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**An Analysis Of How *Hijabi* Youth Experience Social Activities In
Ottawa
Secondary Schools**

Saba Alvi

**Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In Partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in Education – Society, Culture and
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Abstract

This interpretive qualitative study explores the lived experiences of seven *hijabi* youth and how they experience social activities offered in their secondary schools in Ottawa, Ontario. The main research questions are: 1) How do *hijabi* women in Ottawa secondary schools experience the social activities offered by their schools, and 2) In what ways are *hijabi* girls being included or excluded from social activities because of their religious obligations?

A phenomenological tradition of inquiry has been used in order to understand the essence of the experience as perceived by each participant. Analysis has been conducted using Moustakas' (1994) modifications to the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Phenomenological Data. The researcher has also shared her own story of interaction with social activities in high school.

The findings and implications of this study have been categorized into themes in order to illustrate the essence of how *hijabi* youth experience social activities in Ottawa secondary schools. The themes identified are: a) Us Versus Them b) Fighting Stereotypes c) Culture Differences and d) A Desire to Participate.

The first emergent theme, *Us Versus Them*, explains the alienation *hijabi* students feel when partaking in social activities offered at their schools. The second emergent theme, *Fighting Stereotypes*, details the everyday questions, assumptions and judgements *hijabi* students face from peers both Muslim and non-Muslims that ultimately discourage them from partaking in activities. The third emergent theme, *Culture Differences*, explains how current social activities in schools compromise the religious values of *hijabi* girls. The fourth and final emergent theme, *A Desire to Participate* illustrates participants' willingness and in some instances, eagerness to participate in school social activities.

The author aims to raise awareness of how *hijabi* girls experience social aspects of high school and with that, a message for academic authorities to examine how their students are being included or excluded with means towards creating an inclusive environment. The conclusion of this thesis raises implications for further study such as

the role that self-esteem plays in the participation of *hijabi* girls in school social activities.

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Chapter one: Introduction

1.1 My Story

My own personal experiences in the Canadian education system have led me to this thesis topic. I have had the unique opportunity of experiencing secondary school in two Ontario high schools, first as a non-*hijabi* in my junior years and then a *hijabi* in my senior year. My junior years (grades 9-11) as a student were spent in Windsor, Ontario, a relatively small city that contained a population of approximately 198,000 people (Census, 1996) when I was residing there in the 1990's. I attended a predominantly White high school where I was part of a very small population of minority students.

Although I was not wearing *hijab* at that time, I still adhered to many of the religious principles of Islam, such as dressing modestly, abstaining from alcohol use and not engaging in physical interaction with members of the opposite sex. I did however still attend school dances, help organize various social events, and participate in a number of sporting teams.

When participating in athletics I did not wear the team uniform if it involved wearing shorts; instead I wore track pants along with the team jersey, and if the jersey was sleeveless, I wore a t-shirt underneath. I never experienced any problems with uniform alternations, but I do remember before trying out for any team, having to speak to the coach beforehand to explain that I could not wear shorts because of my religion and asking "permission" to wear long pants. As I reflect back on it now, I find it demeaning that I had to ask someone else's permission to wear what I felt comfortable wearing. I also remember the embarrassment of repeatedly having referee's blowing the whistle at me during games and telling me to get into uniform after they would notice I was wearing something different than my teammates. I would have to walk off the court or field and explain to them that I could not wear shorts because of my religious beliefs.

In particular, I recall one soccer game when a referee stopped the whole game and from across the field asked me where my shorts were. I felt singled out and embarrassed as I tried to tell him that I did not wear shorts and that track pants were part of my uniform. Humiliating experiences such as these ultimately discouraged me from participating in sports in my later high school years.

When I was in grade 11, two *hijabi* girls enrolled and they were the first, and only two, *hijabi* girls in our whole school. They did not participate in any of the school's activities and for the most part only engaged with each other outside of the classroom. I understood why they kept to themselves, as many of the students did not give them a warm welcome. Because Windsor had a very small Muslim population at that time, many of my peers had no experience interacting with people different than themselves. A particular memory that has stayed with me is an incident that occurred during a school's sports day one year. During a relay game two boys were making fun of one of the *hijabi* girls. When it came time for one of the boys to pass his baton to the *hijabi* girl, he sarcastically said to his friend "*I ain't touching that.*" After that the two boys just laughed.

After completing grade 11, my family and I moved to Ottawa in 2001 where I would be completing my final year of high school in the Nation's capital; however, something would be different about me this time. Over the course of the summer, I had decided to wear the *hijab* for my own personal religious beliefs. I was excited to move to Ottawa because I had heard about the diversity and rich culture that the city contained. I remember seeing a significant number of *hijabi* girls everywhere I went, and it is something I continue to be impressed by today as I notice the population increase every year. It also helped me adjust to my own decision to wear

hijab because I did not feel like I was the only one wearing it. I was looking forward to starting fresh at my new high school, anticipating new friendships and a chance to meet other *hijabis*.

I was extremely disappointed when I began my senior year and found myself at a school that had only one other *hijabi*. On my first day another student approached me to tell me where to go if I experienced racism or bullying. It was during the second week of the school year that the events of 9/11 happened and changed the way the world would look at Muslims forever. I became subject to a lot of stereotypes and people began to ask me questions about Islam and what the Quran says. Many were valid questions that I did not mind answering, but I was asked and overheard many offensive comments being made about Muslims.

My involvement in school activities became minimal as I felt I stuck out too much, more so than before. I felt awkward and out of place going to school functions like dances and casino night and I decided against going to my senior prom too. Some of my non-*hijabi* Muslim friends who did go to the prom tried to convince me to come but I knew I would feel uncomfortable in a room full of people who were wearing either short dresses, sleeveless, or both. Plus, boys and girls would be dancing together and I was not comfortable with the manner in which that was often done at high school dances.

I was relieved in University when I was able to meet and network with many other Muslims and *hijabis*. It was easier having friends who did not question why I dressed the way I did, who understood that I had to pray 5 times a day, and who did not ask me why I did not date. Most importantly for me, I was able to join social organizations that adhered to my religious beliefs, such as athletic leagues that were solely for women participants and audiences.

When I reflect upon my high school career now, I feel like I missed out on a part of my teenage years. I was not able to enjoy it the way my non-Muslim friends did, and never felt the

schools I attended made an effort to accommodate minority students such as myself. Every social activity held, I felt, was targeted towards a Eurocentric audience. School dances revolved around European themes that conflicted with my personal religious beliefs, school uniforms always included wearing shorts and *hijabi* students were never considered during “crazy hair day” and many other social events that were meant to build a sense of community amongst students.

My own experiences of feeling alienated during high school have prompted me to explore the way *hijabi* students experience high school. I hope that my research will help educators understand their Muslim students and encourage institutions to play an active role in diversifying the social activities they offer in schools.

1.1 Introduction to the Problem

A series of events surrounding the Muslim world and North America have been the front page of media sources for some time now. Most recently, the aftermath of 9/11¹ and the events that continue to follow, have put Muslims in North America at the forefront of a political battle where non-Muslims citizens of the West increasingly view Muslims with apprehension (Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006) and prejudice towards Muslims in general is on the rise (Spurles, 2003). These authors and others claim this is largely because of the media’s negative coverage of anything Islam related, and have resulted in the construction of several stereotypes of Muslims.

One of the main stereotypes the media has given attention to is Islam and its alleged repressive treatment of women. “Muslim women are perceived as subjugated, veiled, secluded and in need of being rescued” (Rezai-Rashti, 1994). This stereotype refers largely to the percentage of women that wear the head veil, or in Islamic terms, the *hijab*. Todd (1998) reports

¹ September 11, 2001, also referred to as 9/11, marks the date of suicide attacks upon the United States of America; since then, Muslim countries, their citizens and Muslims living in the West have attracted an increased amount of negative attention and have been subjugated to increased harassment both verbally and physically.

that the Canadian media has given much attention to the *hijab* prior to 9/11 and this has escalated to be a hot topic of debate today (Meshal, 2003). Haddad et al. (2006) summarizes well by stating “there is little question that the *hijab* has become the most stereotypical symbol of Muslim womanhood” (p.38).

Despite the negative media attention surrounding Muslims and *hijab*, actual representations of both are increasing in Canada’s capital (Statistics Canada, 2005). The Ottawa Muslim population continues to grow through “immigration and natural increase” and statistics show that Muslims are “rapidly surpassing longer-established religious minority groups” (Spurles, 2003, p.42). A contributing factor to this may be that “Muslims living in North America today comprise the most diverse population in the history of Islam” (Haddad et al., 2006, p.4).

Wearing *hijab* is more popular amongst youth today than ever before and in North America is growing increasingly in popularity across high schools and college campuses (Haddad et al., 2006). Studies show that wearing the veil is no longer popular just among women who come from countries where the *hijab* is a common tradition passed on from one generation to the next, but is also gaining favour amongst youth “for whom the garment is culturally alien” (Meshal, 2003, p.73). Studies such as this suggest that contrary to stereotypical thought, more youth are *choosing* to wear the veil for personal and religious beliefs, and that wearing the veil represents not forced tradition but a certain set of religious principles and values they do not wish to compromise.

