and placed fifth in the finals. Relating their achievement with excitement, the boys shared their successes and proudly displayed their trophies and awards (See Appendix D). Memorization was a family practice at Saba's house, especially in the month of Ramadhan when Mikail joined the boys in memorizing and competing in the adult category. Great emphasis is given to Quran recitation in the holy month of Ramadhan globally, and Ramadhan coincided with school holidays that year, giving the boys opportunities to focus more on the Quran. Saba also used these summer holidays to enroll the boys in the Quran sports camp that was held at the community center and that offered a blend of play and learning opportunities. Saba took pride in discussing her children's accomplishment in memorizing chapters from the Quran.

Majid exhibited similar preferences for memorizing Quran, as opposed to sitting and actually reading it. As Kaifa noted, he did not engage competitively in this exercise because he found it difficult to maintain concentration for longer periods. She stated:

> He would want to read more of the Quran maybe with the Arabic teacher, as you know with the mother it is always harder to teach him. When I tried to sit down with him and

> read, like the memorizing, he loves it. He loves memorizing and we put videos or I read it with him or I say the verse and then he says it after me.

Attributing his lack of attention span to his ADHD symptoms, Kaifa found it easier to get him to concentrate on memorizing chapters of Quran while riding in the car. Recognizing the strength of Majid's memory, she said,

> For me as personally I would love Majid to be with the VP of the school, who was a Sheikh, maybe half an hour a week to memorize the Quran. Majid has a big ability for memorizing.

Ability to memorize is nurtured in infancy, when children are made to listen to recordings of verses of the Quran. This was a common practice at bedtime in Saba's household:

> Researcher: If I walked in at bedtime, what would I observe in terms of literacy exercise?
>
> S: No we don't do reading, we do, well it has been a while since we last did it. But the kids have always, always read the Quran before they went to bed. When I say reading I mean recite Quran. They do not read but they recite the Quran, and they listen to it. So they have a CD, that's actually how they like to fall to asleep.

Unable to engage her children in similar practices due to her infant baby, Kaifa remarked that, if she had a choice of doing any literary activity, she too would have wanted the children to recite the Quran before going to sleep. While storybook reading may be a typical mainstream ritual, the participating families preferred practices dominated by remembering God and experiencing serenity.

As parents catered for private tutoring in Arabic and Quran for their children, they looked to their community for support in enhancing Arabic and Quranic education. Several kinds of tutoring were used. The community centers, where the families socialized and congregated on a

regular basis, offered opportunities for Quran recitation, discussions and reflective sessions where children engaged and learned with their peers from the community. Classes normally took place after school on Thursday nights and on weekends (Saturday or Sunday). With several children's services available, parents were able to choose what was suitable for their children and enroll them accordingly. For example, Amir and Hani did not attend the after-school daily Quran tutoring, but went to the weekly Thursday night classes to practice Quran reading. They were also enrolled in the Arabic school on Saturdays in the stream of second-language Arabic learners.

The Intersections of Literacy with Culture and Religion

For Arab Muslims, promoting home language practices was considered a way of maintaining cultural identity; however, it was difficult to separate cultural norms from religious practices, as these overlapped many times. For example, Saba, who was in a bicultural relationship, chose extracurricular Arabic for her children instead of Gujurati, which her husband spoke, because Arabic was also the language of the Quran. Yet Amir and Hani related their competence in Arabic not to religious practice, but rather to their Arab descent. These children identified as Arab and recognized that their Arab descent gave them an advantage over their peers in Arabic. Kaifa and Fatima expressed similar sentiments of wanting their children to maintain the Arabic language, as they were Arabs first and then Canadians, and thus went to great lengths to speak Arabic with the children at home.

These dual Arab and Islamic identities transcended linguistic practices. For instance, these dual identities were reflected in the families' collections. Arabic calligraphy depicting Quranic verses (See Appendix H, I & J) or names describing God's essence and Arab cultural

scenes were among common wall hangings in these homes, illustrating the families' attachment to being Muslim and to the Arab land.

Yet despite the commonalities of these families, their views towards Arabic language learning differed. In Saba's household, engagement with the Quran had more emphasis, and various ways in engaging with it were evident. Sharing the common cultural element of their faith could have prompted Saba and Mikail to emphasize learning the language of the Quran. For their part, Kaifa's family's ideas about Arabic language and culture in their household was rooted in her husband's biography. Her husband, Isa, who had bicultural parents, lost his home language because his mother was non-Arab. Unable to communicate in Arabic himself, Isa was determined that his family would speak Arabic, even if it meant sending Kaifa and the children to Lebanon for a couple of years. In Kaifa's household, the Arabic language formed part of their identity not only as Arabs but also as a Lebanese family. Kaifa and the children did visit Lebanon towards the end of this study to meet family. While it may be seem that decisions taken by these families were predominantly influenced by the male's views, the driving force behind implementing literacy practices was the women of the household, who stood out as decision makers.

The family's use of Arabic at home was further influenced by their alignment with Shi'i and Sunni religious practices. The Shi'i, who follow the Prophet and his family, the Ahlul Bayt or the twelve Imams, as rightful successors after the Prophet, draw on Du'as[4] from these Imams and train their children to learn these together with the Quran. Du'as form an extensive literature that has been compiled by the twelve Imams and are commonly used by the Shi'i on prescribed days and times. Describing Arabic reading practice at home, Fatima outlined how her children

[4] Du'a meaning invocation or supplication

mentor each other in reading and how she uses media literacy in training her children to learn "Du'a Kumayl", compiled by the first Imam of the Shi'i, Ali ibn Abi Talib:

> Researcher: What about reading anything in Arabic at home? What kind of reading goes on in Arabic?
>
> Fatma: With them not that much, it mainly depends on the school they are, what they have been learning. And when we moved here I brought books from UAE, the same books of my eldest daughters I had with me till grade 8. I brought it all. So now we are opening and reading with them. And now I am encouraging the eldest one to sit and read with the youngest one. But most reading, if we will do, is just of Quran or of the Du'a. I will keep for them the YouTube channel example Du'a Kumayl. Du'a Kumayl is shown sentence by sentence the same way you are displaying on the screen (referring to screen at the Muslim community center). So it will be sentence by sentence so I feel that it is easier for them to read and understand.

Engaging in Quran and Du'a was common practice in all the families I visited. Being Shi'i, they talked of Du'a in their conversations and also encouraged their children to memorize Du'a, as seen with Hani, who memorized Du'a for the month of Ramadhan. While the Sunni also have Du'as, emphasis is given to the Quran and the Du'as from it. Thus it is common to find more hafiz[5] from the Sunni than Shi'i. Children were also able to distinguish difference between Sunni and Shi'i based on some Du'as, as Saba pointed out:

> We have one of the teacher who is a Sunni, their French teacher, Monsieur Rauf, and they know he is Sunni and he does not do the Du'a Hujja every day and the kids know it and they do not have a problem with it. They know it and they do not pick on him and

[5] *Hafiz is one who has memorized the whole Quran*

they do not ask him. They like him very much. They come to understand that he is different from us and that's it, it ends there.

It became clear that not only the level of religious commitment but also the nuances of ethnic and cultural affiliation influence the linguistic culture of Arab Muslims. The nuances overlapping culture and religion brought to light several factors that have implications for practice in this study. Situated within social worlds of home, community and school, these factors shaped the literacy practices of these Arab Muslim families and are addressed in the next theme.

The Social Worlds of Arab Muslim Canadian Families: Influences on Practices and Identities

The families I visited would not be considered religious families as classified in Islamic discourse, but rather were typical Muslim families whose day-to-day activities were grounded by their beliefs. Being religious in Islam is understood as demonstrating deep understanding of religious laws and having a commitment to follow them diligently. These families were conscious of belief in one God, and that made them cognizant of being accountable to God for their actions. Whether it was understanding God's message from the Quran and adopting a balanced way of life, demonstrating goodness to others in being welcoming and warm, or adopting certain roles to raise good children and making informed decisions about where and how to educate their children, it was all related to being accountable to God.

Accountability, according to Wilson (2008), includes responsibility and relationality that demonstrates respect, reciprocity and responsibility. The aspects of respect in the families I visited touched me greatly. While hospitality among Muslims is not uncommon, the warm, welcoming reception every time I visited these homes was heart-warming. These families at the same time as many other Canadians, enjoyed ice hockey and soccer games. They participated in

fund raising, offered services as volunteers and promoted saving the environment. These formalities that informed practice and shaped identity can be grouped under three sub headings: Religious values and beliefs, Muslim culture, and Islamic school.

Religious Values and Beliefs

The focus of this study was not to look at religious practices, but on the literacy practices of the families that were the focus of the research. Based on my conversations with and observations of the families, issues around respect, ethics, morality, and religious rituals became evident.

Hospitality and a culture of respect. The respect I was accorded as a guest from mothers and children was embarrassing at times. Saba reminded her boys to be polite and not troublesome, but to cooperate with me. I could see that Saba valued respect, as not only did she encourage her children to observe it, but she also practiced it by calling me "auntie," indicating authority as a guest. Respect for the guest was also evident in their hospitality. My first visit to Saba's house was scheduled after their dinnertime. However, finding out that I had not yet had dinner, Saba insisted that she should first serve me dinner before I began my observation. Not wanting to impose on my allocated time, I declined her offer diplomatically so she wouldn't take offense, knowing that to decline hospitality can be taken as being impolite. I was then served pastries and juice, and this hospitality was accorded to me every time I visited their home. Kaifa received me the same way. Their hospitality challenged my role as a researcher in maintaining distance while conducting observation, especially when hospitality has to be reciprocated. Within these spaces of conducting research, I was not an outsider, but a Muslim sister, and my behavior was viewed on the basis of a Muslim more than a researcher. I could not avoid responding to these continuous gestures of hospitality, but restricted myself only to reciprocating

at festive times such as Eid and Ramadhan. Respect was also age related among the family members, with grandparents accorded the highest level of respect and honor (Shalabi, 2010). While respect was recognized as a virtue that was accorded to parents and elders of the community, it was not limited to family or members of the same community, but also extended to all teachers at school, irrespective of their beliefs. Reminding Amir and Hani of respecting everyone's faith, Saba acknowledged the beliefs of non-Muslim teachers and encouraged the children to respect that:

You want the kids to learn and having them realize that—listen, we are Muslims but the people outside who are not, and you need to respect their beliefs. Like now for Christmas, you know I will be going and buying Christmas gifts for any Christian teacher at the school. A Muslim teacher will not get a gift from me now because there is no occasion. But the Christian [and] the kids should also learn that this is their religion, this is their holiday and just like they would celebrate your holiday you should tell them the same things too. We give them Christmas cards and wish them the best for the New Year. So I continue to that kind of practicing, and to me it sort of promotes the fact that we can mix together as two different communities.

Ethics and morality. Arab Islamic cultural praxis informs how families think and do things. Within this cultural framework, the concept of right and wrong is highly emphasized. It was thus not surprising to have Amir and Hani question my ethical ability to report the truth while taking pictures of their trophies for Quran memorization. Amir questioned how my professor would know that the pictures I had taken were of my participants and not randomly taken from the web. This probe led to a lengthy discussion of plagiarism and how, as a researcher, I would not engage in practices detrimental to my own integrity. The concept of morality was an integral part of how these families made choices for their children. The kind of television programs they were

allowed to watch, the kind of books they would be able to read and choice of holiday places to visit, all reflected their values:

> I don't watch much movies and I trust them to look into what it is. And I ask what they are watching and Zoha is old enough, and I ask her if it's appropriate and she is old enough to know what is appropriate and inappropriate. So they have reached an age where I can trust them, but that does not mean you give them blank cheque to do whatever they want, so we still ask them what they are watching, does it have whatever...

By not completing this sentence, Saba expected me to understand what is "not appropriate" in Islam. The insider's role of being Muslim, knowing Islamic etiquette, was referred to on several other occasions. Parents looked upon school as a place where their children could behave appropriately with their peers as expected in Islam. Commenting on his friends Amir states:

> Researcher: Amir tell me what is the best thing you like about your school?
>
> A: I get a lot of friends that are not kind of bullies, and my friends like they always take care of me.
>
> Researcher: Do you think you would get similar friends if you went to public schools?
>
> A: No I don't think so.
>
> Researcher: Why do you think your friends are special?
>
> A: Because they are just special in a way.

While school promoted good manners, it also provided space for the religious rituals, such as prayers, supplications and fasting, that were crucial aspects of these families' practices as they looked towards school for support in their parenting roles.

Religious rituals (prayers and supplications). At different points, all the families in this study addressed these religious rituals as part of their practices. The participants were not expected to perform these rituals in their entirety right away, but were slowly initiated with time. Short chapters of the Quran that were memorized were used in prayers:

> We recite in first raka'at[6] and second raka'at, but we don't actually take the Quran, we use those surah which we have memorized. But if basically it is a long surah then you are allowed to read from the Quran.

While prayers were not compulsory for any of the participants due to their age, early practice was encouraged, and school offered the best training. When I observed Majid praying at school, he displayed complete attention despite his ADHD condition. Praying was part of school curriculum: the young ones were supervised by the class teacher while older ones joined with the community in congregational prayer. Besides socializing and being able to contribute to community volunteering, Fatima drove forty minutes from Mississauga every day in the month of Ramadhan so that her children would benefit from prayer in congregation. She said, "[besides listening to lectures] the other thing is when they will pray in Jama'a everyday." Amir and Hani talked of the Friday congregational prayer being similar to Eid, as Friday for Muslims is a special day:

> Researcher: What do you celebrate and how do you do it?
>
> Hani: Let him go first.

[6] Rakaat is a unit of prayer. Daily Prayers are split into units of 2/3/4 according to the prescribed times. For example, morning prayer consists of 2 units, afternoon, 4 units, and night are 3 and 4 units.

Amir: So we celebrate days like Eid, and like there are different ones. Some Eids are based on important events and celebrate from them. And there is another Eid that is a very common one that is celebrated every Friday,

Hani: exclaims: What!

Amir (continues): There is special prayers,

Hani (retorts): *Jum'ua*

Amir: It is called Jum'ua. They called it Eid on a Friday

Saba also saw prayer as a factor that differentiated Islamic school from public school.

On the other hand, Du'a that was not part of mandated rituals in Muslim culture was greatly recommended in developing a practice of conversing with God. Looking at the influence of Islamic culture on Muslim children's lives, Shalabi (2010) found Du'a to be a significant daily activity among the Muslim families studied. Similarly, children in this study recognized two Arabic texts, one being the Quran and other the Du'a book.

Besides memorizing the Quran, children also memorized Du'a texts that formed part of their daily practices at home, school and community. The Islamic school day began with Canada's anthem and was followed by Du'a Hujja, an invocation for the safety of the living Imam Mahdi, the last of the twelve Imams from the progeny of the Prophet. After each prayer at school and at the community hall, Du'a was recited. The interplay of culture and religion among these families and the decisions informed by religious values taken by parents in their parenting and lifestyle further contributed in shaping their identities.

Maintaining Muslim Culture

While cultural practices seemed important in maintaining their Arab identity, religion was given precedence in many decisions. The concept of accountability to the divine creator was

reflected in decisions made when parenting. Parents made concerted efforts in maintaining strong family bonds and being around for their children, as they acknowledged the challenges of raising children in a non-Muslim environment. It became apparent that in an environment where God was missing from the conversation and where freedom of speech, dress and self-identify was promoted, these parents struggled to create balance in their lives while maintaining and practicing their fundamental beliefs. By practicing Islam, these families were not isolated to their ethnic groups. They enjoyed and related to the popular culture of hockey and enrolled their children in neighborhood teams. The children played soccer and were involved in choosing and supporting their teams during world leagues. Parents contributed to the wider society by helping in fundraising campaigns and volunteering their services to the community. As Saba commented, finding a balanced life was key for them.