With the increase of *hijabi* youth in schools today, many veiled students are facing problems as they struggle to balance their religious obligations and their school life. Not only are Muslims in general, like so many minorities, feeling left out academically as they fail to see a

reflection of themselves in a Eurocentric dominated curriculum inside the classroom (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson & Zine, 2000), but numerous studies are showing Muslim girls in particular as marginalized in the social realm of school outside the classroom (Zine, 2000, 2001& 2003; Rezai-Rashti, 2005; Keaton, 2006).

This isolation may be the result of the Eurocentric, and at times, Christian oriented social activities being offered in schools today. Kincheloe & Steinberg (1997) suggest that “most institutions develop informal cultural practices that are internalized by their members” (p.174). The social activities schools participate in are a good example of the informal cultural practices Kincheloe & Steinberg make reference to, and the over representation of “white, female, middle class” teachers (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005) can be seen as the internalized members that practice them. Unfortunately, these social activities may be in conflict with the religious beliefs of many *hijabi* girls in Canadian high schools.

Alienating *hijabi* youth from social activities can have potentially harmful implications both short term and long term. One of the main detriments of social exclusion is that it “can compromise one’s ability to acquire the necessary ‘cultural capital’ required to achieve success in mainstream society” (Zine, 2000, p. 309). Furthermore, failure to give one group accessible opportunities to mingle and socially interact with peers can stunt them socially and “lead to feelings of alienation and marginality” (Ibid). It is important to address the issue because research suggests that student experiences with schooling “lay the groundwork for how they live and work in society for the rest of their lives” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1995, p. 3). If educators do not re-evaluate how the social aspects of their schools are or are not including *hijabi* students, they could be providing *hijabi* youth with an unfair and unwarranted legacy. The *hijabi* youth population is one that every school in Canada must recognize and accommodate since statistics

suggest that as the Muslim population grows so will the percentage of *hijabi* youth (Statistics Canada, 2005, 2007).

As a woman who wears *hijab*, I feel compelled to research the issue at hand based on my own experiences. I have undergone secondary school in two different Canadian cities, including Ottawa, both as a non-*hijabi* and then as a *hijabi*. I can recall several instances of feeling alienated from my peers as many social activities were in conflict with my religious beliefs. Although I felt excluded to a certain extent before I wore a *hijab*, I felt even more out of place after I began to wear it, and was subject to many offensive comments and incidents of perceived prejudice.

1.3 Statement of Problem

“We are no longer culturally literate” (Pagano, 1995)

As the minority student population in public schools surpasses the non-minority student population (Bland, 1998), Canada can no longer speak to a unified culture, mission or set of values (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). The disheartening irony is that at a time when anti-racism awareness is at its peak and even science has dictated that there is no such thing as race, racism in the West is on the rise (Ibid). In a study that asked participants what Canadians looked like, 90% of respondents chose images of people with blond hair and blue eyes (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson & Zine, 2000) and a BBC news report (2006) found that “a third of non Muslim pupils thought one race was superior, compared to a tenth of teenagers in mainly Muslim schools.” Despite these figures, some students deny that racism exists in their school and refer to comments made about minority cultures and practices as just “jokes” (Raby, 2004). The abundance of prejudice apparent in Canadian society is not only shocking, but disturbing since

studies have shown that previously marginalized groups in Canadian history have been excluded and even exterminated because of cultural and religious differences (Rezai-Rashti, 1994).

As the number of Muslims steadily rises in Canada (Rezai-Rashti, 1994) Muslim students feel they are being silenced by the “culture of domination” (Dei, 1994). The Eurocentric overtone of the education system has left many Muslims with experiences and feelings full of alienation and isolation (Zine, 2001). This epidemic that seems to be affecting more Muslim women than men, leaves many Muslim women in a constant search for people who share the same experiences as them (Dei, 1994). *Hijabis* may be faced with additional tension in the school world since their choice to veil stands out to others and even themselves as a clear and constant reminder of their Muslim status. These tensions are confronted when *hijabi* students are put in social situations where their ‘Muslim-ness’ is magnified. An example of this is visible during sporting events when a *hijabi* student must cover fully while peers are usually wearing shorts and t-shirts.

A study of Muslims in Ottawa reveals that for parents, raising their children in today’s Eurocentric environment is a source of anxiety as they struggle to maintain a balanced life between their religion and the Canadian society itself, especially since maintaining their Muslim identity is a top priority (Spurles, 2003). This top priority appears to be of interest to many youth as well as Muslims in Canadian schools are struggling to “negotiate an identity within three often conflicting frameworks: the dominant culture, their ethnic culture, and Islam” (Zine, 2001). As wearing the *hijab* becomes more popular in the Ottawa area, practicing Islamic values in Ottawa secondary schools, like so many schools in Canada, can be very conflicting since many of the day to day tasks involved in public schooling may require some *hijabi* students to compromise their religious beliefs. According to some Muslim students, the very nature of co-ed classes can

prove to be problematic (Keaton, 2006). More problematic can be the variety of social activities schools offer that exclude most of the *hijabi* population depending on religious boundaries. School dances based on Eurocentric themes and school activities like “crazy hair day” are just a few examples of social events alienating *hijabi* students from the school community, minimizing their opportunities to interact with peers on a social level.

Secondary schools are a particularly interesting level to examine for many reasons. Firstly, according to the 2001 Census, there are over 45,000 Muslims girls between the age of 15-24 in Ontario, and approximately 3500 girls in Ottawa high schools alone (Statistics Canada, 2007). Secondly, since Islam does not require girls to wear *hijab* before puberty, a larger population of *hijabis* may be found at a high school level because puberty for most women begins shortly before or during the early years of high school. And thirdly, studies show that secondary schools amongst other levels, fail to “connect with the lived experiences of students” (Zine, 2000).

Therefore the problem that remains is thus: literature shows repeatedly the importance of social interaction in schooling. It also shows that the only way to really access and accommodate a marginalized group is through hearing their lived experiences; however, there is virtually no study that focuses solely on how *hijabi* youth at the secondary level experience social activities in school. *Hijabi* youth must be given a voice so if necessary, schools can learn how to accommodate their needs socially.

1.4 Rational For Study

“New academic discourses do not focus on education and the life experiences of young women in the school system. The failure to engage in these areas has worked to reinforce colonial attitudes on the part of educators towards Muslims” (Rezai-Rashti, 2005)

The Ottawa Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) makes numerous statements in their policies promoting antiracism and equitable access to education (OCDSB, 2001, 1999 & 1998). However, with immigration on the rise, high schools enrolling more Muslim students than ever (Rezai-Rashti, 1994) and a “political climate suspicious of Islam, some Muslim students and parents might have indeed been silenced” from their school community (Rizvi, 2005, p.168). Although Rizvi speaks to an American context, this statement may be true in a Canadian context as well. *Hijabi* students feel they are being stereotyped and isolated from their peers and educators (Hoodfar, 2003) and to create further alienation, have no social outlet within their educational institutions (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006).

This study seeks to identify and examine the alienation and stereotypes *hijabi* students are subject to in educational institutions on a day to day basis. Furthermore, this study hopes to alleviate the concerns that have been expressed by many human service professionals such as educators who sincerely wish to learn more information about the cultural traditions and values of their Muslim students (Aswad & Bilge, 1996). The author also hopes that the voiced experiences of *hijabi* students will promote awareness in the anti-racism literary world and result in the implementation of more equitable and accessible social programs in schools for *hijabi* youth. As best prescribed by Enid Lee, “look around at what people of colour are saying about their lives, and draw from those sources” (p.21).

As Canada’s capital, a city that prides itself on diversity (www.ottawatourism.ca), Ottawa must serve as a positive example and be at the forefront in promoting anti-racism. Making

positive changes to Ontario's curriculum can be a start towards acknowledging that it may still carry a very Eurocentric tone that is leaving out a large majority of our minority youth.

Furthermore, there is a need to critically examine the variety of social activities schools offer to ensure all students have the choice to participate.

1.5 Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study will be to examine the lived experiences of *hijabi* youth in Ottawa secondary schools, and how they feel about the social activities offered by their schools. The main research question being thus: How do *hijabi* women in Ottawa secondary schools experience the social activities offered by their schools? The secondary question is: in what ways are *hijabi* girls being included or excluded from social activities because of their religious obligations?

1.6 Terminology

This study contains some terms that may have more than one definition and are at times open to interpretation; therefore, any such terms will be explicitly defined to avoid misinterpretation.

Hijabi: The term *hijabi* will be used to refer to those Muslims who wear a head scarf covering only their hair. This does not include those women who wear a veil covering their face, known as a *nikab*, nor does it include those women who wear a full body cloak, also referred to as an *abaya*.

Eurocentric/Eurocentrism: These terms are used in reference to their general definition which is "reflecting a tendency to interpret the world in terms of Western and especially European or Anglo-American values and experiences"(Merriam-Webster, 2008). Although this thesis will further acknowledge that within the European Diaspora there are those who feel marginalized as well, for the purpose of this study, the terms refers solely to the broader definition as stated above.

Social Activities: This term refers to all the activities organized and/or supervised by the school and/or students attending the school in an effort to promote student unity and a school community.

Halal: Refers to the Arabic term meaning "permissible" in Islam.

Haram: Refers to the Arabic term meaning "forbidden" in Islam.

Prayer (Friday): One of the five pillars of Islam is to perform daily prayer, five times a day. Friday prayer is obligatory upon all Muslim men and must be held in congregation.

1.7 Starting Assumptions

This thesis will take for granted that social activities in schools are meant to be accessible for everyone regardless of uniform. The thesis will not focus on the controversy that wearing *hijab* presents a safety issue while playing sports. Finally, this study will also assume that all participants have given a true and accurate account of their individual experiences.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

“Much mutual incomprehension exists between Muslim-Canadians and non-Muslims” (McDonough, 2003, p.121) and this appears to be a common theme in educational literature (Alvi, 2003; & Zine, 2000). The incomprehension is translating into prejudicial views as surveys reveal that Anglophone and Francophone Canadians feel that Arab and East Indian Canadians are perceived to be the minority group most unlike them, and 32% of them felt a sense of unease around Arabs (Spurles, 2003). The same study’s findings concluded that not only is racism in Canada present, it is very much on the rise (Ibid). Edward Said (1978) attributes this disparity to the “static image” many non-Muslims hold of Islam. Said is referring to the accumulation of negative and stereotyped images of Islam portrayed through the media. Many of these images make headlines almost everyday on the news and on the covers of numerous magazines. Post 9/11, Said (2002) notes the media has engaged in even “more exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility” (p.xi) thus heavily influencing the impression many non-Muslims have of Muslims. Amongst the images Said refers to is that of the veiled Muslim woman. The non-Muslim reaction to the *hijab* is that it symbolizes oppression against women (McDonough, 2003) and a voice that has been forcefully silenced by male counterparts. Although veiling in Islam is seen by many followers of the religion as a sign of modesty, non-Muslim Canadians do not see it this way (Ibid). As result, stereotypes of the ‘oppressed’ *hijabi* woman are carried over into schools as *hijabi* youth also become vulnerable to “misperceptions and inappropriate programming” (Cartledge, 1996, p.38).

The following literature review will inform on four important areas of research and scholarship that affect how Muslim students and *hijabi* youth experience schooling in Canada. They are: Islamophobia and the impact of media, Eurocentrism, anti-racist education, and the

rise of *hijab* in Canada. Similar studies and issues surrounding Muslims and *hijabi* youth in schools will also be included within this examination.

2.1 Islamophobia and The Impact of the Media

The events of 9/11 and following have created an increased atmosphere of political tension and Islamophobia. Sheridan (2006) defines Islamophobia as “a dread or hatred of Islam and therefore a fear or dislike of Muslims” (p. 317). Zine (2001) defines it as “a fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents that translates into individual, ideological and systematic forms of oppression and discrimination.” Zine (2003) also writes “history lessons show us that Islamophobia has been constructed as an ideological tool to legitimate campaigns of political, social, economic, and military domination” (p.39).

The media plays on issues like Islamophobia and “raise(s) the public’s anxiety about crime” (Henry & Tator, 2002). Henry & Tator (2002) also write that too much media focus on certain events and “‘over eventicized’ incidents have led to moral panics about the crime rate, drugs, race, youth violence, (and) and the need to control immigration” (p.164). According to Rezai-Rashti (2005) the “Western media’s distorted coverage of almost anything Islamic has contributed to the persistence of long held stereotypical attitudes” (p.178).

The media has a vital role in the perpetuation of Islamophobia as its images and words impact and reach the world. Examples of media outlets that often stereotype Islam and its followers are newspaper coverage of Islam related events (City wide and school papers), Hollywood movies’ depiction of Islam, and magazines that flaunt images of fully cloaked women on the cover. Dr. Haideh Moghissi (2003) notes “the recurrent Islamophobia of media and governments in the West reduces the life experiences of people from the region to religion and religion alone.” As Moghissi suggests, the media reduces Islam and its followers to a single

unit of people all following the same preaching. In reality however, Islam is comprised of several different sects such as Sunnis and Shias, which comprise the two largest sects in Islam, and come from hundreds of different regions. Roald (2001) notes that there is much “non-distinction between various kinds of Muslims” and attributes this to the “widespread model of [the Europeans] thinking in terms of ‘us and them’ such that unacceptable characteristics are projected onto ‘them’” (p. 5). The images portrayed by the media are repetitive, usually taken out of a Canadian context yet used to represent a Canadian perspective. The media’s presentation of Islam leaves society with a one dimensional image of what Islam is – a religion based on violence, one that allows the male counterparts to dominate, silence and cover female followers.

The effects of Islamophobia were dramatically illustrated post 9/11 when numerous attacks were acted out on Muslims of different ages and ethnicities. A report conducted by the Toronto Police Services showed that in 2001, there was a 66% increase in hate crimes, the most against Muslims (Zine, 2003). There were reports of students being beaten up, in some instances even hospitalized, and “cars attempting to run down Muslim women as they crossed the street (Ibid).

Zine (2003) notes that there are positive media sources out there, such as the Council on American Islamic Relations in Canada (CAIR-CAN), the Canadian Muslim Civil Liberties Association (CMCLA) and the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC). These organizations are dedicated to protecting the social rights of Muslims. More recently, the Canadian Federation of Students’ voted to create a Task Force on the Needs of Muslim Students (2007). This task force is an outlet especially targeted towards students who face discrimination and racism within a school network. Organizations such as these are a positive step towards promoting peace and

awareness about Muslims, but unfortunately there is minimal representation of school based organizations such as these.

2.2 Eurocentrism

Eurocentrism is the practice of viewing the world from a European perspective at the expense of non-Europeans (Rüsen, 2004). It assumes that non-Europeans have similar worldviews and values as Europeans do (Ibid). Amin (1989) notes that Eurocentrism “claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time” (p. vii). Amin (1989) also notes that Eurocentrism is a “modern phenomenon, the roots of which go back only to the Renaissance, a phenomenon that did not flourish until the nineteenth century” (p. vii). A major part of examining Eurocentrism is the role that white privilege plays in the equation. Working in similar ways as Eurocentrism, “white privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank cheques” (McIntosh, 2005, p.109). Both Eurocentricity and white privilege allow all individuals who possess the necessary criteria a ‘no race’ status, and thus a misconceived ability to represent all of humanity (Raby, 2004). As Roman (1993) notes, “the phrase ‘people of colo[u]r’ still implies that white culture is the *hidden norm* against which all other racially subordinate groups’ so-called ‘differences’ are measured” (p.71).

Bonnett (1997) notes that White as a racial identity “is a relatively recent phenomenon” (p. 175) that has become “synonymous with European” (p.176). Bonnett (1997) further notes that many scholars refer to the Europeans as a static image of Christian and White failing to examine the marginality and diversity amongst the diasporas. As Bonnett explains “anti-racists have, for the most part, yet to become aware of, and escape from, the practice of treating Whiteness as a static, ahistorical, aspatial, objective ‘thing’” (p. 177). With regards to people of European

descent Derrida (1992) asks “to what concept, to what real individual, to what singular entity should this name be assigned today?” (p.5). Dei (2000) responds that the issue is not about “who is Whiteness” rather “how and why is Whiteness produced, maintained and elaborated upon in social order” (p.28). Dei (2000) further quotes Harris (1993) who notes “while those who benefit from Whiteness may be disadvantaged in society, it is not because of their race, but in spite of it” (p.29). In studies researched for the purpose of this thesis, the term ‘European’ represents a general definition of Whiteness (Zine, 2000, 2001 & 2003). The use of the word European will also be used in a similar manner in this thesis unless otherwise stated.

Eurocentrism is especially problematic in countries such as Canada because of the increasing rise in minority population. A study of the census, conducted by Jack Jedwab, the executive director of the Association for Canadian Studies, shows that by the year 2021, the majority of Canadians will be “hyphenated” (Thompson, 2008). What this means is that most Canadians will identify with more than one ethnic background. In 2006 alone, 12.9 million Canadians reported a hyphenated ethnicity (Ibid). This is contributed to by the more than 280, 000 mixed marriage unions that occurred in the same year (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Of the minority population, the 2006 census also reported that 10 million people answered “I am Canadian” in combination with their other origin, proving that there is no single culture to be defined for Canada (Ibid). In Ottawa alone, 1 in 5 residents described themselves as a member of a visible minority group and the 2006 census shows that minority groups are growing three times faster than the rest of the population (Greenberg, 2008). It is indeed problematic then when the current society we live in is still driven and defined by Eurocentric forces.

Educational institutions today have a reputation of being Eurocentric and promoting white privilege. This is supported by the fact that teacher demographics largely still consist of

White teachers and that most literature on student development is based on studies of white, middle class western children (Cartledge, 1996). In other words, teachers may not even know how to address their non-White students adequately. Furthermore, if students do not fit into the mold that the Euro-American culture favours, (white, economically advantaged, heterosexual) they are “flung” to the margins (Lewis, 1995, p.34). In an analysis of schooling in North America, Grumet (1995) remarks that as compensation for the “emptiness” of elementary school, educators have dedicated secondary schools to “ancestor worship, oblivious to the world that students actually live in and care about” (p.18). These researchers suggest that the presence of Eurocentricity in today’s schools is completely ignoring minority students. This is especially disturbing in cities such as Ottawa because of the high percentage of student diversity.