Parenting role. The parenting role of these Arab Muslim families showed indications of careful decision-making concerning what was good for their children based on God's laws. Children were a gift from God, and thus making good decisions that would raise them well was seen as a responsibility. Decisions such as educational environments suitable for children's learning, the kind of TV programs children watched, what places they could visit for entertainment and what celebrations they could participate in were measured alongside religious values that informed their decisions and became obvious in this study. Although the degree of concern varied among families, Islamic culture was a primary concern for all parents. For Kaifa, good parenting meant making decisions that built a strong moral foundation for her children:

> And my main concern before education, before anything, it is religion, like I am not going to let them lose religion for anything. You know public school it's not watched,

> and children I brought them, of course God sent them, I brought them to this life, I am responsible for them.

She made an informed decision to schedule her working times around her children's school hours. Reporting on a Canadian study that interviewed 69 female Muslims, Hoodfar (2003) writes that although the women were professionals, they found satisfaction in staying home to raise their children. The choice to stay home to care for children is not uncommon among Muslim women, who will give up their careers to raise a family. Sharing similar parenting views, Saba, who worked full time, relied on Mikail to be there for the children when they came home. Working from home gave Mikail the advantage of providing this support, and when Mikail travelled for business, grandma came and stayed over so the children would never have to be alone after school. For Fatima, maintaining Islamic culture also took precedence in her decision-making:

> Researcher: Do you find that the way you do things, like the way you are raising your children, the practices you engage them in, is it the Arabic cultural influence or would you say it is the Islamic influence?
>
> Fatma: No first is Islamic influence, then the Arabic culture. It should be both of them.
>
> Researcher: Oh okay**.**
>
> Fatma: But of course Islamic I would put first because it would be in the right one.

These families took parenting quite seriously. Religion was the underlying criteria in the way decisions were made. Nurturing children to be conscious of God in a society where the mention of God was not common meant constantly juggling their lifestyles and negotiating ways of doing things. Concerned about the increasing Islamophobic attacks on Muslims living in the West, Saba recognized their impact on her children's Muslim identity. She wanted them to grow up

confident about being Muslims without having to apologize for their belief. *"*So, and of course teaching of Islam and teaching them how to pray and then having them being free and not just always having to justify themselves why they do something."

With a social environment that constantly challenged parental roles, preserving beliefs seemed a continuous task. Parental choices about what their children did, what programs they watched or what camps they attended reflected an underlying strategy: decisions were made in accordance with Islamic values. And a lot of the mothers' choices allowed children to make their own decisions without the mothers imposing a decision on them strictly. As Saba stated,

> I don't watch much movies and I trust them to look into what it is the contents. And as to what they are watching, and Zoha is old enough, and I ask her if it is appropriate and she is old enough to know what is appropriate and inappropriate.

Although the nurturing role of the mother resonates with Arab cultural practices, it is also a feature of Islamic practices too. Mothers occupy a distinct role in the training of children in Islam. While sentiments of the mothers in this study may portray the families as "religious," these sentiments were alluding to core principles of Islam, which is meant to be a way of life. Juggling to fit in with the dominant culture, parents voiced concerns about their struggle to maintain balance. Looking for ways in which they could integrate values from both cultures, parents negotiated differences in ways that both embraced Islamic values and accommodated dominant practices.

Integrated identity. Having done extensive research on faith and its interconnection with identity, Fowler (1981) describes how people make meaning of their lives amidst tensions that keep pulling them in different directions: through some kind of order and cohesion. He describes identity integration as related to faith, in terms of commitment in maintaining certain

roles, relationships and concepts relevant to one's belief. Whereas it may be common to find that the lifestyles of Muslim families revolve around their beliefs, striking the right balance in what they do takes careful planning. Commenting on what guides her choices, Saba made the following comments:

> Researcher: Looking at the language you speak at home, and the cultural practices you engage in such as festivals, the kinds of movies you watch, the places of holidays you visit, what do you think guides your choices?
>
> S: Zoha wears Hijab and I do, and you know we take into consideration what we can do. So religion plays part of it in that way and at the same time you know even whatever is appropriate for their age, I take that into consideration too and what is going to make them enjoy things.

Realizing that her children would have to learn to make independent choices as they integrated with the mainstream society, Saba chose to begin this training early. Also, given that she did not want to isolate them from their peers, she made informed decisions about trusting her children's judgments:

> So they have reached an age where I can trust them but that does not mean you give them blank cheque to do whatever they want, so we still ask them what they are watching, does it have whatever... But you have got to take into consideration that we cannot fully isolate them because again when they go and talk about movies if they don't watch movies like their friends they are going to feel, I don't like my kids feeling left out, meaning I don't want my kids to go and do wrong stuff but they need at the same not feel like "Mum is making us miss out on things."

The ability to observe Islamic faith while integrating with the mainstream society takes different forms and meaning. It could mean splitting time and engaging in both worlds:

> Whether it is TV or whether is travelling, we want to do Islamic trips, but at the same time they love to see, they love to travel. Like, they tell us, "After we go ziyara [on a pilgrimage to a holy site] we want to go to Italy because I want to see." You know, they read books about Greece or whatever, they want to go to Greece to see Olympus and they want to see that. So they understand so we try to balance both. We have to do our Islamic duties and once that is done then we can move on, and you know, at the same time this is Allah's creation, so everywhere you go whether it's visiting Him or were to go on a trip, we continuously remind them, "Wow, look at this! Look isn't that beautiful?" always referring to Allah's creation, like, "look, look, look, Subhannallah [Glory be to God] isn't that wonderful?" and we always refer to Allah's creation.

Or it could mean channeling energy into areas that divert attention from unethical practices that challenge faith. For Kaifa, maintaining balance in a non-Muslim environment was very challenging, as she had concerns about the social influence of drinking and drug addiction common among young people today. She chose to engage her son in sports at an early age to divert his attention from idling as he grew up:

> And we try our best, and that's why I don't want them to think that religion prohibits them from everything else. That's why I put my son in sports so much because I know that later on I know he will be so engrossed in sports that he doesn't have time of other stuff,… But I want a balance, I don't want, [we laugh]… it's hard. Creating balance in religion and social life is challenging with much outside influence.

One would imagine that, growing up within controlled boundaries, these children would have a different lifestyle, yet their values did not hinder them from enjoying most of the same things as other children. For example, my visits coincided with the World Cup football games in Brazil, and the children were well informed about what teams were playing and their performance index. Having a Brazil flag on my car door led to an excited debate between Amir and Hani, who felt I was making the wrong choice. Watching the football games became a family activity in Saba's house, with everyone supporting their own teams. Besides having a high level of moral awareness in their lives, these children engaged in activities that were common to many Canadian children and in many ways were similar to their peers. Yes, these children were cognizant of what values were acceptable and what were not, and within these limits they freely engaged in activities portraying a balanced lifestyle. The family values contributed to the kind of lifestyle they led.

After spending time with my participants, I questioned how different were they from other Canadians. But then, what does a Canadian household look like? Realizing that I had no "model", I focused on what seemed particular to these families' lifestyle that contributed to their learning. A common practice observed in these families was their frequent visits to their community centers. They went to their centers at least once a fortnight, if not weekly, for prayers and socialization. Community centers gave these families a sense of belonging, engaging them and providing opportunities for them to contribute to building community spirit and serving the wider society. An example of such programs was volunteering for an "out of the cold program" that was held once a week during the winter season. Although these families did not participate in this initiative, they engaged in other areas that they were passionate about. Saba who was an avid supporter of environmental issues, served on the eco team that was responsible for

educating members of the community about environmental issues. She and her team members used Quranic references to support their argument.

One thing that stood out in our discussions was that God featured in conversations and activities. Doing things based on God's will seemed to be a natural tendency for these families, as it was woven into the fabric of their lifestyle. Besides being conscious of God, family and intergenerational relationships were of high importance.

Parental involvement and intergenerational relationships. The participants of this study all came from families with both parents present. Both parents shared the responsibilities of caring for their children. Although parenting roles varied within these families, both parents were seen training and supporting their children's learning. While Saba acknowledged the Arab cultural view that women were responsible for the children's upbringing, she recognized the difference in her bicultural home setting, where Mikail was very involved with the children:

> I can see where you probably see that's where I am not the purest Arab culturally I see you are right. [Reference was made to research that allowed access to female participants only.] I could see that being a problem with some families, as they would see that these issues are mother-related issues and she would be the one speaking with such issues and the husband would not be the one needed to comment or give these kinds of views because he is not involved in the family or from cultural perspective that's a woman area. In my household it does not work like that. As you have seen the father spends much more time like that and sometimes much more than I do and we don't live in that kind of household.

In Fatima's household, Mohamed was also involved with helping in children's homework and instilling moral values:

> My husband is **a**lways telling international stories of people from different places. We will talk… and my husband he is the one who is telling her stories, to tell you the truth at that time. He will create some stories about, say, there is young girl called ...it is about her, and how her brother and sister. Yah, and she will laugh and she will know we are talking about her, she will laugh and that's it.

On the other hand, Kaifa's household reflected traditional cultural norms. Conforming to traditional Arab culture, her husband left it totally to Kaifa to take care of the children's school and learning activities. Coping with Majid's ADHD and two younger children, dropping off children and picking them up, homework and after school activities, Kaifa's schedules were very tight and left her little time to engage in extra school work with her children. On my visits she constantly had to get up and respond to her 11-month-old baby's needs. And for this reason, she preferred that I observe Majid at school as well. Isa didn't involve himself in children's schoolwork, but he contributed by taking care of the children when Kaifa went to mosque and providing support in Majid's sports. Being a hockey coach, he shared Majid's passion for hockey.

Whereas parental involvement has been well researched and forms a contributing factor to student achievement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Jeynes, 2003) the impact of family relationships also adds to student achievement (Henderson & Berla, 1994). My observation of these families exposed certain tendencies of communal practice, of wanting to do things together. They visited family, especially grandparents, went to mosque, played together and travelled to holy places together. Visiting grandparents was done on a regular basis. Kaifa often went to Ottawa during PA days to visit her parents. One summer, she also took the children to Lebanon to visit their family. Visiting her home country was a way to acquaint her children with

family and strengthen their identity, as well as to provide an opportunity to practice Arabic. These families subscribed to a collective cultural system that adhered to a structure that organized types of interactions and communications among family members (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). Maintaining these relationships with extended family also served to share responsibilities and maintain cultural capital.

Cultural capital in extended families. Extended families occupy a dignified role within Arab and Muslim culture. Shalabi (2010) describes *Silat al Rahm,* denoting that there is a blood connection between people and blood connection carries with it respect for extended family members. Whereas respect was a common feature in these families' engagements, respect to grandparents in Muslim culture is considered an obligation for the parents (Elsaman & Arafa, 2012). It is common in Arab Muslim families that the elderly are cared for by family members in the home. The notion of placing parents in nursing homes is considered a violation of family values. While children learn to care for and respect their parents and grandparents and elderly from a young age, in this study grandparents were seen as agents of maintaining home language. Similar to Coleman's (1993) concept of cultural capital, which places families center-stage as a primordial organization in which relationships are established by childbirth and which classifies social capital as a reciprocal construct of parents investing in their children, who in turn will support them in later life, Arab Muslim culture prescribes the centrality of family as a religious responsibility. When visiting grandparents, children were trained to speak to them in their home language because it was deemed respectful. Saba also installed Arabic satellite television to provide for the grandparents' needs when they visited occasionally:

> Again, I am not a TV watcher, but I do have the channels in Arabic because I figured Ramadhan or when my parents come here, sometimes they want to watch something that they can understand, so I have kept the Arabic satellite.

Whereas these families often visited their parents who lived out of town, Mikail's mother who lived in town often came to be with her grandchildren, especially when Mikail was travelling. These extended relationships instilled a sense of security, support and belonging, sentiments that were important to these families who felt comfortable in their own spaces, where they could not only observe cultural norms but also adhere to religious requirements. Parents chose to enroll their children in Islamic school for similar reasons. Listening to these mothers' reasons for choosing Islamic school made me realize that their decision was not random, but rather based on cultural and religious priorities, as well as their experiences of engaging with public schools.

The Role of Islamic Schooling and Community in Shaping Identity

The children in this study attended several types of Islamic schooling that helped to shape their identities: the Islamic school that was in place of daily schooling, the Arabic school that was held once a week, and Madrasa [religious educational institution] on Thursday nights. While the Arabic school taught Arabic only and Madrasa addressed Quran, the Islamic school offered the Ontario curriculum from the Ministry of Education as well as Islamic studies, Arabic and Quran. The families looked to the community to support the children's religious education on weekends and during special periods such as the month of Ramadhan. As mosques were normally attached to the community centers, the children were able to engage in various activities while there. Amir talked of going to pray at his Muslim community center and listening to lectures, and Majid recalled attending lectures in Arabic with his mother. The role of the local

community centers was central in bringing these families together based on their Arab ethnicity or Muslim identity. These community centers provided a sense of security where families felt they belonged and were able to convene freely to practice their faith. The Islamic school that Hani, Amir and Majid attended was part of their community's initiative in providing an Islamic environment for inclusive education.

Although membership in communal settings is voluntary, families chose to attend these centers regularly, almost on a weekly basis. The centers were seen as central convening places for families where they felt free and comfortable to socialize and worship together and to contribute back to the community. Saba, who is passionate about preserving the environment, actively engaged the community in promoting "green" habits through responsible behavior at the community center. Whereas it may seem that these community centers have helped further polarize communities within their own ethnic groupings, this was not the case here. The community centers are open to all Muslims, irrespective of their ethnicities, with each center selecting their principal languages based on the majority of their membership. So for example, the community center Saba attended used English and Urdu/Gujurati to address the congregation, whereas the center Kaifa attended used only Arabic as a medium of communication. The linguistic options determined which center the families attended. In the beginning of my study, Kaifa attended the same center that Saba attended, as her husband preferred listening to English speakers. However, towards the end of the study, Kaifa preferred the center where Arabic was predominantly used, for the sake of her children's language practice.

While movement back and forth between community centers was common, families tended to convene at the center that met their linguistic as well as sociocultural and religious needs. The

community centers, madrasas[7], and Arabic school all contributed to serving the needs of their members and supporting educational needs of the community's children. The community centers were also seen as places where children could worship alongside their peers and adults of the community, which gave them a sense of identity and of belonging to the community. Children learned ways of conforming to the communal practices as they engaged in and listened to lectures and prayer sessions from an early age. From the time they were born, these children were taken to the community center as part of the congregation.

Besides the daily prayers, the Shi'i Muslims congregated at the community center to commemorate the birth and death occasions of the Prophet and the twelve Imams. Hani talked of observing *Ashura*[8], the martyrdom day of the grandson of the Prophet. Describing his community center, Amir referred to it as a place to "read Quran, listen to the lecture and eat food." Sitting together and sharing a meal happens daily in the month of Ramadhan and over several occasions in the rest of the year. Children were thus very familiar with the center's Sheikh and mentioned him in their conversations. While affiliation with the community center was common among all these participants, the frequency of visiting the centers varied among the participants. Living within walking distance from the community center, Saba's family frequently attended mosque, and so did Fatima's family. Although Fatima lived in Mississauga, she travelled 45 minutes daily, especially in the month of Ramadhan, so that her family could be among their Arab friends at the Muslim community center. Being a new immigrant, she looked towards friends to initiate her family into the community, and didn't mind driving that distance daily. Kaifa, too, loved going to the Lebanese Arab center, but her visits were determined by her

children's needs and schedules. Participants of this study were all familiar with their community centers and engaged in the learning and cultural practices held there. The community center was a hub for all the needs of the community. Several Madrasa sessions ran over the course of the week and on weekends.

While I am unable to comment on the Madrasas, as I did not observe children in that space, I will document findings largely from the Islamic school and address the Arabic school in the next section under "Arab educators."