Muslim students are affected greatly by practices of Eurocentrism in schools as they are often viewed solely through stereotypes their teachers and peers have of them. This is partially the result of Western scholarly work and colonial authorities having somewhat succeeded in convincing many that Islam is a one-dimensional image (Hoodfar, 2003). Tsang (1992) suggests this is because “it is often easier to view people as stereotypical representations rather than as individuals” (pg. 94). Regardless, Muslims, and in particular Muslim women who wear *hijab* in schools today, are indeed subjected to colonial discourses (Rezai-Rashti, 2005).

There seems to be a large focus on the scrutinization of *hijabi* women because of the stereotypical image that comes to the minds of most Westerners: “an awkward black cloak that covers the whole body, including the face” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.11). In actuality, the *hijab* refers only to the head scarf worn to cover a woman’s hair and neck. Covering one’s body with a long loose dress is often called an *abaya* or *jilbab*, and covering one’s body and face entirely only revealing the eyes is referred to as a *nikab*. This seems to be a little known fact in the Western

world. One thing is clear though, in Canada a common reaction to seeing a woman in *hijab* is “why is she hiding?” (McDonough, 2003, p.126). When students in a Toronto university were asked to describe what they think a Muslim woman looks like, Professor Rezai-Rashti (1994) was shocked to learn that many of her students described a “backward, oppressed, secluded and battered victim” (p.37). These “born yesterday assumption[s]” (Aswad & Bilge, 1996, p.35) Westerners have of *hijabi* women contribute to perpetuating Eurocentric attitudes in schools. *Hijabi* Somalian students in one school were constantly asked why they would continue to follow a culture that was so “obviously” backwards in comparison to “Canadian culture” (Dei et al., 2000, p.190).

What is the ‘Canadian culture’? Does Canada have just one? The Canadian culture being referred to is related to the previously mentioned Eurocentrism, which assumes that dominant European culture is the culture of everyone, including those of non European decent. Those who do not assimilate with the supposed ‘norm’ are therefore regarded as different. Thus, seeing a woman in *hijab* is viewed by non-Muslims in the West as an inferior cultural difference (Haddad et al., 2006), and the principles and values that accompany the veil are “held up to criticism and even ridiculed” (Aswad & Bilge, 1996, p.37). Similarly, in schools “counselors dealing with Muslim students attribute their teenage problems to their ‘backward culture’” (Rezai-Rashti, 2005, p.181). Girls in school who wear the *hijab* are automatically judged by their educators to be passive, forced by their parents to wear the veil and in the need of rescue (Ibid). Rezai-Rashti also challenges the predominant perception that non-Muslim women in the West have achieved liberation that ‘other’ women need to follow.

Studies such as the aforementioned suggest that Eurocentric attitudes continue to grow as very few educators in Canadian schools pause to examine the reality behind the veil and its

implications for the students who choose to wear it.

2.3 Anti-Racist Education

“Anti racist education helps us move that European perspective over to the side to make room for other cultural perspectives that must be included” (Lee,1995, p.19)

Anti racism can be seen as a proactive response to Eurocentrism and white privilege.

Bonnett (2000) defines a minimal definition of anti-racism as “[referring] to those forms of thought and/or practice that seek to confront, eradicate and/or ameliorate racism” (p.4). Dei & Calliste (2000) describe a more detailed definition of anti-racism, noting that it is,

an action-oriented, educational and political strategy for institutional and systematic changes that addresses the issues of racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression (sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism) (p.13).

Although the concept of anti-racism may not be a new one, the term is a “twentieth century creation” (Bonnett, 2000, p. 10). Within a Canadian context Bonnett (2000) describes Canada as “a politically devolved society, where both the majority of federal and provincial governments claim to accommodate and celebrate ethnic and racial pluralism” (p.60. Lee (1985) situates the role of anti-racism in schools by noting:

Anti-racist education is a perspective that permeates all subject areas and school practices. Its aim is the eradication of racism in all its various forms. Anti racist education emerges from an understanding that racism exists in society and, therefore, the school, as an institution of society, is influenced by racism (p.8).

The goal of anti racism is to create educational settings where all minority students can be center stage in the learning process. Lee (1995) describes anti-racist education as a “perspective” that “cuts across all subject areas, and addresses the histories and experiences of people who have been left out of the curriculum” (p.19). Dei (1994) describes it as minority

students no longer acting as “players supporting an all-white European cast but as major actors” (p.2). He envisions anti-racism as more than a discourse; he sees it as a pro active educational strategy that addresses not only issues of racism, but many types of social oppression. Dei believes that anti racist strategies should not stop at race, but must include other aspects, such as the inclusion and exclusion of minority groups and the social implications that accompany such practices.

Implementing policies that focus on student equality and anti racism in schools is a way to address the lived experiences and histories of minority students who have been left out of the curriculum. One of the ways discrimination works is “that it treats some people’s experiences, lives, and points of view as though they don’t count, as though they are less valuable than other peoples” (Lee, 1995, p.20). Important components of equality as described by Farell (1999) include all students having access to all programs offered by the schools. However, opening programs to all students is not enough, educators must ensure students are succeeding to similar levels. Canadian schools can not be ranked at the top of the accredited lists if they do not help students from all marginalized groups to attain success. In order for schools to accomplish this, Shields (2002) suggests that educators must frequently reflect and examine “who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged?” (p. 38).

Multiculturalism, sometimes confused as meaning the same thing as anti-racism, is often mistaken as the solution to combating ‘racism’ in schools. Multiculturalism is defined as “a political doctrine officially promoting cultural diversity as an intrinsic component of social, political and moral order” (Dei & Calliste, 2000, p.21). Dei & Calliste (2000) further explain that multiculturalism “works with the notion of our basic humanness and downplays inequities of difference by accentuating shared commonalities” (p.21). Bedard (2000) notes that

multiculturalism “has become a site in which Whiteness continues to remain the centre and difference is relegated to the margins of social experience” (p.41). The social experiences Bedard speaks to is the superficial cultural aspect that multiculturalism often focuses on. While the intention to highlight a minority groups’ culture in order to create student awareness and bring them together may seem noble, it can at times be very detrimental, widening the gap even further between minorities and non-minorities. The multicultural approach is challenged as simply masking inequality under superficial aspects of culture, such as the clothes, the language and the food (Zine, 2003), or as Lee (1995) notes, limiting multiculturalism to “the dances, the dress, the dialect, the dinners” (p.19). Generalizing cultures to just representations are what eventually lead to stereotypes, the same stereotypes that single out minority groups like *hijabis*. These stereotypes are what silence minority groups as images begin to represent them instead of their own voices. “Saris and samosas do not build critical knowledge of racialized power and privilege in society” (Zine, 2003, p.40).

There are however positive aspects of Multiculturalism. It is important for students to be able to share cultural aspects with each other since studies have shown that “student body diversity promotes learning outcome, and better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society, and better prepares them as professionals” (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006, p.32). Furthermore, cultural knowledge of their students also helps teachers to “maximize the effectiveness of their instruction” (Cartledge, 1996, p.16). However, multiculturalism alone is not enough to promote an environment of equality. Multiculturalism must be paired with anti-racist strategies. Bennett (2000) notes that in a Canadian context it is vital to “draw a distinction between anti-racism and multiculturalism” (p.20). Bennett (2000) feels the question of concern is not “whether multiculturalism shares certain ideas in common with anti-racism. Rather...to

explain where to draw the boundary and operationalize the distinction between [the] two terms” (p.21). This concern highlighted by Bennett is one that scholars such as Dei (2000) and Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) also share. Anti-racism and multiculturalism can not be used as interchangeable terms because the former has a much more proactive and complex definition than the latter. Schools must take both initiatives seriously because failure to do so is actually promoting a Eurocentric, racist education. “There is no neutral ground on this” (Lee, 1995).

2.4 Rise of *Hijab* in Canada

Oh Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the wives of the believers, that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments (K.33:59)

Wearing a *hijab* is a phenomenon that is on the rise in Canada. Its widespread practice amongst all ethnic groups, even groups that have not traditionally worn it in the past, suggests that it is no longer a cultural influence that leads girls to wear it (Meshal, 2003). Furthermore, *hijabis* in Canada today are not just comprised of immigrants from Muslim countries, but are women who have been born and raised in the West (Hoodfar, 2003). Several studies have therefore examined the phenomenon of why more and more women in North America are wearing the *hijab* (Hoodfar, 2003; Zine, 2001; Roald, 2001& McDonough, 2003). Major reasons stated for wanting to practice the *hijab* was to maintain an Islamic lifestyle (Zine, 2001), to gain trust and freedom from parents, to rise awareness about Islam, to maintain an Islamic identity, to exercise their democratic rights (Hoodfar, 2003) and as a source of empowerment (McDonough, 2003). Amongst these reasons of why women choose to veil, a common theme prevalent in all studies was that participants did not believe *hijab* was a form of restriction and repression, “or any of the other terms by which Westerners have generally understood the Muslim woman’s condition” (Haddad et al., 2006). The most popular answer was that women in *hijab* were trying to maintain a certain standard of Islam by veiling (Aswad& Bilge, 1996). Wearing *hijab* was out

of sincere dedication and commitment to the religion of Islam and women wore it to “convey piety and respect for religious values” (Roald, 2001, p. 259). These studies suggest that in the Canadian context, wearing *hijab* can indicate a woman’s commitment to Islam, and that a Muslim who wears *hijab* is likely to be more committed to her religion than a Muslim who does not (Hoodfar, 2003). Furthermore, wearing *hijab* asserts Islamic identity making it an indispensable form of social identification (Zine, 2000). Women who choose to veil are prepared and acknowledge that regardless of where they go, wearing a *hijab* will automatically link them to their status as a Muslim.

The commitment to be recognized as a Muslim by wearing the veil is what distinguishes *hijabis’* experiences in schools from other Muslims (male and non-*hijabi*). While non-*hijabi* youth are not automatically recognizable as Muslims and therefore less susceptible to being stereotyped by others, Muslim males are also perceived by their *hijabi* peers to have a much different experience in schooling altogether (Hoodfar, 2003). Muslim males seem to experience more freedom when it comes to social interaction as noted by a participant in Hoodfar’s (Ibid) study: “What bothered me most and made it harder for me to put up with all these restrictions was that they did not apply to my brother because he was a boy...the difference between my life and his was considerable” (p.19). Statements such as this suggest that *hijabi* girls are experiencing schooling much differently than their peers, be they non-Muslims or Muslims, male or female.

Students who wear *hijab* and many Muslims in general are often faced with religious contradictions in Canadian schools. These problems are not just perceived prejudice from teachers and peers. Muslims also face several contradictions between their religion and everyday school routines. With respect to the fundamentals of Islam such as fasting during the month of

Ramadan, some Muslim students had teachers criticize the practice, informing students that fasting was detrimental to their health (Keaton, 2006). The same study further highlighted Muslim students' frustration with the lack of teacher understanding of Islam. Observing religious holidays such as Eid (day of celebration that follows the month of Ramadan) was not possible because of scheduled tests or assignments. Students felt their religion held no importance in the schools that gave two weeks worth of holidays for Christmas celebrations (Ibid). When Muslim students in high school confide in counselors for many of the same reasons non-Muslim students do, they have their problems attributed to the "backward culture" of Islam and their Muslim parents (Rezai-Rashti, 2005). Furthermore, Muslim students admit their "funny names" different foods and different music often became the subject of many jokes (Hoodfar, 2003).

For *hijabi* students, criticism from educators often comes within the classroom when *hijab* becomes the subject of discussion and even ridicule at times (Hoodfar, 2003). *Hijabi* students are faced with the tensions of having to discuss the "woman question" and "feminist issues" without feeling as though they have betrayed their religion or Islamic values (Rezai-Rashti, 2005). Some *hijabi* students felt teachers misunderstood Islam and as a result adapted patronizing attitudes and reacted differently towards them (Zine, 2000).

From their peers, Muslim students feel they are asked "stupid questions" (Hoodfar, 2003) about their *hijab*. An example of this is illustrated in Raby' (2004) study which examined whether or not student's felt racism was present in their school. One girl's narration revealed that many Somolian students in her school were picked on because of the "wraps all around their faces" and were asked questions like "aren't you hot?" and "are you a ninja?" (p.1). In physical education classes, *hijabi* students who wore tracksuits instead of shorts and a t-shirt felt they were the only ones who were made fun of by their peers, even if other non-Muslim students

chose to wear similar attire. “[*Hijabis*] were made to feel like outsiders, not quite up to the standards of Canadian society” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.28).

Socially, studies indicate *hijabi* youth are alienated by institutional activities organized by public schools, especially at the high school level (Zine, 2000). Many physical activities such as physical education classes strain relationships between Muslim students and their non-Muslim classmates (Hoodfar, 2003). Gym classes that involve swimming in a co-ed environment, and in some cases, even in all girl classes, conflict with the religious beliefs of some Muslims (Rezai-Rashti, 2005). In cases like this, many girls obtained medical notes from doctors excusing them from swimming class (Keaton, 2006).

School dances, which become more common and popular during high school, can be another source of anxiety for *hijabi* students. The physical interaction between young men and women, the dark atmosphere mixed with loud music (which in itself can be a religious restriction some Muslims abide by), women dressing in provocative clothing that make *hijabi* girls stand out even more as they cover virtually every part of themselves except their hands and face, are all factors that conflict with practices of Islam (Aswad & Bilge, 1996). Just the pedagogical themes of school dances can be problematic. Dances that reflect the dominant European themes of most schools can ultimately conflict with many of the beliefs that Muslim students hold. Examples of school dance themes are Halloween, Valentine’s Day, Easter, and Christmas (Aswad & Bilge, 1996; Dei et al., 2000 & Zine, 2001). Under the guidance of religious leaders such as Imams, many Muslims are questioning the appropriateness of celebrating such events (Aswad & Bilge, 1996).

High school also becomes a common time when many students start dating and socialize more frequently, as they usually experience more social independence during this stage.

Unfortunately, it is difficult for many Muslim students to interact socially with their peers as their social activities differ greatly. Examples of social activities that often take place outside of school include dating and alcohol and drug use. These activities may be common practices amongst non-Muslim youth but are forbidden in Islam (Aswad & Bilge, 1996 & Zine, 2001). However, some Muslim students willing to compromise aspects of their religion in an attempt to fit in or because of peer pressure, do engage in these practices. This is what Al Jabri (1995) describes as “split personality syndrome.” It occurs when Muslims feel the need to develop a double identity in order to fit in with their non-Muslim friends yet maintain integrity towards their Muslim lifestyle. For *hijabi* students though, split personality is rare since wearing *hijab* is a sign of their commitment to prioritizing Islam first in their life, regardless of what their non-Muslim and even non-*hijabi* Muslim peers do. Therefore, religious obligations are more likely to create tensions between *hijabi* students and their peers, thus causing social exclusion (Hoodfar, 2003).

Social exclusion from peers has resulted in Muslim students forming associations and clubs exclusively for Muslims. Many high schools in Canada have formed groups such as the Muslim Students Associations (MSA), as well as many community organizations such as the Muslim Youth association (MYO) and within Ottawa, the Muslim Association of Canada Youth Division of Ottawa (MYDO). Zine’s (2000) study which examines the phenomenon of the increasing number of Muslim student organizations in Toronto schools attributes its creation to a way to resisting marginality within a Eurocentric school system, a type of “formalized resistance”(p.293). Students interviewed during the study viewed Muslim organizations as a place where they could come back to “their own kind” (p.306). What this meant for many students, as explained by Zine, is that organizations such as these allowed Muslims to cultivate

relationships on the basis of mutual interest. The overall goal of Muslim based clubs is to promote social interaction for Muslim youth in a “*halal*” environment (p.307). The study revealed that having a social outlet like an MSA provided students with alternative options to school dances and other social activities that would otherwise compromise their Islamic values.

There is also a rise in formation of clubs exclusively for Muslim women. An example within Ottawa is One Soul, an athletic association created solely for women, especially those who wear *hijab* and wish to participate in sports in an environment that adheres to their personal Islamic values. Furthermore, there has been an increase in the number of *halaqas* (discussion groups), youth camps and internet sites where young women can participate in discussions about various Islamic topics. It is very common for a majority of the participants to be *hijabi* (Hoodfar 2003 & Zine, 2000). Overall, there is a significant amount of research illustrating the rise in the *hijabi* population in a Canadian context.

2.5 The Gaps in Literature

The literature review highlights studies that examine how Muslim students undergo schooling in a North American context (Rezai-Rashti, 1994; Aswad & Bilge, 1996; Hoodfar, 2003; Meshal, 2003; Raby, 2004; Keaton, 2006 & Gollnick & Chinn, 2006.) and studies that examine schooling for Muslim students in a specifically Canadian context (Zine, 2000 & 2001). However, many of these studies, while giving some attention to Muslim students, do not focus solely on the experiences of *hijabi* students. Some studies examine why some women decide for or against wearing a *hijab* (Meshal, 2003 & Hoodfar, 2003), some look at how racism in schools is “denied and downplayed” (Raby, 2004), and some look at Muslim students in general, regardless of gender, assuming their experiences are the same. The researcher finds that there are little, if any, studies that dedicate research to understanding how *hijabi* youth are experiencing

public high school in Canada. In particular, secondary schools in one of Canada's most diverse cities, Ottawa.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This thesis aims to gain an “insider” perspective of how participants feel and to show the multiple realities of each one’s experience (Creswell, 1998). Also, I feel the topic is one that needs to be explored in depth since “theories are not available to explain behaviour [of this] population” (Creswell, 1998, p.17). It is for these reasons that the study will be solely qualitative in nature. Johnson and Christensen (2004) define qualitative research as research that relies “primarily on the collection of qualitative data (nonnumerical data such as words and pictures)” (p.359). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982) qualitative research contains five essential features. They are: 1) “qualitative research has the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument” 2) “qualitative research is descriptive” 3) “qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products” 4) “qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively” and 5) “meaning is of essential concern to the qualitative approach” (p.27-29). All five features are applicable to this thesis.