Reinforcing safe spaces and a sense of belonging. When I asked parents on their choice of an Islamic school, they shared personal experiences of public schooling and the dynamics that challenged their values. They shared concerns of having their children in a safe and free environment where they could voice their beliefs and practice without any intimidation or fear of being discriminated against. They talked of spaces where children's discipline could be nurtured by educators who understood and respected their beliefs, and they looked towards an environment where bullying was not tolerated. In a nutshell, these parents were looking for spaces similar to home. The reality of meeting these needs was costly, and realizing the challenges of private schooling, they struggled to provide for these needs. Saba shared her experience of being in public schools:

> I have been to regular schools here and I know it's not easy, and you know what, Mikail and I both work too, so I find that when you put them in an Islamic school you are at the same time some of the kind of teaching you wanted to do at home is also being done outside the home. Not that you stop teaching at home, but it does so complement to make sure you provide your children with the best kind of environment.

Kaifa was more vocally critical of her experience in public school:

> I would always say to everybody... if my kids were in public school I would be with them. When I came to Canada, I went to high school. I was **not happy at all** [she stressed this point] with the…with the everyday, with the kids, I felt like it is not Islamic at all, I felt like I would lose my kids if my kids were in public school.

She found it shocking that public schools were rolling out the sex education curriculum and reiterated her decision to send her children to Islamic school:

> I am never going to move my kids, no way. The curriculum is bad. I mean, now everyone is going to be like, so have the same opinion. Because I don't want…I think they are too young, they should worry about kid stuff now and other stuff later. I don't want my daughter to come and ask me these questions or even my son.

As the curriculum had not been rolled out yet, there was little information on what it contained. Sex education is not ignored in Muslim education, but rather there are comprehensive guidelines on what one needs to do prior to having a relationship, during and after. As the Imam of the mosque stated, "We do not shun sex education, it is the timing and contents that we have issues with." The Imam of the community, who also plays an active role in guiding the community, is informed of what goes on in the education circle and advises the congregation according to what conforms to the law of Islam. Kaifa recalled her Imam's advice on children who defied practicing their values by not praying or listening to their parents. Relating the Imam's advice at the Lebanese center, she recalled he reiterated the importance of sending children to an Islamic school and called for the people to sacrifice material possessions in order to afford an Islamic environment:

> "If you can't afford buying a house, if buying a house is going to affect your children's education, don't buy a house. Live in a rented apartment but concentrate more on religion

> and your kids' future" he said. Because the atmosphere just in the morning saying Du'a, reciting a Sura of Quran, saying *Salaam alaikum*, remembering the occasions, forget about teaching the Islamic of studies but just these small things that we might take for granted, these affect the children in many, many, many ways.

Listening to the Imam's advice helped validate Kaifa's belief as she felt she had made the right choice in sending her children to Islamic school.

Although it was the parents who made the choice to send children to Islamic school, the children were happy with the decision. They felt confident about the safe spaces the school provided against bullying. They described bullying as taking away someone's rights, and as therefore ethically wrong, and said that this religious awareness meant they had a moral obligation not to indulge in it. Amir and Hani talked of the caring nature of their friends who made school special. Describing his friends Amir said, "I get a lot of friends that are not kind of bullies, and my friends, like, they always take care of me."

Freedom of expression. The safe spaces in an Islamic environment also meant that children could freely express their thoughts in their writings. Writing about "My best vacation," Hani decided to describe his trip to Mecca. When his mother asked why he chose that trip among all other trips he had taken, he expressed that it was the one he really enjoyed the most. Would he have chosen to write on the same topic if he was in a public school? I am not sure. But being sure that his writing would not be made fun of gave Hani the confidence to write about a trip that was dear to him. Similarly, reflection on God was evident in many areas of Majid's journals. Not only did he freely express his faith in his writings, the concept of God was also integrated into the curriculum. When I observed Majid's science lesson on the life cycle of a butterfly, taught by

a non-Muslim teacher, the teacher reflected the school ethos and related aspects of the butterfly's life cycle to Allah, its creator.

Different aspects of the curriculum allowed for culture and religion to be included. Closing the day with reading time, a girl from Majid's class was given an opportunity to read to the class the book she had donated. The book was called *Isa and the incredible climb to Mount Mushkil*. This book was culturally relevant to the Muslim children and used common terms such as *Alhamdulillah* (praise be to God), *Inshallah* (God willing), and had Allah's name recurring in the story. Despite the fact that it was the end of the day, the children listened attentively, especially Majid, in spite of his short attention span. It seemed that the book resonated with the children, as they could relate to the characters.

The school's support in promoting culture and belief was integrated in classrooms, assembly halls and the library. The school's library supported children's learning by providing relevant literature that reflected Islamic festivities, values and lifestyles (See Appendix E). The library worked with thematic topics and displayed books and information based on Islamic calendar events such as Hajj, Ramadhan and Eid. The hallways reflected their cultural heritage with posters of Muslim scientists and their contribution in shaping the eras of civilizations (See Appendix F). Apart from providing supportive literature that informed students of their history, the school also helped celebrate festivities that were relevant to Muslims as well as those relevant to Canadians. The teachers were constantly given refreshers on how to incorporate a balanced view in their teachings, incorporating Islam into the secular curriculum. The value of integrated identity was being reinforced at school as well. Although a large number of the parents supported the integrated view, there were some who chose the school for its safe spaces and were not committed to the integrated concept. This raised issues for children who saw two

separate identities, one at school and one at home and in the outer world, that were conflicting in values. This conflicting view of maintaining separate identities has caused tensions in the school and becomes a separate topic in itself; however, it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss it here.

Cultural continuity. Extending home practices at school meant that children could practice literacy from home like the Quran and *Du'a* and have the opportunity to study Islam as a school subject. In addition to extending home practices, the school also integrated children into the community. Children from Grade 3 upwards joined the larger Muslim community for communal prayers at the center. Given the opportunity to participate in and contribute to communal prayers, children felt included as part of the larger community. Although not all the teachers were Muslims, the integrated membership of the staff promoted diversity and fostered a culture of respect. Describing how school promotes culture, Saba says:

> And one way of them promoting culture is having teachers of different backgrounds. That, according to me, is promoting culture. So we are not just stuck up on the same type of teachers. The fact that you have people of different backgrounds who bring their own way of teaching, because it's not just about the learning but also keeping and respecting the backgrounds of everybody.

Having spent a couple of months with these families, I realized that respect is a value not only practiced at home, but also interwoven and carried into school and life outside.
The school's safe spaces contributed to, among other things, building confidence in these children that prepared them for competitive encounters with peers from public schools in events such as science fairs and spelling bees. The Islamic school achieved high EQAO scores (See Appendix G), giving parents' confidence in the school's academic standing. School was

therefore not only a secular learning place but a holistic learning environment that supported cultural ethos and values while at the same time preparing children for competing and integrating with the secular world. The learning from home to school and community formed a circle of continuity that shaped and formed these children's identities

Language Choices and Diversity in Cultural Values and Teaching Styles

The families in this study challenged common literacy practices often emphasized in literacy education. Reading to children was not something these families did: although the children read storybooks out of their own passion, reading storybooks as not emphasized as a daily practice, and definitely not at bedtime. One thing that was done on a daily basis was homework, and parents were diligent in seeing that children completed their school tasks. Besides that, these children played at home during weekdays, attended extra hockey activities after school and cuddled with their parents at bedtime while listening to verses of Quran being played as they drifted to sleep. Reciting verses of the Quran was a literacy practice that was common in all three families. Yet within these three families, two Lebanese and one Iraqi, views of language maintenance varied with their circumstances and beliefs.

Language Maintenance in First Generation Arab Muslim Canadians

The literacy activities that these families engaged in were not anything out of the ordinary: like many bilingual families, they made language choices based on the influence of circumstances and cultural trends. Saba's husband, Mikail, being non-Arab, could not speak Arabic, and thus the family opted to use English as their home language. While Saba's family spoke predominantly in English, I found her switching to Arabic whenever she wanted to draw her children's attention. Code-switching for Saba served as an attention-getting tool when the children had crossed their limits in behaviour. Switching to Arabic meant she was upset and her

children realized that immediately. While her daughter spoke Arabic fairly well, Saba recognized that it was due to her daughter's own diligence in wanting to learn the language, whereas maintaining Arabic for the boys was difficult, especially because they did not use Arabic in communicating.

Kaifa's decision to speak only in Arabic at home occurred after seeing language attrition in her daughter while she was away on holiday for three weeks. Finding that her daughter, who had good command of Arabic, suddenly shifting to speaking English made Kaifa realize the challenges of maintaining the Arabic language in her home. Not sure of the bilingual challenges and implications of Majid's ADHD, she sought expert advice from her family pediatrician. Given the assurance that use of two languages would not have a significant impact on Majid's learning, Kaifa shifted to speaking Arabic with her children. Her decision was also influenced by her husband's concern over his language loss. Hamud, a first generation Canadian unable to speak Arabic due to the language practices of his bicultural parents, who privileged English, was determined that his children maintain Arabic. The dance between two languages in Kaifa's family was meant to encourage their children to speak in both languages, but the children responded mainly in English to both parents. Having made the decision to speak in Arabic, Kaifa began noticing that English translations were poor substitutes for the richness of original Arabic texts. This led her to further integrate her children with the Arab community to maintain the language.

Fatima on the other hand, was a new immigrant with good linguistic capital from Arab countries. Although her children studied in an English medium school in Dubai, the Arab environment allowed them to develop good Arabic language skills. She was therefore enthusiastic about maintaining her family's Arabic language, key to accessing their cultural

history and literature. However, she was cognizant of the challenges in maintaining Anisa's language from lack of support in school, and time limitations after school, in teaching her Arabic. As a new immigrant, Fatima showed a strong commitment to maintaining Arabic at home and hoping it would prevent complete language loss.

All the children in this study, except Anisa, spoke English but understood that maintaining Arabic was necessary in order to communicate with their grandparents. Maintaining the intergenerational link is of great value to Arab culture: the children were encouraged to respect their grandparents and one way of demonstrating respect was to communicate with them in Arabic, the language they spoke.

Maintaining home language was definitely a concern for these families, as was maintaining their cultural identity, but the fact that Arabic was linked to Islam gave further significance to maintaining Arabic.

English Language Use and Literacy Resources

The children spoke mainly in English, and literacy supports were also predominantly in English. These children read mostly English storybooks. When asked about dual language books, the parents had no idea that they existed. The only dual language material that children came across was the Quran, their Arabic textbooks and religious texts. Dual language Arabic books were not easily available and were few for older children. Checking the local public library, I was not able to find any dual language books for Grades 1 and up. When I asked the librarian about these books, he replied, "Newcomers should use ESL books and not dual language." Shocked by his lack of understanding, I looked through the library for these materials. On locating a handful of books, I found that the level of translation for young readers was either very basic or way above children's comprehension. When I shared these books with Saba, she too

found the English and its corresponding Arabic translation not of the same level . The Arabic translation was way too difficult for the designated age. Given that Arab families or schools do not commonly use dual language books, these books remain untapped as language resources. While reading was not a daily practice, the participants had varied reading material, preferences and habits. Majid preferred reading "boys only" books as he could not imagine reading "girly" stuff:

Researcher: Do you enjoy listening to stories or reading?

Majid: Like to read the book only if it is a boy book.

Researcher: Why are they scary girl books?

Majid: No. Only boy's books! No, I mean if there is a girl book, then I am not going to read it, and if you say it's a boy book then I am going to read it.

Researcher: Why?

Majid: Because I don't want to read a girly book.

Researcher: What's wrong in a girly book?

Majid: Because there may be a lot of Barbie stuff

Majid's strong opinion on gendered books could have been influenced by the distinct gender roles maintained in his home, and though he was not much of a reader, he had a clear opinion on what he preferred. On the other hand, Amir and Hani had no reservations about anything in particular, and their choices ranged from fiction to non-fiction and a series of illustrated books. Their bicultural background led to a wide range of reading materials. The children were also influenced by their father's passion for reading. While Saba supported her children's reading choices and constantly bought them books, she was particularly against any

fiction that involved crime. Coming from a war-torn country, she had strong principles of raising children without these experiences. Describing her children's literacy practices, she said,

> Zoha can read a book in a day if I don't yell at her. Ali is gotten there, quite a bit. If he likes a book he will read it through. So I think I have no problem taking them to buy books, having said that, only if they have completed reading the book…. So reading is something they have to be interested in. So if it going to be fiction, let it be fiction, as long as it doesn't involve violence, to me it has to be something that is, if it takes you out of... Fiction is nice as it brings about imagination. So you are reading and picturing in your head. You are reading and using your brains to do comprehension outside. You are thinking outside the box. Zoha is into poetry but Amir is not there yet.

Although I did not observe reading during my visits, the children shared and discussed their book collection with me. In both homes children had a literature collection that formed their own reading resource. Amir loved adventure books and had the Animal Spirit series while Hani was more into graphic books and loved the Diary of a Wimpy Kids series. They also had books with French words that put Hani off, as he couldn't read them yet. Saba mentioned that the children read at their own times and once they were done with reading these books she would take them to get more. Majid's book were mainly of sports such as hockey and soccer, subjects he enjoyed reading about. He was not into reading chapter books or any other kind of books.

Besides the collection of storybooks the children had, all these families subscribed to English and Arab satellite television. The Arab satellite provided the children with opportunities for watching Arabic cartoons or Arabic rhymes, while also giving the adults access to Arabic news and talk shows. Observing the families' television viewing habits, they watched very limited Canadian programming. While watching television was uncommon, the type of programs

that were allowed was limited. There were many programs that the parents didn't approve of because of language, violence and values. Saba had her older daughter supervise when the boys watched some television during weekends. More often than watching television, I found these children played sports when they had free time. Majid’s favorite home activity was playing soccer and hockey on his PlayStation, and in the holidays he watched sports most of the time. Sports were also popular with Amir and Hani. On my first visit to Hani and Amir’s house, Saba had to negotiate timings with Hani who agreed to sit with me for a while before he ran off to play. He then came in for some more time and then he went off again. He actually timed his in and out sessions. Whether these home practices relate to the fact that the participants were boys, I cannot be sure.

Fatima kept up with Arabic reading from the newspapers and magazines that she got from her Arabic grocery store. She brought these for her children, to practice their Arabic reading, and to keep abreast with what was happening in the Arab world. For English resources, she used the public libraries to borrow books. A frequent visitor to the library, she found that it was the best way to access books for her children. While the children got books from the library, there was no pressure to share reading time with their parents. Instead, they were free to read on their own. Similar to differences in reading patterns, parental views on school-related work also varied.

Parental Views on Literacy Learning

There were some common patterns in how the parents in this study handled learning and schoolwork. They strongly believed that children should work independently, and most of the children were left to work on their own and only sought help when needed. With the exception of Hani, who received constant attention from his mother, the others worked independently with

school homework. However, these mothers had different views of how children should be educated, and these views reflected the cultural heritage that they brought to Canada as Arabs. Saba felt that schools here didn't challenge the children as much as they should. Basing her thoughts on her own school days, she compared,

> Here it's different that the kids can express themselves much more, so it's like black and white answer. But I mean, it doesn't mean that back home was bad, I think it was very good too because it taught you how to be, I mean use your brain all the time. Here sometimes I find they don't give enough homework. I mean really none of the homework makes you smarter, I think homework just makes you more disciplined taking time and sort of breaking your day in a way that this is playtime and this is homework time. It is more of that kind of perspective than just coming to say "I have nothing else to do."

Although Saba favored more homework, she stuck to the homework sent from school and did not complement with extra work. For Saba the concept of homework helped in maintaining study discipline that was good for her children. Similarly, Fatima noticed the difference in the Canadian education system and opted to trust the experts at school to take charge of her children's progress. With a related but slightly different perspective on the Canadian system, Fatima said,

> Now the Canadian curriculum is a little similar to the American curriculum. I noticed a lot of difference between the British curriculum and the American curriculum or the Canadian curriculum. In the British curriculum they concentrated on grammar, spelling, in grade 1 they gave them 20 words everyday of spelling and they did spelling a lot, and with the grammar, they gave them words to write everyday. Each word was written 5 times or whatever you know so daily they had to write. Here I didn't see that. I noticed in

> British curriculum they learned more academically but when my kids moved here, they said we like the school here more because there is more playtime. I think she will tell you, you can ask her she will tell you the same. Immediately she will say here is nicer because we are playing a lot. They are showing us movies, they will give popcorn and look at movies, we are sitting on the floor…

Fatima noticed the relaxed approach in the Canadian education system but chose to leave it to the expert educators to take charge. She expressed,

> I always believe that the school is responsible how to educate people, a lot of people have been graduated, and my child will also graduate. I don't believe in giving opinion to professional one and I am not professional. Yah I do believe that how they rank, since their rank is good and since they have graduated a lot of people and a lot of kids, it means my kid will be fine, he or she will be fine and will be on the way.

Unlike Fatima, who left the school in charge of educating her children, Kaifa could not imagine allowing the school, especially public schools, to be responsible in teaching her children the right values regarding the sex curriculum. She found the mere concept of teaching children the sex curriculum to be unacceptable:

> Because I don't want to, I think they are too young; they should worry about kid stuff now and other stuff later. I don't want my daughter to come and ask me these questions, or even my son.

She was convinced that sending her children to Islamic school was the best decision she had made. With various approaches to school work, parents showed that they had their children's education needs at heart, wanting the best for them as each handled school work with their own understanding. Sharing experiences of war backgrounds and insecure countries, the key to

independence and advancement was education. However, it was clear that this pursuit would not occur at the risk of their beliefs. Belief was the underlying force that motivated these parents in making choices for their children's learning. And believing that children were a "gift from God" inspired responsibility for educating them in the right way.

Pedagogical Styles of Arab Educators

Arab educators teaching Arabic at Islamic school, and in private tutoring, followed teacher-centered approaches to learning. I am unable to comment on the Arabic school as I did not observe teachers there, but I observed Majid's private tutor who taught at the Arabic school. Most of these teachers were teachers in their country of origin or, in the case of the Arabic school, parent volunteers, who could speak and understand the Arabic language. Their pedagogical approach was teacher centered and contrasted with more mainstream student-centered approaches. These educators' views of teaching mirrored cultural expectations that children are to listen attentively without asking many questions.

However, Arabic learners varied in their language affiliation which in turn had implications for how these learners were taught. Commenting on the differences between first-language and second-language Arabic learners, the vice principal of the Arabic school commented that the school, cognizant of the varying levels of students' language skills, had separate curricula for first-language and second-language Arabic learners. First-language learners followed the curriculum of their home country, whereas second-language learners had a simplified curriculum to support learning. Amir and Hani, who enrolled in the second-language stream, still found the simplified curriculum quite difficult. The curriculum was not the only issue: the children noted different teaching approaches, their lack of understanding by being

taught only in Arabic, and their being with peers who were not familiar which all added to the complexity of Arabic learning.

The qualification of teachers further complicated matters. While teaching was a voluntary service at the Arabic school that provided support to community children, it was not easy to find Arabic teachers who would volunteer to teach every week. The school thus utilized the services of Arab speaking parents regardless of whether they were certified as teachers in Canada or not. Commenting on some of the challenges facing the school, the principal talked of children dropping out of Arabic school after grades 5 and 6, feeling they had learned enough. The children attending this school came from Arabic-speaking homes and were enrolled due to parental concerns around preserving their culture. Since all my participants were not yet in Grade 5, they showed no indication of wanting to quit school; however, commuting long distances to the Arabic school every Saturday was a deterring factor for Amir and Hani.

My observation of Majid with the Arabic tutor at his home also revealed that his tutor used a teacher-centered approach. Whether the time of day contributed to Majid's extremely short attention span, or the medication for his ADHD had worn off, or simply a teaching approach that called for his constant attention did not match is learning style, Majid found it very difficult to concentrate on his lesson. It probably didn't help that I was observing this lesson, as the tutor made repeated efforts to get Majid to read and respond. Because it was late in the evening, Majid could have been tired and not in a position to engage in any more learning. The tutor's teaching practice demonstrated Arab teaching culture as well, where students observed strict discipline in learning. Saba recalled,

> I remember the stress of having to learn something by heart and do it in front of the classroom and God forbid if you got it wrong, right? I mean, that's how we

> were brought up. Here it's different that the kids can express themselves much more so it's like black and white answer. But I mean it doesn't mean that back home was bad, I think it was very good too because it taught you how to be, I mean use your brain all the time

When I observed Majid in an Arabic class at his Islamic school, his response was totally different. In class, he answered most of the questions the teacher asked, and he worked quickly on the given assignment, demonstrating more Arabic knowledge than his peers. While the teacher's approach was similar to that of the Arabic tutor, she allowed for more freedom and permitted children to move around in class and approach her with any questions they had. Although the Arabic curriculum at Islamic school was highly content-based with less experiential activities that children could engage in, the teacher incorporated the school's ethos of inquiry-based learning as she entertained questions from students and allowed them to seek clarification whenever they needed.

Summary

In conclusion, the participants of this study came from middle class working families who reflected strong attachment to their belief values and culture. Their attachment to the Arabic language was firstly due to religious affiliation and then to their cultural origin. Religion was highly significant in the lives of these Arab Muslims, as it shaped the choices they made in their lives, including literacy and learning. Religion dictated the maintenance of strong family relationships that provided secure spaces for the children in their homes. Islamic school saw the continuity of these safe spaces, while also offering freedom of expression. Encouragement to believe in God was not limited to the houses, but was also fostered in the school and community, promoting a cycle of continuity in the development of these children. Whereas the small number

of participants in this study cannot be representative of the entire Arab Muslim population, the sample offers crucial common patterns, especially among Arab Shi'i Muslims. While these children did not come from high literacy-focused homes, nor did they receive exceptional parental support in literacy or storybook practices in their early years, they did not fall into the group of low achievers cited in McKell (2010). Their success plays a significant role in helping educators understand the challenges facing Arab Muslim children in TDSB schools and deserves careful examination.

CHAPTER 6

LITERACY LEARNING FROM A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The previous chapter presented ethnographic findings on two Lebanese families and one Iraqi family. These findings respond to my main research question: How is literacy constructed in the homes of Arab Muslim families? This construction is presented from a social and cultural perspective and categorized under the themes of: Linguistic culture and religion*,* Social worlds and identity, and Language choices and teaching styles. Sociocultural theories (Street, 1993; Lantolf, 2000) framed the premise with which I entered this research, guiding the way I looked at culture and social contexts and helping me to identify crucial factors of home literacy practices. Within this framework, aspects such as linguistic practices, families' beliefs and language choices helped formulate thematic codes in the data collected from field notes, participant observations and interviews. Whereas ethnographic data is typically derived from long engagement with fieldwork (Clifford, 1997), my engagement with the Arab Muslim families in this study did not follow this example; rather, I moved in and out of the field, working around the schedules and availability of the families. Nonetheless, under the principles of ethnography, I was able to engage with these families in such a way as to develop an understanding of their linguistic practices and beliefs.

Exploring linguistic culture, the first theme, Linguistic culture and religion*,* responded to research questions one and two. Question one looked at the construction of literacy in the homes of these Arab Muslim families and the kind of literacy practices children engaged in, while question two identified the role of Arabic and Quran in these families' practices. Practices documented within this first theme highlight the importance of the Arabic language, engagement with Quranic literacy, the culture of oral tradition, and literacy choices made. The second theme,

Social worlds and identity, demonstrated the way children negotiated home and school literacy, given that the values and beliefs of their homes shaped their worldview and identity. For me, self-identity in the life of an individual is, to a large extent, shaped through ongoing exchanges with other family members who share beliefs, morals, and rituals. This theme answered the fifth research question: How do Arab Muslim children navigate between home and school literacy? Values and beliefs, as observed by these families, exposed how these children thought, expressed themselves and behaved, and how these beliefs continued in the safe environment of their Islamic school. The third theme, Language choices and teaching styles, helped respond to research questions three and four in addressing the role of English in the home of Arab Muslim children and the language preference of parents/children. This theme raised important questions about how literacy learning within diverse communities can be different from the dominant approach yet still be valid literacy engagement.

I began this investigation with the goal of understanding why Arab students were underachieving in TDSB schools, and that led me to formulate my basic research question: how is literacy constructed in Arab Muslim homes? While the research context shifted from public to private (Islamic) school, my emphasis on how these children performed at school remained. Having said this, I had little insight into how these students performed in Islamic schools, and the shift prompted me to look critically at Islamic schools as alternative schooling. New questions emerged, such as why parents opted for the Islamic environment and the provisions offered at the Islamic school compared to those existing at TDSB schools. Although the sample of participants hailed from private school instead of public school, it did not alter the focus of my investigation, that is, to highlight the practice and acquisition of literacy at home. While the proposal for this ethnographic study was to be at the homes of the participants, the parent of one participant

requested that, since her schedules were very tight, I would benefit from observing him at school, too. Throughout this research, my goal was to understand, using a sociocultural lens (Gregory, 2004; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993;Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Vygotsky, 1987), how literacy was constructed within social contexts and to observe how adults worked on and contributed to shaping their children's literacy knowledge.

Factors that populated my data about how these families engaged with literacy were derived from observations, interviews and conversations held in the home and school context. The previous chapter aimed to generate a more focused discussion of the literacy practices that dominated these Arab Muslim homes, and to describe factors that helped shape these practices. In this chapter, my findings generate three areas of discussion in response to my research focus on how literacy is constructed in Arab Muslim homes: the first area, investing in the Arabic Language, addresses how these families empowered their children in learning their home language. Describing the significance of Arabic in the lives of Arab Muslim families, this theme describes how parents' invested time and effort in teaching this language. The second area, the centrality of religion, highlights religious beliefs and cultural values in the social contexts of home, school and community of Arab Muslim families. Within these contexts, the data revealed religious and cultural values that influenced children's thoughts, expressions and beliefs, and shaped their worldview. The school contexts fostered continuity with home practices, offering children freedom to express and practice their belief in God. The third area of discussion, no single approach to literacy learning, looks at the practices and attitudes of these families towards literacy learning. The discussion reveals differences between the literacy practices of these families and dominant approaches popular in the mainstream. Although the popular culture of storybook reading and exposure to print in early years has received great emphasis in the

mainstream, these practices were not common within these Arab cultural groups, groups which preferred other literacy practices for their children.

This chapter also aims to link the findings to my literature review, with a special focus on religion and cultural issues and the value of safe spaces. In conclusion, this chapter will present the implications of these findings.

Investing in the Arabic Language

My research purpose was to better understand Arab student underachievement by focusing on how literacy is constructed in the social and cultural contexts of Arab Muslim homes. Understanding what language learning means to these families and how this practice is developed in their homes responds to my research purpose, namely, how literacy is constructed in these contexts. My observations revealed that these homes were highly invested in maintaining their home language, Arabic, as it gave them access to religious as well as cultural affiliations. Knowing Arabic was a privilege that accorded them cultural heritage as well as their Muslim identity. While parents did not neglect supporting their children in English learning, concentrated effort was observed in teaching Arabic.

Parents invested time in private tutoring, after school and extracurricular support to ensure the preservation of their children's Arabic language abilities. Fatima left academic learning to the teachers but invested time in supporting Anisa's Arabic learning at home using the textbooks she brought from the UAE. Similarly, Kaifa showed concern about preserving Arabic and insisted on speaking Arabic with her children in order to reinforce their Arab and Muslim identity. While experiences of using Arabic varied widely according to family structures and parental knowledge of the language, all parents made great efforts to provide support for Arabic language learning. Arabic is a language that is not only used by 256 million in the Arab

world but shared with over a billion people globally who use Arabic for religious and cultural affiliation. Regardless of ethnic affiliations, most Arab speaking families care about their Arabic heritage (Sehlaoui, 2008).

For Arab immigrants who come to Canada, maintaining home language is one way of preserving ties with their home countries. The Arabic language has an idiosyncratic religious dimension, as it is the language of the Quran and privileged in Islam. Participants of this study faced two dilemmas: one of juggling cultural and religious identities, and the other of learning Standard Arabic and speaking colloquially. Maintaining Arabic therefore linked them to their homeland, their culture, and their identity as Arabs and as Muslims. Although these children spoke mainly in English, they learned Arabic in after-school activities and listened to English and Arabic lectures at their community centers.

The juxtaposing of children's home and community practices in two languages demonstrates that language learning is inseparable from the social contexts of home, school and community (Dagenais & Day 1999). Even though Cummins (2001) suggests that children's cultural and linguistic experience at home forms the foundation for future learning and develops flexibility in their thinking, it was evident that these participants' struggles with Arabic would lead to language loss at some point. Language retention of bilingual children has been attributed to many factors, commonly including: the extent of language use outside the school (Cummins, 2001); opportunities in practicing language; as well a strong home policy of language use. When children cannot maintain language use and begin responding in English when spoken to in the home language, language loss is inevitable (Sehlaoui, 2008). Whereas these issues were unavoidable in Saba's and Kaifa's families due to bicultural marriages, it is arguable that Arabic language loss in Arab Muslim families takes a different form. The duality of language

construction in Standard and colloquial form makes it difficult for learners to keep up with this dichotomy. Research on bilingual literacy suggests that children with bilingual backgrounds can transfer their skills when learning a new language (Cummins, 2001; Moll, 2007). Cummins (2001) suggests that home language and second language are strongly interdependent, and that promoting home language proficiency helps promote overall conceptual development as well as other forms of academic knowledge. Although this theory may be applicable across other languages, Arabic has its own particularities: specifically, the dynamics of diglosssia within the Arabic language poses challenges for language users. Acknowledging this dualistic nature of Arabic learning, parents described similar challenges that they faced when learning the language. However, having grown up in the Middle East, Saba, Kaifa and Fatima learned to use Standard Arabic easily by talking to people, and they felt that their children were disadvantaged in this aspect. While Cummins' (2001) theory suggests that acquiring first language competency helps in transferring skills to second language learning, the diglossia within Arabic hinders the learning process to the point that Standard Arabic becomes a semi-developed language because language development rests on its functional use and engagement with language materials.

Maintaining and developing language require constant exposure to literacy practices such as reading, writing, exposure to print, and oral conversations. These families had limited resources to support home language acquisition. The principal Arabic resources were Quranic text, books of Du'as (supplications), Arabic textbooks and Arabic TV channels. In addition, teaching Arabic in an English dominant society differs significantly from teaching English in an English dominant society. These children had no Arabic storybooks or dual-language books; their engagement with print was mainly from reading the Quran and Du'a books. It would be easy for language researchers to disregard these homes as lacking relevant Arabic literacy exposure.

However, as I looked closely, it was evident that their ways of acquiring Arabic differed from English learning, and the linguistic engagement of literacy practices varied in Arabic learning. These children mainly learned Arabic from Arabic cartoons, *nasheeds* (poetry), their Arabic textbooks and listening to lectures. Writing in Arabic was not common, so they were more inclined to oral learning. From an English language learning perspective, this approach to learning Arabic may seem incomplete, lacking crucial components such as reading fluency, sentence construction and comprehension practice. Yet for these Arab Muslims, this way was their way of learning, an approach they learnt and continued with. For instance Fatima's concern with having access to Arab history and religious knowledge was only possible through reading in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and if the children would not read in Arabic, then all history would be lost. Arabic was required for accessing Arabic cultural capital, and also gave access to works of supplication that ascribed much of their religious affiliation (Yazigy, 1994). While Modern Standard Arabic differed from Classical Quranic Arabic, there were overlaps that were common in the language. Thus, for these families, knowing Arabic meant access to a different world that was profound and personal. As Saba explained, "the benefit of Quran is infinite."