A qualitative research design allows for a “world, or reality, [that] is not the fixed, single, agreed upon, or measureable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research” (Merriam, 2002, p.3). This is applicable to research participants in a qualitative study such as this, as each one has her own experience of the phenomenon in question. Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) note, “qualitative researchers...assume that the world is made up of multiple realities, socially constructed by different individual views of the same situation”(p.16). This enables participants to each share their unique stories. As a qualitative researcher, I am "interested in understanding what those interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a

particular context" (Merriam, 2002, p.4). A qualitative tradition of inquiry will also be used because of my "emancipatory aims to raise awareness foster self-understanding...and create opportunities to engage in social action and seek social justice" (Schram, 2003).

I will be drawing from the elements of an *interpretive* qualitative approach because of my interest in learning how my participants "interact with their social world, [and] the meaning it has for them (Merriam, 2002, p.4). The *interpretive* qualitative research design has four main characteristics. The first is that the researcher aims to understand how the participant perceives the experience under investigation, the second is that the "researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis" (ibid, p.5), thirdly, the study being conducted is inductive, meaning, the outcome of a qualitative study such as this one should produce some form of organized data, such as themes or categories (in this thesis, themes and an essence are produced), and finally, the findings of the thesis should be richly descriptive so that readers can thoroughly access the researched phenomenon.

The qualitative tradition of inquiry being used will be a phenomenological one. Phenomenological inquiries are most often associated with the names of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz (as referred to in Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982) "researchers in phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (p.31). A phenomenology, as described by Creswell (1998) is "the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon. It explores the structures of consciousness in human experiences" (p.51). The four major characteristics of phenomenology include the need to return to philosophy, to suspend all judgment on what is 'real', one's consciousness is always related to the reality of an object, and lastly, reality can only be perceived within the scope of one's

experience (Ibid, p.52-53). Merriam (2002) notes that "from phenomenology comes the idea that people interpret everyday experiences from the perspective of the meaning it has for them" (p.37). Ultimately, a phenomenology aims to "understand the essence or structure of a phenomenon" (ibid, p.93).

I will be using a relativist ontological perspective, meaning there is no single reality, rather the assumption that there are multiple constructed realities for each participant. This perspective will allow all participants to voice their experiences the way they perceive them to be.

3.2 Eligibility Criteria

In order to be a part of this study, participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- 1) Be a female Muslim
- 2) Wear a *hijab*
- 3) Currently attending a public high school in Ottawa
- 4) Are between the ages of 14-18
- 5) Be able to converse fluently in the English language

The first and second criterions were established because the study focuses solely on the experiences of Muslim *hijabi* women. The third and fourth criterions were established because the phenomenon in question has a specific focus on Ottawa public high schools, excluding special and adult education high schools; and the fifth criterion was established because the researcher is not bilingual.

A criterion was established in order to recruit a purposeful sample, which Merriam (2002) notes are a "sample from which the most can be learned" (p.12). Merriam (2002) further notes that "random sampling makes little sense" (p.12) for a researcher such as myself, as I am seeking to gain information about a particular phenomenon. Therefore, I created a focused criteria that would attract particular participants to help me investigate the phenomenon in question.

3.3 Participants

Participants were recruited by electronic mail through various Muslim based organizations in Ottawa, such as the Muslim Youth of Ottawa (MYO), Muslim Association of Canada Youth Division of Ottawa (MYDO), Muslim Youth Association (MYA), One Soul Athletics, and community Muslim Students' Associations (MSA). Participants were not recruited directly from secondary schools because of time feasibility. Upon receiving ethical approval from the University of Ottawa, I did not have to receive separate approval from the school board because I accessed my participants privately through online group servers (See Appendix A).

After potential participants showed interest by contacting me, further issues were addressed, such as a suitable meeting place that would be convenient for the participants and a suitable time of day. After these issues were addressed, appointments were made to meet with the participant and a guardian to have all necessary consent forms signed and a thorough explanation of the study if participants or their guardian had any further questions and/or concerns. Upon completing all necessary paperwork, researcher and participant met in a confidential space where the interview then took place.

In order to obtain a purposeful sample of data, a total of seven participants were recruited, which according to Dukes (1984) is appropriate since a qualitative study allows for

flexibility in the number of participants. Collectively five different secondary were being attended. Schools discussed were located across Ottawa from the West end to the East end and ranged from a highly diverse student body to a small minority population.

Participants ranged from grades 9 to 12 and belonged to different ethnicities. Three participants identified as Pakistani-Canadians, two identified as Somali-Canadians, one identified as Afghani-Canadian and one identified as Egyptian-Canadian. All of them have been attending their high school since their junior year and have all been living in Ottawa for at least 6 years. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym name for confidentiality purposes. Table 1 represents a summary of the participant demographics.

Table 1: Participant Information

Name	Farah	Sabina	Zainab	Seema	Mariam	Imaan	Fatima
Current Grade	Gr.11	Gr.10	Gr.9	Gr.11	Gr.10	Gr.10	Gr.11
Grade started <i>hijab</i>	Gr.7	Gr.3	Gr.5	Gr.9	Gr.5	Gr.7	Gr.9
Identifies as	Pakistani-Canadian	Somali-Canadian	Pakistani-Canadian	Somali-Canadian	Afghani-Canadian	Pakistani-Canadian	Egyptian-Canadian

3.4 Data Collection

In order to collect data and gain insight into the experience of the seven participants involved, I conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with each participant, using a digital voice recorder. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and notes were also being taken by the researcher throughout the whole process, including first impression and an overall description of the participant. A semi-structured, face-to-face interview method was utilized to capture the essence of individual experiences in terms of unique and exceptional stories, facial

expressions, tone of voice and body language. Participants were encouraged to share every aspect of their experience that they felt comfortable with. The interviews was comprised of central questions which were “open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional” (Creswell, 1998, p.99), followed by prompting topical subquestions that encouraged participants to elaborate in full detail (See Appendix B). At the end of each interview, participants were encouraged to contact me if they remembered anything else they would like included in their interview.

After transcribing verbatim each interview, a copy was given to the respective participant. Participants were given sufficient time to read and respond to their transcripts, and if there were something they wished to remove or include, changes were made right away by the researcher and once again sent electronically for participant approval. Only after I received full approval from all participants to use all the data collected during interviews, did I proceed with data analysis. Overall, all the participants were content with their transcripts and showed enthusiasm in contributing towards the study.

3.5 Data Analysis

After completing all interview transcriptions I followed Creswell (1998) and Tesh's (1990) suggestion to simply read through each interview to get an overall sense of the data. I then made extensive notes about each interviews (e.g., word choice, tone of voice and other observational field notes) in the margins of the transcripts as recommended by Bogdan & Biklen (as cited in Creswell, 1998). Finally, by reading and re-reading each transcript, I prepared to reduce the data by highlighting statements and looking closely at participants' choice of words.

After those initial steps, the data analysis stage of my research really began. I decided to use Moustakas' (1994) modifications to the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Phenomenological Data to analyze my data and code the significant themes prevalent in participant interviews. It is

important to note that Moustakas (1994) refers to research participants as "co-researchers" (p.122). Creswell (1998) also acknowledges this Method to be the most commonly used for a phenomenological study such as mine. Moustakas' (1994) adaptation of the mentioned Method is as follows:

1. using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of your own experience of the phenomenon.
 2. From the verbatim transcript of your experience, complete the following steps:
 - a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
 - b. Record all relevant statements
 - c. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience
 - d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes
 - e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into *a description of the textures of the experience*. Include verbatim examples.
 - f. Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct *a description of the structures of your experience*.
 - g. Construct a *textural-structural description* of the meanings and essences of your experience.
 3. From the verbatim transcript of the experiences of *each* of the other *co-researchers*, complete the above steps, a through g.
 4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all co-researchers experiences, construct *a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the*

experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole (p.122).

Ultimately the researcher is striving to describe the *essence* of the experience undertaken by all participants. During step 2c of Moustakas' adaption of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method, horizons, also referred to as, horizontalization, "treats each statement as having equal worth" (Creswell, 1998, p.147). Step 2e's reference to textures, or, textural description of the experience, simply means obtaining a description of what happened in the experience. Step 2f's reference to imaginative variation and textural-structural description means "seeking all possible meanings and divergent perspectives, varying the frames of reference about the phenomenon, and constructing a description of how the phenomenon was experienced" (Creswell, 1998, p.150 & Moustakas, 1994, p.97). I have already described my experience of the phenomenon in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

The goal of this study was to understand how *hijabi* youth experience the social activities offered by their high schools. I acknowledge that there may be exceptions in the phenomenon in question and that some *hijabi* students may not relate to experiences told by other participants; however, this study aims to create an understanding of the phenomenon under examination rather than to represent a large population. It is the hope of the researcher though that the information generated will be transferable in other contexts.