The dance between the Arabic language and the language of Quran formed the landscape of Arabic learning in these families. In addition, the focus on learning Quran revolved around reading, memorizing and listening to Quranic verses. Given that Amir, Hani and Majid were all born in Canada, one might assume that the impact of the Quran, which is normally heard in mosques and shops in the Middle East, would be less prominent and their attachment to the Quran would be less obvious. On the contrary, in the absence of the Islamic environment of the Middle East, their parents made concerted efforts to re-enforce religious values (Berns McGown, 1999, Zine, 2001) in this non-Muslim environment. Parents could not achieve this task on their

own, and community support became vital in realizing it. The sense of community in Islam supports believers in achieving well-being (Halstead, 2004). Thus, communities provide support not only by teaching Quran reading but also provide lectures on understanding Quran and hold competitions to promote fluency in Quranic recitation.

While some educators perceive that engaging in the competitive exercise of memorizing the Quran is an Islamic Middle Eastern tradition, it was not surprising that this practice was also prevalent in the western world. What was surprising was the families' commitment to engaging in this exercise, too. Competing with adults at the community center, Mikail became his children's role model in memorizing the Quran. Memorization, which has been an age-old tradition within Muslim communities, has drawn little, if any, attention among mainstream literacy practices. With little research conducted on the significance of memorization, its relevance remains unknown. Mohamed Ghilan, a neuroscientist, links memorization to Muslims' improved thinking and numerous scientific discoveries in the golden age of Islam (Abdul-Majied, 2013). His research suggests that the careful attention given to listening, recall and pronunciation stimulates an area of the brain in the temporal lobe: the memory consolidation center. The more the temporal lobe is activated, such as during the process of memorizing of the Holy Quran, the better and more efficient it becomes in its capacity for learning and memory. Similar research by Susanne Jaeggi (Begley, 2012) at the University of Michigan found that short-term memory training such as memorization and memory drills have shown to boost and improve intelligence based on neuroimaging clues. The Arab Muslim participants had no indication of this cognitive benefit, but they had a strong conviction that memorizing Quran provided infinitely more benefits than simple literacy engagement. Not only did they value the Quran, Amir and Majid held it with high respect.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the whole experience of the Quran for Muslims remains to this day an auditory experience first, and only secondarily is it associated with reading in the ordinary sense (McAuliffe, 2003). An auditory reality heard and memorized in addition to the written text, the Quran touches the deepest chords of the souls of the faithful (Nasr, as cited in Scriber & Cole, 1981). Over centuries, oral tradition has played an important role in the Islamic education system where it is believed that the heart preserves true knowledge. It is possible that parents leaned towards an Islamic environment for their children's education as it supported oral traditional practices. Arabic has an idiosyncratic religious dimension, as Classical Arabic is the language of the Quran and Modern Standard Arabic is the language of Islam. Abandoning Arabic would mean forsaking religion and culture, and giving up one's history (Lindsey, 2012). In these homes where Islamic traditions were observed and where Arabic and Quranic literacy were highly valued and meaningful, the Arabic language was interwoven into their landscape. Even the art on the walls reflected Arabic texts depicting culture and religion. (See Appendix I, J, K)

The Centrality of Religion

My research purpose was to also investigate how children navigated between home and school literacy. The findings of this study confirmed a core pattern of religious beliefs informing the choice of literature children accessed, the language used and practices that were acceptable to their culture. Similar to what has been cited in the literature, I found that religion informed the decisions the families made in their day to day life (Halstead, 2004; Sarroub, 2002b; Sehlaoui, 2008; Shalabi, 2010). However, while most of the existing research addresses how religion intertwines in the lives of Muslims and influences their decisions, rarely does it discuss how religion influences and shapes literacy culture. My ethnographic research provides insight into

the religious culture, values and practices that influence children's literacy choices, thoughts, and writings to form their worldview.

From the onset of my observations, I realized that my participants and their parents were passionate about their religious beliefs and values. Yet religion can never be a purely individual affair because individual development cannot take place without regard to the social environment in which it occurs. Therefore the decisions families made in preserving their values affected literacy choices, after school activities, social engagement for themselves and their children. Being spiritually conscious translated into vetting the television programs children watched, the summer camps they could attend, the books they read, the after school activities they engaged in and the friends they associated with. This consciousness not only affected children's activities but also influenced how they interacted with elders, grandparents and teachers. Against the backdrop of Islamic ethics, respect was encouraged in the way children interacted and expressed themselves in their home, school and community environments. For example, being conscious of right and wrong prompted Amir and Hani to question my reporting skills in this research. They could not understand the freedom of documenting my views about them as an ethnographer and to what extent the data reported would be accurate and valid. Their intriguing question was "how will your professor know that what you have written and the pictures taken are truly about us and not taken from the internet?" Majid demonstrated similar awareness when he expressed concern about the challenges his sister would face wearing her hijab if she went to public school. It seemed that the participants' thoughts constantly went through a right and wrong filter as they viewed the environment around them. This mindfulness was also observed with the parents. For example, one of the reasons why Kaifa enrolled Majid in the after school soccer program was in order to prevent him getting into drugs as he grew older. Being consciously aware of right and

wrong was also a factor deterring bullying in the Islamic school. The explanation of bullying as taking away someone's rights informed the children as to how it could affect their relationships at school. Also the Islamic literacy books that were at school highlighted aspects of values and morality (See Appendix E).

Cognizant of the difference between Islamic and Western conceptions of ethical values, the families in this study expressed concern with having balance in their lives by seeking a middle path for their children. Yet, even though parents longed for balance, the ways of the secular world were becoming more and more challenging, and what balance looked like was not constant. Their experiences in engaging with the social world beyond their own home-school-community nexus informed their view of balance. They realized that "fitting in" meant making adjustments aligned with their beliefs, yet at the same time congruent with mainstream social worlds. Wanting the best for their children, parents in this study recognized the challenges that existed in observing Muslim values in this society, yet at the same time felt apprehensive in isolating their children from Western culture. Aware of the popularity of drugs and alcohol in mainstream society, Kaifa made an early decision to immerse Majid in sports as a means of deterring any chances of idle time that could lead to addiction. Meanwhile, Saba, a working mother with more experience in engaging with the mainstream world, looked for ways to accommodate her children within safe parameters in this social world. Wanting her children to grow up feeling part of the same society as their peers and not being left out, Saba evaluated the parameters and appropriateness of the activities her children could engage in, like going to the cinema, and allowed the activities within reasonable boundaries.

Maintaining this balanced life involved making difficult choices. In a society where the majority do not openly practice religion, being a practicing person stands out profoundly. The

choice to practice publicly is a difficult one, as it often means alienation, and many times means walking the path alone. Understanding that the decisions parents make for their children are difficult ones, places like community centers and Islamic school offer opportunities for children to be among similar people with the same values and allow them to freely assimilate and practice their religion. From a Muslim perspective, I understand why these choices are important, yet the reality is that not every practicing Muslim has these safe zones. The pressure of assimilation that surrounds minority groups such as Arab Muslims requires willpower and strength to resist the isolation brought about mainly by misconceptions of Islam spread by the media. Maintaining a Muslim identity in this climate of hate for Muslims has become extremely hard. While, for a Muslim, practicing faith is a normal way of life, standing up for one's beliefs and rights in the current climate requires conviction as one is easily termed as "fanatic" or "religious." In a society where the normal tendency is not to disclose one's faith, practicing Muslims stand out sharply.

These Arab families valued their Muslim identity and wanted their children to grow up feeling good about their faith. In contrast to the views of some, who feel that the gulf between secularity and religion is too wide to reconcile (Nasr, 1987; Zine, 2001), these parents were cognizant of these challenges and looked for ways to find balance, that is, the space in between, as they negotiated their integrated identity. Individuals construct and negotiate multiple identities in sociocultural contexts (Rogoff, 2003), and these identity formations and expressions change depending on the way ethnicity and religious affiliation are valued and viewed within specific contexts (Schachter, 2005; Yon, 2000).

While home and community helped construct these identities, parents were aware that time children spent at school that further contributed in shaping their identity. Therefore, school

had to be a place of maintaining their Muslim and Arab identity. These parents expressed fear that their children would assimilate into a melting pot or lose their cultural heritage and identity altogether if they were to attend public school. The kind of language children used in public school and the sex curriculum proposed by the Ontario Ministry of Education in particular were disturbing factors for Kaifa and detrimental to the values she held based on her faith and culture. Having frank and open discussion on sexuality was not something Kaifa was comfortable with, and she felt that it was disrespectful to engage in any kind of these discussions. Issues such as Islamaphobia and bullying were Saba's concern, but the children, too, had their own opinions of a non-Islamic school environment. Majid expressed fear that his sister would become a victim of Islamaphobia if she wore a hijab. Amir talked of bullying being rampant in public schools. Many Muslim children have been targets of attacks and scrutiny in recent decades, and have often faced bullying and hostile behaviors from peers in the school context. Research shows that Muslim children have not only been victims of peers' attacks, but have also faced discrimination from teachers and school personnel (Abo-Zena, Sahli & Tobias-Nahi, 2009; Bayoumi, 2009; Kahf, 2006; Zine, 2001). Religious identity may seem unrelated to schooling, yet it is dynamic. Religious identity impacts thinking and feelings, especially of minority students, and can result in intimidation from others and eventual withdrawal.

Religious identity, like any other aspect of identity closely interwoven with context, is shaped by the accumulation of experiences. As described by a minority youth,

> "Identity building in cultural and social places is not a one-time process, but involves continual negotiation and renegotiation between children and schools." (Nasir, 2004, p. 155)

Being vigilant about what their children could do and where they could participate was a

continuous role that parents of this study played. Their religious values informed the choices they made. Which summer camps they enrolled their children in, what television shows children watched, which events they participated in, how respect was rendered to family members, teachers and adults were all guided by their religious parameters. With the understanding that they were accountable to God, parents made concerned choices for their children as they struggled to maintain balance between secular and religious domains. These decisions influenced the children's way of thinking and understanding the world, as observed in several instances during the study. Amir and Hani trained to recognize right from wrong, questioned my integrity in genuinely presenting their pictures of Quran memorization and not faking photos from the internet. They were curious to know how my professor would know that the pictures presented were from the actual participants. In addition, Majid's statement that he could not read *girlie* books reflects the gender segregation that is common practice in Islamic culture and might also be reflected in Canadian culture. Similarly, the children were aware that taking away someone's rights was against religious practices, and thus their perspective on bullying was informed by observing religious practices. Additionally, by taking Christmas gifts to their non-Muslim teachers, Hani and Amir demonstrated cultural values that all teachers deserve honor and respect, irrespective of their religious affiliation. These examples reflected the underlying belief system prevalent within these families. In a culturally disparate environment, maintaining values crucial to their identity would have been a struggle, especially without the support of Islamic school. The families' beliefs and ways of thinking influenced their literacy learning and the way the children thought, wrote, read and processed information. In order to nurture these integrated identities, it became important to seek an environment where their children could be educated in a way that allowed them to be successful in terms of provincial curricular expectations without

having to remove God from their learning and understanding.

Practicing religion for Muslims cannot be a private affair since, for Muslims, God exists everywhere and is not limited to particular spaces. Belief in God is central to Muslim lives and restricting it to specified spaces of homes and community centers suggests breaking laws. To illustrate this consciousness, Muslims are required to be observant of God's commands such as praying and fasting, and to practice them. Prayers cannot only happen at home; when prayer times fall in the middle of work or school time, one cannot ignore this period, especially during the winter, when days are shorter. For Muslim students praying in school is not an option but is necessary especially when daylight timings are shorter. As one student describes, prayer is a meeting with the creator that one cannot afford delaying (Abo-Zena, Sahli & Tobias-Nahi 2009).

Muslims have met with constant scrutiny and negative profiling when practicing religion in public places. Incidences of confrontation have increased since September 11 and in the wake of ISIS. For instance, in a recent report, three Muslim siblings were removed from an airplane because their phone had Arabic writing (Grierson, 2016). Recognizing this hostility as religious discrimination, parents wanted their children to feel confident about being Muslims. Saba wanted her children not to be apologetic for their faith, and to grow up feeling confident as Muslims. Similar to Saba's sentiments are the experiences of Muslim students who have had to feel guilty about crimes committed by those under the name of Islam and have had to explain the motives of these crimes (Khan, 2009).

In the search for safe spaces to practice faith, the community center became an ideal place where these families could worship and socialize with members of their faith, further their knowledge of Islam, and listen to lectures from the Quran that connected them in their day-to-

day lives. Parents were able to worship alongside their children. Mikael attended the Friday prayer at the mosque attached to the community center where Hani and Amir went to school. Arab Muslims fear that Western society and its ethical underpinnings are eroding their cultural values (Haddad, 1994), and look upon their communities to provide support in raising their children. Reflecting Ogbu's (1982) view of cultural differences, community centers were places that offered accommodation without assimilation. These families were closely connected with their community centers. They invested time in taking their children to mosque and community center often, even if it meant driving forty-five minutes from Mississauga, daily, during Ramadhan, as Fatima did. Commenting on this effort, Fatima stated that Anisa would get to pray with the congregation and have an opportunity to be of service to the community. Similarly, Mikail regularly went to mosque with Amir and Hani and would then engage them in discussion about the lecture they had heard. Between mosque, community center, and school, these families felt at home in these spaces that offered them a sense of security in the practice of their faith. The desire for safe and secure spaces where children could freely practice their faith without intimidation led these families to choose an Islamic school for their children.

Success in literacy education has been attributed to socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity, but little attention has been given to practices that are meaningful to people's values and beliefs about home literacy. A sociocultural perspective promotes literacy as part of culture, and the ways in which people practice literacy reflect what they value and do (Street, 1993). Studies that have investigated relationships between home literacy and the development of literacy skills (Dickinson & Tabors, 1991; Heath, 1983; Mason, 1992; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) have suggested that home literacy measures relate to literacy achievement at school. It is therefore important that educators consider how religious values influence families' literacies

and practices.

Islamic School: The Context for Safe Spaces

Private Islamic school is an expensive choice for parents (Greenberg, 2012). Fees of $5000 per child and higher are not cheap, especially when one has more than one child attending. Although the participating parents longed for moral vitality, they were also looking for academic excellence. For example, Saba wanted her children to perform well in all areas, as she was concerned about their holistic development.

Islamic school was a context where children had freedom of expression of their identity, a place where they could freely talk and write about God without fear of being intimidated. The school also incorporated God and ethical principles in planning their themes. Various aspects of the curriculum had God incorporated into them, with teachers trained to recognize this connection in the curriculum. An example of this understanding was in Majid's science class, where a non-Muslim teacher taught the life cycle of the butterfly and made reference to it as one of God's creations. Also emphasized was the reminder to children to be respectful of each other's rights and to maintain discipline to please God. Drawing examples from Islamic literature informed lessons for the children. For example, Prophet Yusuf's story from the Quran was used to illustrate bullying and the fact that it took only one bystander sibling to save the bullied. Parents felt secure having their children surrounded with principles that conformed to their home values. Saba was relieved that the school catered for children's prayers during school hours. Not that she wanted the school to take over her parenting role, but it gave her comfort to know that it was taken care of during school time. Voicing similar sentiments, Kaifa felt that just being in an Islamic setting sensitized her children to Islamic culture. In addition to reconstructing the curriculum to include connections to the Divine, the school offered Arabic language and Islamic

studies as part of their curriculum that complemented basic teachings of Islam. While one may consider freedom to practice faith as a minor issue, it impacted the worldview of these children and affected their thoughts, writings, and practices. Helping to maintain cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2003), the Islamic setting provided a continuity between the literacy practices and values that the children were raised with at home and that which the school offered, giving them a sense of security of belonging to a group and having a common identity (Haddad, 1994).

In the Islamic school, these children found themselves in the majority compared to the minority they would have been in public schools. They felt at home among peers and educators of similar culture, values and beliefs, which promoted their sense of belonging and celebrated their Muslim identities. The educators in the school were familiar with the children's cultures and did not have to learn about them in order to put knowledge of the children's culture to pedagogical use (Cazden & Mehan, 1989). Unlike Ogbu's (1982) cultural ecology perspective that suggests cultural differences cause students to experience discontinuity when moving between home and school, going to the Islamic school was in fact the opposite for these children. They found educators from a similar cultural background as their own, educators who knew exactly how to take their practices further. Colleagues who had a better understanding of the children's cultural capital supported educators who were not Muslims. Kaifa looked upon the vice principal as a role model for her son and wished that her son would spend more time with him so that he could benefit from his training. McNaughton (2001) asserts that families value similar ways of acting and forms of knowledge, and that providing families and schools with a better match, one that focuses on continuity between aspects of discourse and pedagogy, helps them to bring out the best in children.

Critics may argue that lack of religious pluralism inhibits the spirit of free debate; however,

Zine (2008) challenges the idea that public schools genuinely promote different cultures and asserts that they tend to constrain diversity by promoting Eurocentric knowledge in a hegemonic way. The Islamic school provided a means of preserving culture and resisting total assimilation, while at the same time protecting children from drugs, gangs, violence and racial and religious discrimination (Al-Jabri, 1995; Zine, 2001). Children did not have to struggle or combat Islamophobic experiences, take responsibility for what other so-called Muslims did, or explain on their behalf (Suleiman, 2001). These children were free and safe in their own environment. Majid could express his feelings of reverence about the Prophet in his journal writing. Similarly, Hani felt free to write about his trip to Mecca as one of his best experiences. Incorporating home values and beliefs helped preserve cultural continuity in these children's lives. Although one may contend that such schools promote hegemonic bias in a way similar to public schools, I would argue that having the privilege and freedom of voicing and documenting one's belief within safe spaces without fear of intimidation is an ingredient for achievement, and as educators we need to consider how these schools impact children's learning. The need to investigate how religious based schools support ethnic minority children's success is an area for further investigation.

Seen as an ideal context for maintaining culture, the Islamic school represented an institution that fostered the education of children within their cultural frame of reference. Ogbu (1993) defines the cultural frame of reference as "the correct way of behaving within a culture, attitudes, beliefs, preferences and practices considered appropriate for members of the culture" (p. 490). Majid's knowledge that his sister was safe wearing the hijab in school, the fact that Kaifa did not have to worry about the kind of improper language used in schools, and Saba's affirmation that her children would not have to apologize for their beliefs demonstrate the religious and cultural practices that Islamic school allowed in practicing their faith and culture.

Failure to understand the cultural backgrounds of minority students has led to social crisis, as students have shown a lack of response to schooling culture. Philips (1976) argues that minority children are not culturally deprived, but rather are placed in culturally different environments, and that they do not acquire the style of learning required by mainstream schools. Discontinuities of home and community experiences occur mainly in language and thought, and are important cognitive consequences of schooling (Ogbu, 1982). The children in this study found acceptance in cultural and linguistic knowledge at their school. Majid could practice his Arabic in class while Amir and Hani could exercise their memorization skills with their peers. Reinforcing cultural significance, the school celebrated significant days such as *Meraj*[9] in their assembly, and on special days such as *Eid, Laylatul Qadr* and *Ashura*, it remained closed. Within this Muslim school environment, they had educators who constructed positive relationships through shared cultural understanding and close links to their families. In the Arabic community center, families met with educators and socialized. However, while socializing with educators at the community center extends the feeling of belonging, it also has its challenges. For example, families who experience problems with certain educators at school may find it uncomfortable socializing with the same people at the community level.

The Islamic school offered opportunities for students to explore their heritage identities that co-existed within their learning and curriculum. Having the ability to practice home and community experiences without having to separate the two, these children were able to make the most of living in their "simultaneous worlds" (Kenner, 2004; Kenner & Ruby, 2012). Their achievement was evident from their report cards, and, as Saba expressed, "alhamdulillah [praise be to God] they are doing well". Faith was instrumental in driving performance, but cultural

[9] The day the Prophet of Islam was taken to the skies

continuity and safe spaces were also contributing factors to this success. Given the paucity of research on faith-based schools and their contribution to learning success, the key in driving their success remains unidentified. Researchers working in Muslim communities point to various aspects that they believe contribute to learning success. Rosowsky (2008) (in observing a Mirpuri-Punjabi community in Northern England) attributes success to self-esteem fostered through knowledge of liturgical literacy. Similarly, Moore (2006) identified high levels of decoding abilities and oral reading fluency from Quranic schooling in Ohio. Using a sociocultural perspective, Sarroub (2010) pins success and failure on cultural and religious differences and socioeconomic status among Arab Muslim families. All these factors deserve further study so as to help understand, for instance, why a performance index of Islamic schools in Ontario shows that Islamic schools have an excellent academic success rate as defined by standardized tests. It is worth noting that while maintaining spiritual connection, these schools have also excelled academically (see Appendix G).

No Single Approach to Literacy Learning

In following my research focus on understanding how literacy is constructed in homes, I was obliged to look beyond what literacy practices actually occur and to consider how literacy practices were approached. In previous sections, the discussion highlighted how cultural and religious practices permeated the sociocultural domains of the children. This section alludes to literacy construction at home and looks at the pedagogical styles of the educators of these children. The last three decades have seen researchers increasingly acknowledge the importance of literacy education's sociocultural context. Heath (1983) examined how community practices influenced language and learning. Barton and Hamilton (2000) supported the notion that literacy is a social practice acquired through the process of informal learning and sense making. Given

this view, literacy is not merely a matter of learning how to read and write, but rather the ways in which children learn and participate through active engagement in various domains of their lives, such as homes, schools and communities.

Literacy engagement in these Arab Muslim homes reflected the kind of literacy that ordinary households engage in. Yet what is *ordinary* in the milieu of the multicultural society currently prevailing in Ontario remains to be defined. These children watched television, played video games, had English storybooks and were bilingual. Reading materials were available in their homes; however, reading patterns varied in each home. Homework was revered and done diligently but, beyond that, children played and spent time interacting and doing things with parents as a family. Family relationships were vibrant in these homes, as parents engaged children in cultural ways of literacy. Amir and Hani's dad, Mikail, engaged in memorization contests to support his children's engagement. Mikail also often took his sons to mosque for prayers and listening to lectures. After listening to these lectures, normally an hour long, Mikail discussed the lecture with his children and provided further explanation to them. Mikail had a good selection of novels, and the boys looked up to his selection as an inspiration for them to develop their reading skills. Participants in this study also played sports together with their fathers. Majid, whose activities revolved around sports, received support from his father, who was a soccer coach, as he trained him about the rules and regulations of the game. Majid was well conversant with these rules and could spell them out for you. On the other hand, Amir and Hani could tell you what the Imam of the mosque related during his sermons. Do all these events reflect literacy? Alternatively, do they seem devoid of literacy? In Street's (1993) view, these events involve rich engagement with each other that forms the root of social practice in literacy. Yet such views of literacy have received little, if any, recognition from the mainstream. As

parents spent time and played with their children, these families epitomized stable homes, where children were blessings from God. While success in children's learning is often linked to socioeconomic status, little attention has been paid to parental attachment and responsiveness, a factor that also contributes to children's learning (Schneider, Keesler & Morlock, 2010). Increasingly, research is demonstrating that emotional involvement of both mothers and fathers and the time spent together contributes to children's well-being, emotional stability and cognitive development (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; van Wel, Linssen & Abma, 2000). A comprehensive study of the American education system involving 3,000 schools and over 600,000 students has shown children who grow up in stable and well-resourced families have significant advantage over their peers, demonstrating that family background has strong correlation with performance (Egalite, 2016).

The families in this research study demonstrated high levels of social engagement within both nuclear and extended families. Families engaged in literacy events culturally shaped by their social relationships. Through ongoing exchange with other family members who shared similar knowledge, beliefs, morals and rituals, they influenced and transmitted cultural capital in their connectedness. The family milieu, being the most significant sociocultural context, socializes, represents and transmits literacy. For instance, these children understood that communicating with grandparents in English is rude and to show respect for their status they, the children, had to converse in Arabic. Parents, too, showed deference to grandparents needs as did the children. Saba installed the Arabic channel for her parents so that they would have access to Arabic news when they visited occasionally. Likewise, Kaifa and her children often travelled to Ottawa on PA days to be with her parents. Mikail's mother was a frequent visitor at his house and would be available to care for the children when Mikail was out of town. During festival

times such as Eid, families gathered and shared meals together. Maintaining family relationships as part of Islamic culture helped transmit cultural values to the children such as interaction patterns, interdependence and cultural knowledge.

The children in this study listened to and processed information that resonated with their oral heritage tradition, more often than they read books. Parents talked and related events and information that were pertinent to their needs. Critical of the trend of using nothing but print material for literacy engagement, Saba felt that schools should also adopt oral discussions of reading instead of writing reports. She believed that this approach would be much more relevant. Oral pedagogy included memorization and nasheeds that were in praise of God. Listening was a great skill that parents helped develop. Besides listening to nasheeds, children listened to verses of Quran and sermons in the mosque. While these practices featured God in them, so did the art and calligraphy that decorated their walls. When on vacation, nature reminded them of God. Their supplications were directed to God. It is no exaggeration to say that the heritage and lifestyle that formed an underlying value of their Islamic culture had God embedded in it. Describing Islamic culture, Hodge and Nadir (2008) state, “life is seen as a holistic experience in which the spiritual informs all aspects of existence” (p. 320).

Because parents were conscious of cultivating Islamic spirit, Islamic school was a good choice for protecting their children’s spiritual and educational needs. Sending the children to a private Islamic school was not cheap, yet parents felt it was a necessary part of their duty in raising their children. Sending children to Islamic school was not just the parents’ decision; rather, parents were often encouraged by leaders at the mosque to consider an Islamic environment for their children’s education so that they could uphold religion at all times. Amidst the stereotyping that occurred in public schools when students observed religious and cultural

practices, the Islamic school was perceived as providing a safer zone for educating Muslim children. Mothers felt at ease with these safe surroundings. Mothers in Muslim communities have an integral role in transferring, sustaining and cultivating the religious and cultural identities of the families (Shalabi, 2010). These parents did not consider Islamic school to be merely an academic institution, but rather saw it as taking over some of their parenting role in nurturing consciousness of Islamic duties such as praying, developing a spirit of giving and being part of community. Saba's concern about supervision of her children during daily prayer was not intended to transfer her role to the teachers, but rather to observe the continuity of her training while she was not around them. Likewise, the school encouraged students to bring their charity donations (*sadaqa*) on a daily basis to contribute to various charitable causes it supported. The school also catered to integrating students with community members in daily congregational prayers. Not only did students participate in congregational prayer, part of their school assignment was also journaling lessons based on the Friday sermons. The school also focused on nurturing children's character based on Islamic principles, and set out monthly themes related to aspects of character building such as honesty, respect, forgiveness and patience. Furthermore, Islamic school not only engaged students in developing their Muslim identities but also helped them attain academic excellence. Given opportunities to engage with mainstream schools in contests such as spelling bees and science fairs, students performed excellently. Saba's desire for her children to have the best of both worlds alluded to academic success as well as spiritual development, and she found what she needed in the Islamic school. Similarly, Kaifa measured Majid's school success by his achievement in Quran and Islamic studies, as she felt that his foremost responsibility was to God, followed by the other subjects. These learning and literacy processes can be seen as the co-constructing of knowledge, whereby

opportunities presented were explored and socially carried out (Sulzby, 1986). In having the best of both worlds, the Islamic school offered a holistic education through an inclusive curriculum while teachers used a culturally responsive pedagogy.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural reference in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Using what they know about their students, educators give students tailored access to learning (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Being allowed to learn based on their cultural and social experiences, students become active participants in their learning (Nieto & Bode, 2011). Hollins and Guzman (2005) believe that culturally mediated instruction provides the best learning conditions for all students. Within this framework, students feel safe and accepted, and are inspired to succeed. Feeling safe was a crucial aspect for children in the Islamic school. They were able to dress according to their cultural requirements, express their beliefs openly, practice their rituals at officially scheduled times, and during the month of Ramadhan they could choose to rest in class instead of playing outdoors. As many of their teachers shared the same religious values, they helped promote integrated learning that was responsive to the children's needs. These children were able to see themselves and their beliefs incorporated into their curriculum as in, for example, recognizing the contribution of Muslim scientists in the world, relating the butterfly's life cycle to God's creation in Majid's science lesson, or journaling about the Holy Land, as Hani did. Seeing themselves represented in the curriculum gave them ownership of their learning, as they could relate to what was taught and what they believed in. Furthermore, the school informed and celebrated culturally significant days such as Eid, adding to their sense of fitting in. Responding to Gay's (2002) criteria for building responsive communities of learning, educators of the Islamic school taught personal, moral, social, cultural, and academic knowledge simultaneously. Among

Gay's (2000) culturally responsive characteristics is teaching that validates students' home and cultural heritage and helps develop a sense of pride in them. The Islamic school validated the children in this study in many ways. Their home culture was acknowledged, and it resonated with their educators. The school helped raise Islamic culture to a higher level through educational practices. One such practice was discussing the events of Meraj in the school assembly and exploring why this event was symbolic in Islamic history. On seeing their linguistic and cultural heritage valued, recognized, and represented the children in this research would have been provided with a sense of belonging. They could connect and relate to their cultural festivals and rituals during school time too. Furthermore, by offering Islamic studies and Arabic as part of the school curriculum, the school provided an important element in the validation of Islamic culture. Overall, the Islamic school demonstrated qualities of culturally responsive pedagogy that fostered communities of learning true to meeting the needs of Muslim children.

Concluding Remarks

To portray literacy success through standardized test scores would be to defer to the autonomous model described by Street (1993). I resisted this move since doing so would undervalue these families' practices. The literacy success observed in these Arab Muslim homes was not based on how often parents read to their children, sang to them or told them stories. Neither was success based on the number of children's books or audio recordings in the homes. Rather, cultural and religious practices continued from home to school related to their success, their close family relationships, their safe spaces to freely express their thoughts and investment in their beliefs that promoted achievement. The continuity of home practices in an Islamic schooling environment extended home culture to school. Having an uninterrupted transition and

the ability to locate themselves in literature within safe spaces was a contributing factor. Linking the curriculum to God allowed them to express themselves openly and without reservation in the parameters set by their religious values. Whereas writing creatively was a challenge for all three boys, it was not clear whether this was a result of underlying beliefs or the notion of boys' reading practices (Hamilton & Jones, 2016; Wilhelm & Smith, 2002). Did belief prompt these children to express factuality in their writings instead of venturing into a world of imagination, devoid of reality, or was it a gender issue of boys' reading habits leading to a lack of creative ideas?

While storybook reading has dominated educators' perceptions of success in literacy, minority groups view literacy from a different perspective. The culture of storybook reading among minority groups differs in the sense that it can be a multifaceted activity with parents interjecting their own social and cultural beliefs into the exercise, making it culturally appropriate (Wan, 2000). Further, what counts as literacy and how it is learned is also varied (Heath, 1983; Street, 1993; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines). Thus to insist on a particular view of literacy and to disregard the socio-cultural beliefs and attitudes of its reading audience would reduce reading practices to being merely a formality of schoolwork. Situated within a sociocultural framework, social contexts and beliefs are crucial factors for learning success. Any practice ignoring the conceptual dimensions that readily account for successful learning between school and out-of-school spaces limits learning to closed contexts such as schools (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Learning does not occur in limited spaces and is not tightly sealed within certain spaces; rather, it moves in and out of contexts where continuity and practice ensure its success.