3.6 Validity of the Study

Merriam (2002) notes that "the issues around rigor and trustworthiness are best understood once you become involved in the study" (p.422). In order to make this thesis a reliable source of literature, I must ensure that the validity of my study is explicit and transparent. Therefore, I used Sandelowski's (1986) criteria to ensure rigor in my study. They

criteria are: 1) the study should be credible; 2) the study should be applicable; 3) the study should be consistent; and 4) the study should contain neutrality. These criteria are explained in detail below.

3.6.1 Credibility

Credibility of the study is achieved when participants share and agree with the findings and interpretation that the researcher has compiled from transcripts. One way this can be ensured is through triangulation; that is, collecting data from different participants at different times, and observing consistent patterns throughout. This was done throughout the duration of the interview process, as participants were always contacted and interviewed separately to ensure confidentiality as well as freedom to share their own experiences without the influence of other participants' stories.

A second way credibility was ensured was through member checking. Member checking enabled participants to access researcher notes so each one could verify that their recordings were accurate. During the process of data analysis, available participants were also given access to dominant themes and categories comprised by the researcher. Furthermore, internal validity is strengthened by presenting detailed field notes and descriptions using as much verbatim conversations as possible throughout the results portion of the study.

3.6.2 Applicability

According to Sandelowski (1986) a study is deemed applicable if "its findings can 'fit' into contexts outside the study situation and when it's audience views its findings as meaningful and applicable in terms of their own experiences" (p.32). As mentioned earlier, this study aims to create an understanding of the phenomenon under examination rather than to represent a large population; however, I hope that the data revealed will be transferable to other contexts.

Furthermore, since findings amongst all seven participants in this study were very consistent, I am confident that the essences described in the results portion of the study may resonate with the experiences of other *hijabi* youth attending high school, and so in that way, are transferable.

3.6.3 Consistency

Consistency refers to another researcher's ability to easily follow the "decision trail" (Sandelowski, 1986) taken by the initial researcher. In this study I have outlined and detailed the descriptive path I have taken from the beginning of my study until the end. I have explicitly identified all steps taken in order to arrive at the results and implications of my study. All of these factors combined should provide a sufficient amount of information to obtain consistency.

3.6.4 Neutrality

As the name suggests, neutrality requires that the researcher remain bias free and the research remain as transparent as possible. Initially I was conscious about this aspect because I wear a *hijab* and would therefore be seen as an insider. However, I also believe my role as an insider enabled my participants to feel more at ease and comfortable while talking to me about their experiences. For the purpose of the study and its readers, I have stated that I am a *hijabi* in the first chapter so not to conceal it. Throughout the interviewing process I spoke only when asking the interview questions and ensured the questions being asked were non-directional so I would not influence my participants in any way. Moreover, participants were always asked to explain their answers explicitly if I felt an answer was vague. This left room for no assuming on my part. I have also provided readers and other researchers with rich excerpts from transcripts obtained during participant interviews.

Although my role as an insider may be apparent, it is important to note that in the academic world, I am also considered an outsider because of my status as an educational

researcher. I acknowledge that it may appear difficult to remain bias free when a researcher such as myself involves herself in a topic she is closely related to, however it is for this reason that I use as much verbatim data from participant interviews as possible. It is important to note that complete neutrality can rarely be achieved as Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) stipulate that “no matter how hard observers try to be impartial, their observation will possess some degree of bias” (p.453). They further note:

No one can be totally objective, as we all are influenced to some degree by our past experiences, which in turn affect how we see the world and the people within it.

Nevertheless, all researchers should do their best to become aware of, and try to control, their biases (p.453).

I have done my best to ensure that I remain bias-free throughout this study. I have engaged in critical self reflection throughout the process of writing and putting together this thesis and thus achieved to some extent, reflexivity, which Johnson and Christensen (2004) refer to as a “key strategy used to understand researcher bias” (p.249).

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

The findings are revealed from the lived experiences of seven *hijabi* high school students in Ottawa and their interaction with school social activities. The following will serve as an in-depth introduction to each participant, allowing readers insight into world of each *hijabi* interviewed. Participants have shared their own personal and significant stories in an effort to help us understand the way they have perceived their experiences so far. Participant profiles also explore other important and relevant information such as why participants chose to wear *hijab* and how adhering to the religious principles of Islam interacts with social activities offered by their secondary schools. Profiles are broken down into sub-categories as follows: background, school demographics, social activities in the school, the impact of social activities, perceptions of Muslims and the *hijab*, and suggestion for change.

4.2 Farah's Profile

Farah is a Pakistani-Canadian who was in Grade 11 at the time of our interview. My reflective notes on my interview with Farah describe her as: *confident and down to earth, an enthusiastic student who is very comfortable with who she is, and makes this apparent by the way she interacts with me.*

Background

Farah began wearing *hijab* in grade 7 because it was her way of showing the people around her that she was Muslim. She also feels that it helped her avoid different social pressures from peers, and allowed people to judge her as a person through interaction rather than by personal appearance. As summed up by Farah:

I wanted [my peers] to know I was Muslim...because a lot of people here especially get judged by how you look like, because looks are really important, but personally I really don't care, so I want people to like, think about me, about how I am as a person, not what I look like as a person because it doesn't really matter.

Farah's two older sisters also wear the *hijab*, but her Mother does not. When asked about the influences that informed her decision to wear a *hijab*, Farah said:

Well I started going to Islamic School, well, not Islamic School but like a Sunday school when I was in grade 7, so I started to learn the traditions and stuff like that, and my sisters wore one before I started. My older sister started in high school and my other sister started in grade 7...so that was sort of like an influence too, they sort of told me what the benefits and like, it wasn't their decision telling me "oh you have to wear it" it was more like, "you can if you want to."

Farah's number one reason for wearing the *hijab* was to assert her identity as a Muslim.

Ultimately for Farah, it was her own decision to wear the *hijab* and she was not pressured into wearing it by anyone.

When I asked Farah what significance wearing the *hijab* had to her, she replied:

It means that you have the security in yourself to know that people will take you for you. I guess I think of it as a way to weed out who is real and who is not because a lot of people can be fake, so you find out people's intentions easier this way I find.

Throughout many readings of Farah's transcript, I noted in my reflective journal that Farah makes many references to feeling "secure" as a *hijabi*. I write: *Farah is very confident and proud of her status as a hijabi Muslim; this is visible not just through her words, but also through her*

body language. She appears to be very comfortable in her own skin, and has no hesitation talking about being Muslim or being one of very few hijabis in her school.

School Demographics

Farah describes her school as a predominantly 'Jewish School' containing a very small population of minorities including the Muslim *hijabi* population. There is a maximum of 15 *hijabis* in Farah's school and overall 50 Muslims, out of a population of over 1200 students. When asked to describe an overall picture of what her school looks like ethnically and racially, Farah first paused then said "my school is so segregated its so sad, like, we have a group for black people... and a group for like the Jew crew², and like, the popular kids." Farah used the term "Jew crew" often throughout our interview to describe the school's Jewish population. According to Farah, the term was coined by the Jewish students themselves. Although this term could be interpreted as a racist epithet Farah claimed it was an openly used term in her school affiliated with popularity and a high social status. Farah defined the popular kids as "the Jew crew...white kids, rich as hell, like, I'm not kidding!" To add to this, Farah also describes her school as one where there is minimal mixing amongst cultures and religions and that she finds she is one of a few individuals that is friendly with all groups, regardless of race or religion. She says, "I don't like to stick with one group, I go around to different people."

Social Activities in the School

Farah named the following social activities that were offered currently at school: student council, environmental club, amnesty international, Links Crew, athletic council, sports clubs (such as basketball, rugby, soccer, volleyball etc), school dances, casino nights and Oscar awards. Events such as school dances, casino night and the Oscar awards are organized by the

² It is important to note that Farah refers to the Jewish students at her school as being the "white kids" rather than a minority group.

student council, which Farah is a part of. When I asked her what kind of awards were given at the school's Oscars she said:

Like, everyone can get nominated for stuff, like, I'm on the student council too, I've been on it since grade 9. I put an emphasis on [how] you should be more general rather than like, what your friends will choose for you, because a lot of people on student council have like the same friends cause its usually like a popularity contest, and then it makes a difference to them because their like 'oh okay, I guess we can put something else in.' It makes them more open minded I find.

The student council at Farah's school, and the individuals involved were described as the "White kids." As the only *hijabi* and one of few minority members of student council, Farah described how she has to attend all the social events organized by student council:

Um, I have to go to all of them, but pretty much what I do is I sit on the side...like at the dances we have to watch the halls so nobody goes and stuff so I'm just sitting there texting people like, "I'm bored" (laughs).

Farah further added "Yah, I go to all of them, so like Oscars, Casino night, dances, but like, I don't participate in all of them, I don't do the gambling, I don't do the dancing." When I asked her why she does not participate in the social events she attends she replied:

I don't do the dancing because dancing is...sort of like, why would you do that if you're wearing a hijab? Why would you do that if you're Muslim? Yah, [wearing hijab] makes you feel more like, conservative, its not like its [students'] intention to make you feel more conservative but its like, if I am wearing this, then why would I go against it, and like, pretty much give up everything I am going for here.