Within the Islamic school context, children felt connected to their educators who considered their worldview relevant. These children related with their teachers, who were

sensitive to their culture. These teachers not only recognized children's home practices but also understood their beliefs and cultural ways, and responded in their teaching. While it is arguable that these practices may be difficult to respond to in the diverse settings of our public schools, adopting culturally responsive teaching would cater to minority children. Arab Muslim children, like any other children, have a right to their language and culture, and culturally responsive teaching practices dictate that children can express themselves freely, without fear of stigmatization. The children attending Islamic school found themselves nurtured in safe havens and, while this encouraged their cultural view in literacy learning, these children will ultimately face the current power and politics in the mainstream education system after high school. Preparing them psychologically for the wider society remains to be considered.

CHAPTER 7

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS: INVEST IN CONTEXTS BOTH IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL FOR TANGIBLE EFFECTS ON SUCCESS

Projecting this study forward, the insights offered by the Islamic school's continuity and safe pedagogy further validated the theory that investment in contexts both in and out of school has tangible effects on success. This study, initially motivated by the statistics of Arab children underperforming in public schools, because of recruitment issues moved to the Islamic school, where achievement was no longer an issue and success could be highlighted. Based on the findings of this study, I offer my thoughts on recommendations for future research. While I am unable to comment with certainty for Arab children in public schools, as I did not study them, I can only speculate about the realities that exist. The cultural background of researchers affects how they view relationships between literacy and culture. Most researchers from the dominant culture view literacy and culture from a Western perspective. With limited studies available on literacy practices conducted on Arab Muslims from an insider's perspective, my perspective as an insider provides a better understanding to practices that are culturally relevant and religiously significant. My own perspective on literacy and culture originates from my cultural background as a Muslim and Middle Eastern. My understanding of self and society is mediated through my relationship with my family members. It is possible that other researchers working with the same data would see and interpret things differently. The beauty of conducting ethnography is that it allows the study of people's cultures to be narrated from the researcher's view, and an insider's view is able to access and observe what other researchers are not able to. It somehow can be considered a privilege in accessing data from this point of view.

Look on Religion as a Factor that Permeates the Lives of Arab Muslim Families

In view of sociocultural literacy that situates literacy in its context, for this particular demographic of Arab Muslim children, religion has to be considered as an important factor that permeates the lives and contexts of these families. Whereas studies done within the homes of Muslim families have offered insights into Quranic literacy, none have considered religion as a theoretical piece that defines the context. In defining the parameters of contexts for literacy, it becomes necessary to study factors that influence home and community contexts for literacy success. When religion is a driving factor, educators need to be aware of how this influence impacts learning and the complexities of accommodating this within the school curriculum. Being able to locate oneself in the curriculum provides ownership for students, as was seen in the Islamic school.

Take Seriously School Board Guidelines for Religious Accommodation

Ethnographers who have conducted studies within Muslim communities have observed that religion is central to many Muslim families, and as such cannot be observed in homes only. However, practicing religion in public places and public schools has attracted negative attention from peers, educators and school administrators. Muslim students in public schools report that they have faced discrimination amidst media perpetuation of Islamophobia. While Islamophobia accelerated after 9/11, it has increased exponentially of late with the ISIS proliferation around the globe. As a Muslim educator, I, too, have experienced suspicion, apprehension and also discrimination working within graduate education. I do not blame my peers and mentors entirely, as I understand that many people are being fed biased information by media sources. Like me, students in public schools are faced with the same negative reactions. Practicing Islam has become challenging, and it is important to understand that Muslim parents choose to send their children to Islamic schools in order to protect them from alienation or stigmatization, by

educating their children within safe parameters. With this in sight, taking seriously School Board guidelines for religious accommodation becomes necessary to protect the religious culture of Muslims in public schools.

Consider the Need for Public Funding of Islamic Schools

While Islamic schools may be the solution to Muslim students' marginalization at public schools, enrolment of children in Islamic schools is beyond the budgets of many. In order to be competitive with other privately funded schools and provide teachers with competitive remuneration , the Islamic school has to continuously raise funds to meet its financial budget. In Ontario, government policies have funded Catholic schools, but they have ignored voices raised by other faith-based groups such as Jews and Muslims. The bias in government policies has raised questions about the discrimination that contributes to dissatisfaction among those Muslims parents whose children would do better in Islamic schools. This argument may be similar to Africentric schooling (Adjei & Agpeyong, 2009), where Black parents and educators were concerned over Black students' perpetual failure and found that the cause was disconnection from the curriculum. Unable to see themselves in the curriculum, black students felt distanced from their schooling and parents fought for an Africentric curriculum, this segregation has been questioned. Islamic schools do not advocate for an Islamic curriculum, but rather call for equal consideration and opportunity to educate Muslim students based on religious and cultural requirements, with freedom from any discrimination. If our government can fund Catholic schools and Africentric schools based on their religious and cultural needs, then the need for Islamic schools should be considered.

Include Early Year's Literacy Resources that Respond to Arab Muslim Needs

The Arabic language in this study was considered an important fund of knowledge, as it linked the participants to their culture and the language of the Quran. Yet, even when participants attended private schools where the Arabic language was used, it became evident that children were struggling to learn the Arabic language due to the differences between Classical Quranic Arabic and the Modern Standard Arabic. The fact that there were limited resources available to them prompted them to persevere with whatever was available. To promote first language efficiency, there is a need to include early years' Arabic literacy resources that respond to these minority groups' needs, for instance, resources that feature age appropriate language that is also culturally relevant and not just books translated from English sources which is largely the case now. Having literacy resources that are culturally relevant would allow students to be located in the literacy and take ownership of their learning. If these children could strengthen their first language learning, it would promote second language competency.

Promote Family Literacy Activities that are Culturally Relevant

Family relationships in this study were closely maintained. The Arab Muslim families enjoyed doing things together and respected family bonds. While the impact of family and community connections has implications on student achievement, promoting family activities that are culturally relevant may offer a route to foster literacy achievement. Literacy learning does not necessarily have to be reading books together. It could be listening to and analyzing sermons or poetry, or discussing a topic that is culturally relevant. The value of family relationships and their ways of supporting each other could serve as a learning tool that could be an asset to literacy learning. And as educators we need to be recognize these values that Arab families hold to help us serve them better, as there could be times when we would fail to

understand why they would put family affairs before school. This doesn't mean that these families do not care about school; however, as educators, it is important to know that family relationships in Islam are prioritized and when families practice these bonds, family activities may impact school schedules. This should not be taken to mean that they do not care about school.

As I conclude this study, I am still concerned about the performance of Arab children in TDSB schools. With the arrival of Arab Syrian refugees to Toronto, the number of Arab children in public schools will increase. As educators, this impacts our classrooms and the children we teach. Serious considerations of cultural sensitivity should be a priority. Having spent time with these two Arab families and seeing their attachment to their values, the impact of continuity at Islamic school and the safe spaces that promoted learning, I believe that collaborative work is needed between public schools and Islamic schools in gaining and sharing the cultural knowledge required to educate Arab Muslim children. While educators have explicitly recognized parents as partners in their children's education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Ippolito, 2010, 2012, 2015; Kelly, Gregory & Williams, 2001; Schecter & Ippolito, 2008), it is uncommon for educators to draw upon the rich diversity of home language, family cultures, and religious values in classroom practice. Acknowledging the variety of ways literacy can be learnt requires a shift in language pedagogy. Allowing ourselves to step outside the box and see the capabilities these children possess can help us develop a better understanding of minority students and their learning potential.

Continue Searching for Minority Group Accommodation in Public Schools and Spaces

The findings of this study offered a different understanding of literacy learning. It provided a cultural and religious perspective on the literacy learning of these children. While

success of Arab Muslim participants in this study was highlighted, the implications of this study also raise inquiries for further investigation. Summarizing the recommendations discussed above, I present the following areas that would benefit from future research:

1. What factors contribute to success of children in Islamic schools?
2. How do Arab Muslim students adjust to secular school systems after leaving Islamic schools?
3. In what ways can public libraries be accessible to immigrants and support dual language learners?
4. How can the lack of Arabic dual language resources in schools and libraries be addressed in meeting the needs of the Arab population?
5. Children of this study showed great attachment to the Quran, yet this study revealed that Quranic literacy was something that was difficult for the children to understand. How can age appropriate Quranic literacy be developed?
6. What challenges do public schools face in adopting a responsive cultural pedagogy to literacy learning?

It is commonly observed in ethnographic studies that when one conducts ethnography, it becomes a springboard for continuing research. I am hoping that my study prompts me and others to continue searching for ways in which minority students can find accommodation in public schools and spaces.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent for Parents/Caregivers

I am a doctoral student at York University and I am interested in literacy practices of Arab Muslim families occurring outside of school and how children navigate literacies between home and school. The research title is *Exploring Arab Muslim Children's Home Literacy Experiences in Ontario.* I am interested in examining some Arab Muslim children from JK to grade 4 and their families in Ontario.

I plan to spend six months in observing you and your child within your home context. This would involve spending a couple of hours once in every two weeks for a period of six months. I plan to make notes, have conversations and make observations focusing on literacy activities that your children are engaged in. I would also like to conduct two interviews with you and your child separately, one at the beginning of the study (in October 2013) and one at the end of my study (around March 2014). When I conduct interviews with you, I would like your permission to videotape or audio record to help remind me what we discussed. At the end of the study I will share with you my findings and will respect your input as to what data can be included.

There are no risks involved whether you decide to give consent or not for participating in this study. The identity of you and your child will be kept confidential. No names, including your child's school names will be used in any reports or publications. Your privacy will be protected to the fullest extent allowable by law. Only research staff will have access to the data. Your names will always be kept confidential when oral or written presentation of the results of the study occurs.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. You are under no obligation to participate and you may terminate participation at any

time. If you decide to stop participating, you will still be eligible to receive your gift for agreeing to be in the project. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with York University, or any other group associated with this project. In the event you decide to withdraw from the study, all data generated will be destroyed immediately.

Your participation will contribute to a better understanding of Arab Muslim literacy cultural practices at the early year's level. Presently there is little research on literacy practices of Arab Muslim groups available and this study hopes to add to a wider understanding of literacy practices that occur outside school in minority groups. I hope you will take this opportunity to participate and share your knowledge in this important area of research.

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me or my Graduate Supervisor - Dr. John Ippolito. You may also contact my Graduate Program Faculty of Education. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please feel free to contact A.M. Collins-Mrakas, Senior Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics.

In recognizing your effort in participating in this study and accommodating me in your homes, I have two gift vouchers of $50 each for you and your child to be given half way into the study and at the end of the study. This in no way compensates your efforts in this process; however, it is a humble way of appreciating your time and providing me an opportunity to conduct my studies. Your final reward lies with the Almighty.

Yours truly,

Shahnaaz Alidina

Phd Student

Faculty of Education

York University

I *(fill in your name here)*, consent to participate in ***Exploring Arab Muslim Children's Home Literacy Experiences in Ontario*** conducted by Shahnaaz Alidina. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature ______________________ **Date** ____________________

Participant

[ ] I agree to be videotaped in the observations of this study

[ ] I agree to be audiotaped in the observations of this study

Appendix B: Informed Consent for Child Participants

Your signature below indicates your voluntary consent for your child to participate in this study titled ***Exploring Arab Muslim Children's Home Literacy Experiences in Canada***. Please tick in the boxes below to indicate your consent in audio and video taping your child.

Verbal Assent

I was present when ______________________________________ read this form (or had it read to her/him) and gave verbal assent.

____

Person who obtained assent

_____________________ ___________________

Signature Date

Written Assent

Please mark one of the choices below to tell us what you want to do:

___ Yes, I want to be in this project.

___ No, I do not want to be in this project.

Shahnaaz Alidina September 201

________________________________ ______________________

Signature of researcher Date

[ ] I agree for my child to be videotaped in the observations of this study

[ ] I agree for my child to be audiotaped in the observations of this study

[ ] I agree for my child to be photographed in the observations of this study

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Questionnaire for Parents

Demographic questions: (To be used in the first meet and greet session in the home).

1. Background information: country of birth, ethnicity, educational level, length of time in Canada
2. What languages do you speak?
3. In what languages can you read and write?

First Interview questions: (Based on observations from initial visits and as a follow up).

1. What is the purpose of teaching your child your native language? Elaborate
2. In your opinion what is the best way to introduce reading and writing to your child?
3. Do you find it important to teach your child Arabic? At what age would you introduce your child to this?
4. What kind of knowledge and training do you feel is relevant for your child?
5. Is there any important literature or literacy practice you would want your child to know? Why is this important?
6.. I saw you (talking in native language/English language) in explaining your child his/her work. Why do you choose this medium?
7. If I walked in at bedtime, what would I observe in terms of literacy exercise?
8. If I walked in when you were introducing your child to the Quran, what would I see?
9. What do you feel about your child speaking/ reading English at home?
10. Have you come across dual language books? What is your opinion on using dual

language books to teach reading?

11. If I were to visit your community centre, what literacy activity would I be able to observe? How do adults and children interact at the centre?

12. What is your opinion on how literacy is approached in schools?

13. Is there any difference how you approached language learning now and how you were doing it back home? Which way do you prefer and why?

14. In your opinion are schools helping in promoting your language and culture?

15... How do you see your child using his native language five years from now? Does this matter to you?

16.. If you could change one thing about how literacy is taught, what would you change? Explain.

17.. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't talked about?

Questions for the Second Interview will be developed after having spent adequate time at the participants' homes and will be focused on extrapolating and clarifying practices, preferences and the use of literacy in the home.

Questionnaire for student participants

Demographic questions: (To be used in the first meet and greet session in the home).

1. Background information: country of birth, educational level, parents ethnic origin, length of time in Canada

2. What languages do you speak?

3. In what languages can you read and write?

4. Besides English, do you have reading books in any other language?

First Interview Questions:

1. What kind of literacy activities do you enjoy doing most? Why?
2. What kind of stories do you enjoy reading or listening to? (English or Arabic, read or told)
3. What language do you prefer reading in? (English or Arabic). Explain why?
4. If you were to choose a literacy activity to do with a friend, what would you do? Why?
5. What kind of schoolwork do you find difficult to do at home?
6. What do feel about being able to speak and explain things at school in your own language? Would it help to explain clearly to your friends and teachers?
7. How do see the way reading is done in English and the way it is done in Arabic?
8. How do you feel about reading a book in two languages? Which language do you enjoy listening to? Explain.
9. I saw you talking in your native language to your (mum/dad/sibling). Tell me what language you prefer to use when at home.
10. If I were to walk in and observe you reading the Quran, what would I see? How is reading the Quran different from reading a story book?
11. Is reading Quran an important exercise for you? Explain.
12. What is the difference between a child reading the Quran and an adult reading it?
13. If I were to come with you to your community centre/mosque, what would I see you doing? Tell me what activities you do while at the community centre/mosque.
14. What language is used at the community centre/mosque? Does everyone understand the language used?

15. How do you see yourself in Grade 8 using your native language?
16. If there is one thing you could change about how literacy is taught, what would you change? Explain.
17. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't talked about?

Questions for the second interview will be developed having visited the home several times. The question format will be similar to the ones above, but seeking further clarification on what has been observed.

Appendix D: Quran Awards

1.1 Hani showing off his awards

1.2 Hani's award for his first fast in Ramadhan

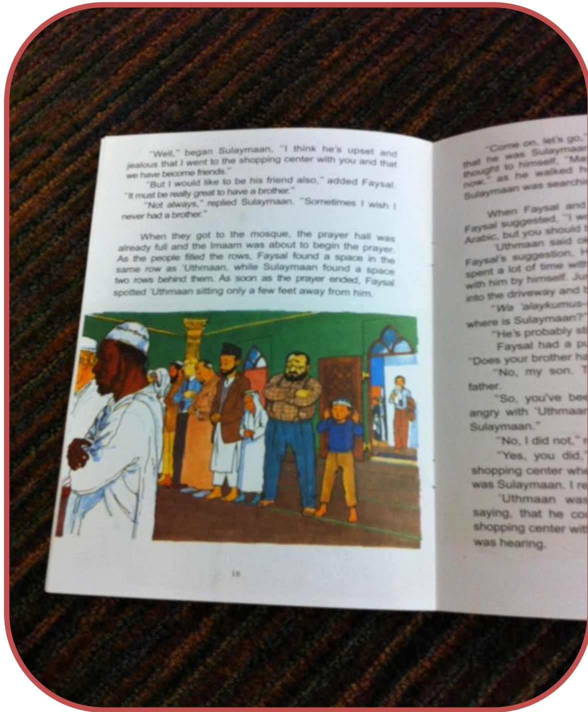
1.3 Hani’s award for Quran Memorization; First Place

2.1 Amir with his Awards

2.2 Amir's awards

2.3 Amir's Quran Meoriazation Award: Fifth Place

Appendix E: Islamic Story Books



"Well," began Sulaymaan, "I think he's upset and jealous that I went to the shopping center with you and that we have become friends."

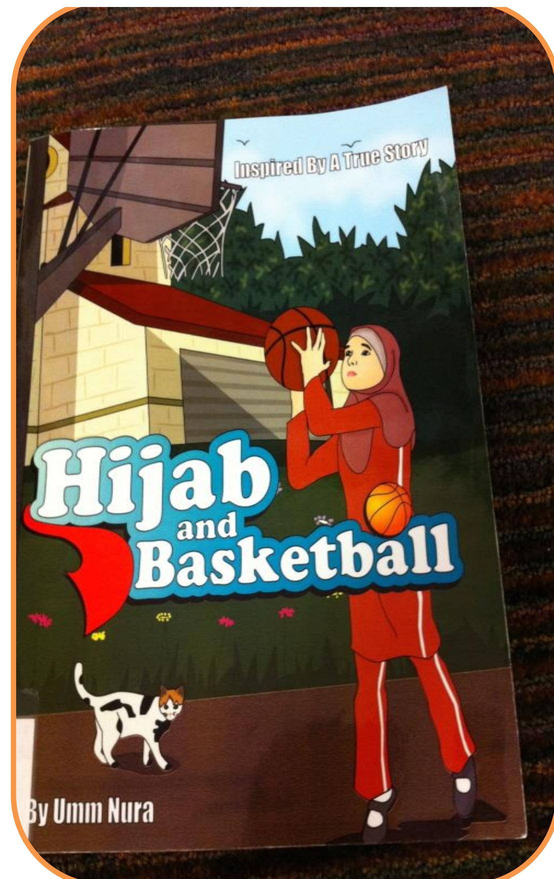
"But I would like to be his friend also," added Faysal. "It must be really great to have a brother."

"Not always," replied Sulaymaan. "Sometimes I wish I never had a brother."

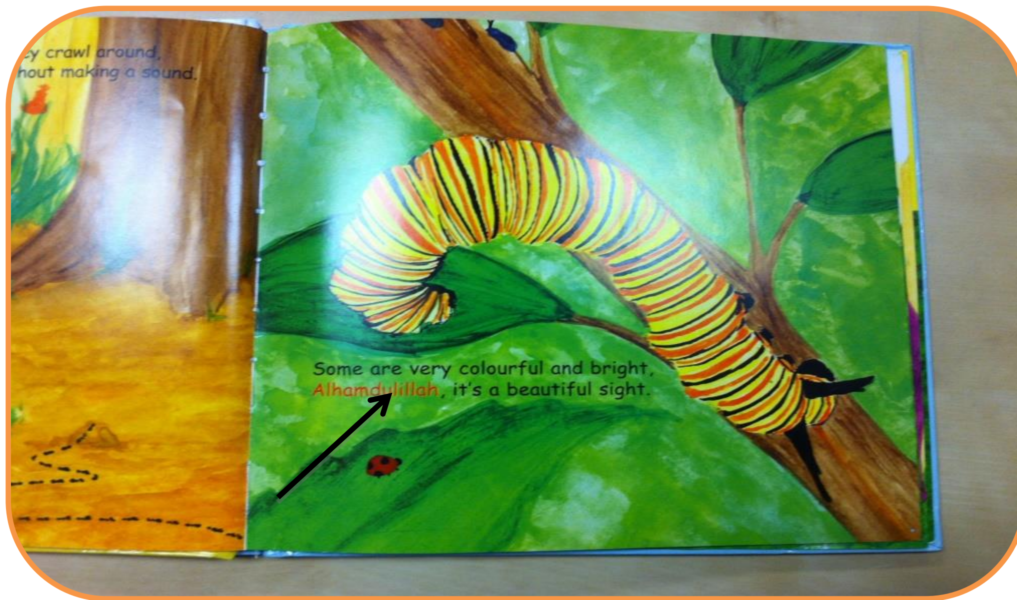
When they got to the mosque, the prayer hall was already full and the Imaam was about to begin the prayer. As the people filled the rows, Faysal found a space in the same row as 'Uthmaan, while Sulaymaan found a space two rows behind them. As soon as the prayer ended, Faysal spotted 'Uthmaan sitting only a few feet away from him.

3.1 Story books depicting cultural practices such as prayers

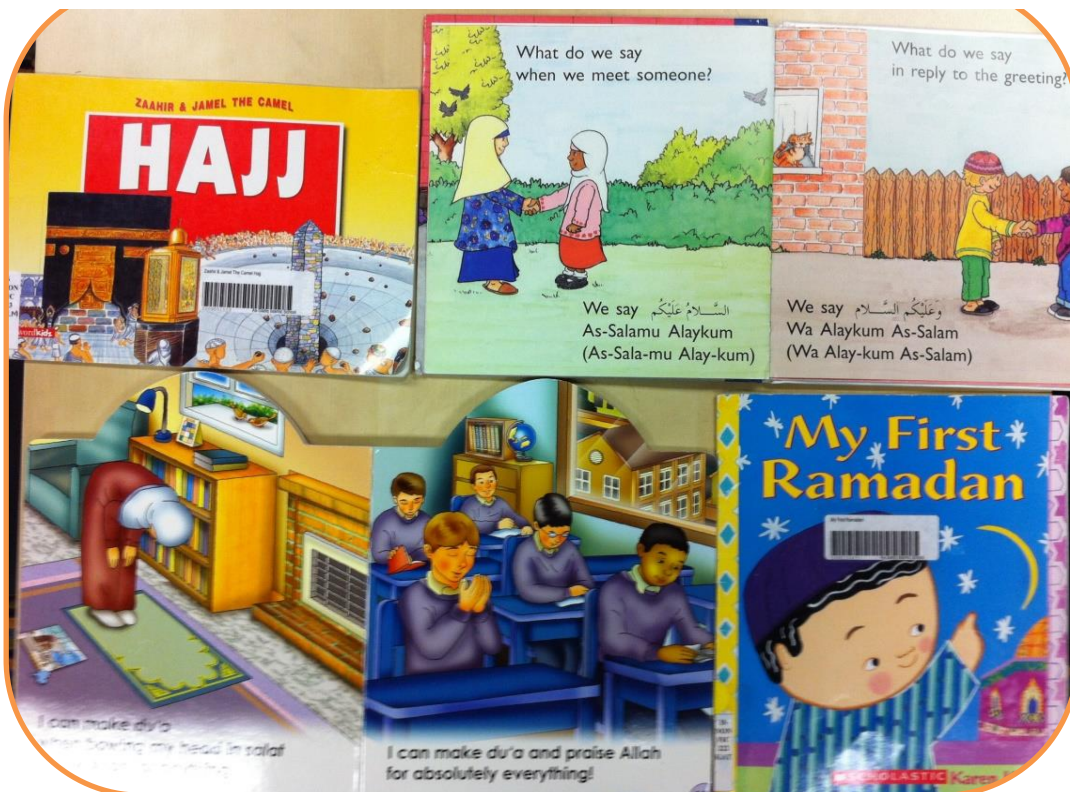
3.2 Books enhancing Islamic practices



3.3 Real life stories become books and lessons to draw



3.4 Reference to God embedded in stories

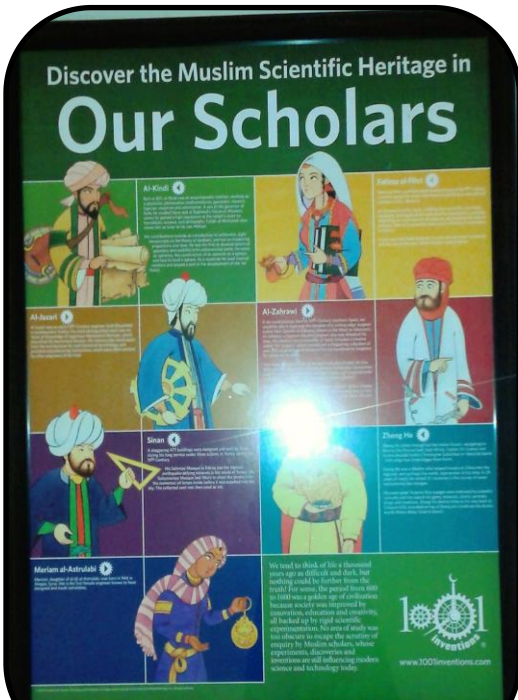


3.5 Islamic books on moral practices

3.6 Moral Stories and lessons from the Quran

3.7 Level of Arabic too high for young grades

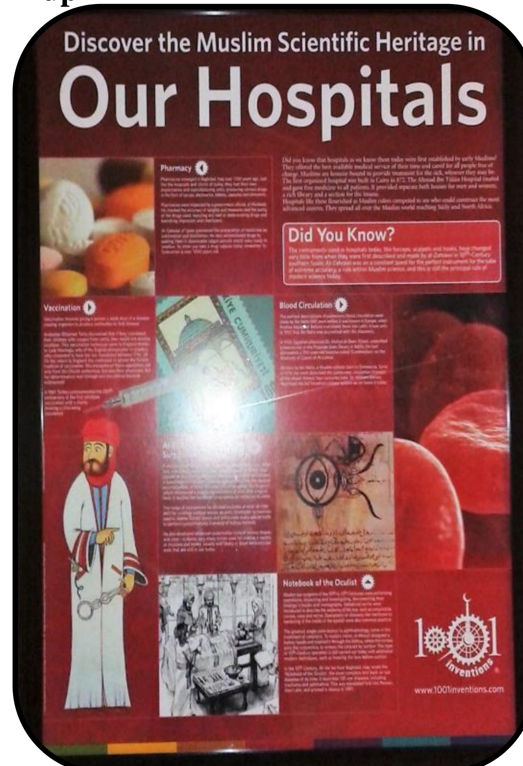
Appendix F: Cultural Heritage



4.1 Muslims scholars' contribution to the academic world

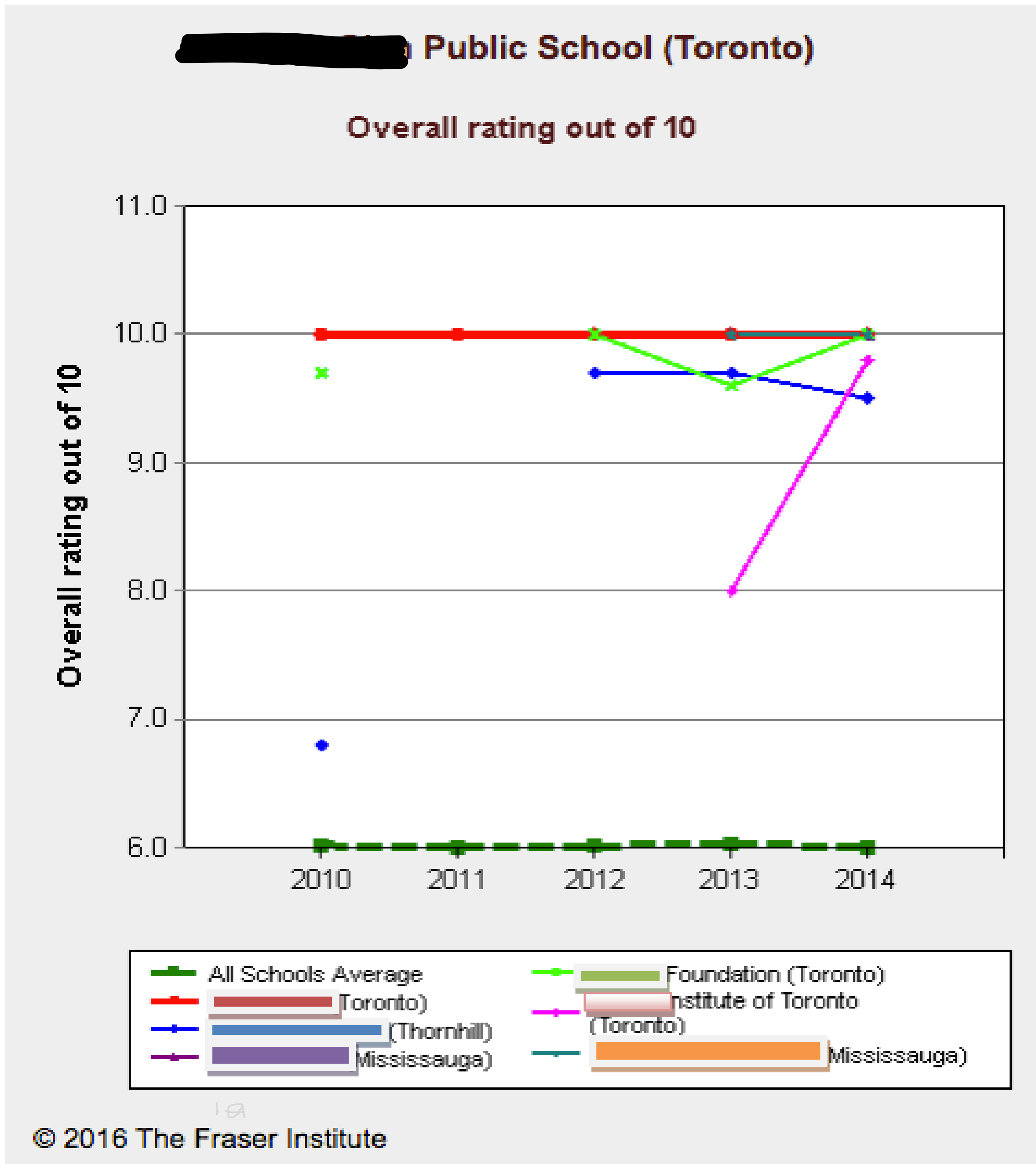
4.2 Among the first schools to be set up

4.3 Among the pioneers in Mathematical and astronomical studies



4.4 Pioneer in medical discovery

Appendix G: Islamic schools performance index



5.1

Examples of Islamic schools (Talabul Ilm; Qalam; Salsabil Foundation & Romisa Institute performance index from Fraser Institute

Appendix H: Art Literacy

Wall hangings Amir and Hani's home

6.1 Verses from Ziyara of the Imam Husain

6.2 Chapter 113 (Sura Falaq) of the Ouran

6.3. Market scene in the Middle East

Appendix I: Art Literacy

6.4 Chapter 114 (Sura Naas) of the Quran

6.5 Name of Prophet's grandson: Hussain

Wall hangings Majid's home

7.1 Name of Allah and Muhammad

Appendix J: Art Literacy

7.2 Chapter 113 & 114 (Sura Naas & Falaq) of the Quran

7.3 Verse of the Throne from the Quran (Ayat al Kursi)

7.4 Wall Carpet with verses of the Throne form the Quran (Ayatul Kursi)

7.5 Names of the Holy household of the Prophet; Ali, Fatema, Hassan & Hussain