Farah made many other statements explaining her lack of active participation in student council led events, such as, "I personally feel like if I'm doing something for my religion, then why would I go against it and throw everything away just for like, an hour of fun?" She also stated that if she did actively participate in events such as school dances, she would "sort of feel weird," and when asked to comment further she explained "I don't know, I don't feel out of place because no one is like, mean to me, but if I'm not participating and I'm just walking around, I'm just like, 'this is so wrong.'" No other *hijabis* participated in student council led events because, as Farah described them, "they're really conservative." Aside from being on student council and taking part in a couple of athletic clubs, Farah is also the president of a school club that involves volunteering around the community.

The Impact of Social Activities

In order to explore my second research question, which is, in what ways are *hijabi* girls being included or excluded from social activities because of their religious obligations, Farah and I discussed her participation, and fellow *hijabis*' participation in social events at school.

When it comes to sports, Farah is an active participant. She has played rugby, field hockey and badminton and states that she has never had any problem participating in these sports in terms of uniform conflicts. There was only one other *hijabi* girl who participated in school sports as Farah explained:

There's a *hijabi* girl who plays volleyball and I think it's really funny because all the volleyball girls have like the smallest spandex (laughs) and she's like wearing jogging pants and it looks so different because your so used to seeing the spandex, so your like, 'yesss!' (laughing)...its ridiculous, like why are you even wearing that? Like, how does

that even interfere? How does wearing pants interfere with volleyball? I don't understand.

Although the *hijabi* girl Farah made reference to did not experience any problems from peers or referees, Farah explained "she just finds it really funny because she says it doesn't matter if you're wearing pants or if you're wearing spandex, it doesn't affect how fast you play." I found this story personally interesting because of my own involvement on my high school volleyball team. Although I felt I excelled in volleyball and had even won medals of achievement, I eventually stopped playing competitively because of all the questions and comments I received over my uniform which consisted of track pants and a t-shirt and differed greatly from my teammates who wore the traditional jerseys and spandex shorts. I chose not to tell Farah my experience. Overall, Farah claims that wearing a fully clothed uniform in all sports' teams has never been a problem at her school.

As in most high schools, Prom, the end of the year formal dance held for senior students, is a big deal. Since Farah will be in her senior year in the coming fall of 2008, I asked her if she planned on attending her prom. Farah replied that she may go but "every year the *hijabis* that do go have a bad time." One of the reasons *hijabis* did not go to prom was because all the other students went with dates, to which Farah commented:

Yah, a lot of people don't feel comfortable, but like, who cares about a date? Like personally, I'd just go with my friends. The purpose is to have fun and to not be like, 'oh I need a date!'"

I asked her about what a *hijabi* girl might wear and she said,

Yah, I don't know, I think I could find a nice dress, like wear a nice blouse and a skirt. I wouldn't have a problem with that...because if you let prom take control of your life, like,

'oh I feel so out of place, and I won't have a dress, and I won't look like everybody else' then of course you'll be like 'oh' but if your just like 'oh whatever I'll have fun with my friends then it won' really matter.

Farah also talked about the prom 'after party' that became the main event every year, but because of the atmosphere, drinking, smoking, drug use, she would never go nor would any *hijabi* she knows.

When it comes to events such as dances and casino night Farah stated that she attended because it is part of her duty as a student council member, but from a religious point of view, she does not believe in participating in such events. She explained it as, "I wouldn't participate, but I do go, but I don't like *DO* it...I guess just as long as you watch what you are doing your good." I asked her if any of her *hijabi* friends ever attended these events and she said rarely because they felt like it is catered only to the "popular kids" who, Farah clarified, are the "White kids." When she has asked her *hijabi* friends to attend, Farah said they replied that they felt like they did not belong and that they would "feel weird." Farah's response to this concern is that "you wouldn't know if you'd feel weird in that situation until you tried it."

I found the discrepancy between how different *hijabis* felt about attending different social events interesting. Farah pointed out that within the *hijabi* and Muslim community at her school, there were different boundaries and interpretation of religion for each individual. "I'm okay with going to dances, but other people are like *Astagferullah!* (May God forgive us)" She stated that some *hijabi* girls were more conservative than others, and that she was one of the only *hijabi* girls that was very active in school events. In her defence, she added that everyone held their own religious beliefs based on perception, and that regardless of what one's beliefs are "religion [was] a really private thing." Farah went on to say that everyone, regardless of religion, also held

their own level of beliefs that should not be influenced by others. Farah was disappointed that there were no other *hijabis* on student council and often asked her *hijabi* friends to participate in school events. Her friends always declined and explained "because nobody else is going, and I'll feel weird there by myself." Farah believes that if there was more involvement from *hijabi* girls, it would encourage more inclusive school activities and as a result, encourage more *hijabi* students to be involved in student council led activities.

I asked Farah how she felt her social experiences of high school compared to that of her *hijabi* friends to which she replied, "I think I am getting the high school experience...I'm in sports, I'm in band...none of my *hijabi* friends do band, I do drama, I do art, I do student council, I do clubs. I'm involved in everything." In comparison to her non-Muslim friends Farah felt there was a difference explaining: "well, theirs is more like partying, their getting all that partying and mine is being a different person, finding my own way."

Perceptions of Muslims and the *Hijab*

I asked Farah if she ever felt like she could not participate in certain social activities offered by her school because of perceptions she felt others held of her, and she replied, "like at dances I think I would look out of place for a lot of people just because their like, 'oh aren't you like, not supposed to be here?' and I'm just like, whatever, I'll do what I want to." This opened up an interesting opportunity for me to ask her further about personal experiences she has had regarding incidents that have happened at school. "[Students] are really into it and want to know why you do it, and like ask me questions why...people always ask me if I was forced to wear it, it's like a media perception that we are like, forced to wear *hijab*." Farah believed that the media played a significant role in portraying Muslims in a negative light and as a result has led non-Muslims to believe that *hijabi* women are forced to wear it with no decision of their own. She

talks about Muslim women being portrayed as “caged” with no rights and treated as a mere object. Her reply to these stereotypes is that *hijabi* women are the “complete opposite.”

Farah also finds humour in some of the questions she is asked such as "if I sees a strand of your hair, do you have to marry me?" and "do you wear the *hijab* in front of your dad?" Her response to these questions is usually a laugh and replies "you just asked a dumb question, I'm not gonna lie!" Other questions she is asked are "Does your Mom wear *hijab*? Why doesn't your Mom wear *hijab*? Did she force you to wear *hijab*?"

Farah said she understood why people asked questions, especially the "why did you decide to wear *hijab*" question. She admitted that if someone she knew started to wear *hijab*, she would also be curious and ask why they decided to do so. "I guess [people] just want to learn about other people."

One of the most admirable qualities about Farah was her confidence in herself and her decision to wear *hijab*. Throughout our interview Farah proved that unlike myself and many students her age, she was not affected by the comments others made about Muslims and *hijab*. Farah interacted with people of different social groups regardless of what her peers thought, and enjoying high school was a decision she was actively making. When we discussed her friend circle she told me her social circle was not limited to just one group, but rather she was friends with different people. "I don't find it weird, I don't feel out of place, it doesn't affect me, other girls are like, oh don't you feel weird being with those people? But I'm like, why would I feel weird?" When we discussed how she handles conflicting friend circles and social activities, she explained "I guess it's just with how you treat things, and let things treat you." She further stated, "if you think in your head I'll feel awkward, you don't even notice that other people probably don't care, if you yourself feel awkward, you're just going to evoke that awkwardness." Farah

went on to say that even though she participated in social activities in her school, she believed she was still maintaining her status as a good Muslim, as she explained, "I'm not doing anything bad and I'm not ruining the perception of a *hijabi*...I don't go and do stupid stuff and drink and stuff. I'm maintaining the purpose of what the *hijab* is."

Suggestion for Change

Farah made several suggestions about how her school could facilitate activities that hijabi girls could partake in. She noted that many of the ideas that she suggested were a part of her campaign for student council co-president.

I'm thinking of having Friday after school barbecues to bring together my school because it's so annoying how segregated it is. Adding together all the clubs and having like, one big event, like maybe having one night to showcase all the different talents at my school. Having a film festival to showcase the videos that students make, and students that are like singers and dancers, and like, if you wanna say a poem, say your poem, have a coffee house, have people snapping fingers for you. Not just have the student council by itself, because that's sort of what it is, like student council is an entity and you can't touch it. It's more like having the [all the clubs] together and like making it all towards one thing so those people in separate things itself connect together.

Farah went into detail about her future plans to 'connect' her school community:

I want more of a focus on like, rather than just having one group of people coming out to these events, have people feel comfortable in this school and feel like they belong in this school, and have a good time while their in high school and not just like "oh, I'm the outsider so I can't have a good time." I want everybody to feel like they belong and have

a good experience and just like afterwards not talk about “oh I hated my high school so much because the only people that ever did anything were the Jew crew.”

Another suggestion Farah made was to have a multicultural show so different ethnicities could showcase their culture. Farah told me that when her older sister was in high school her peers organized a multicultural show that appealed to many different groups. She suggested that instead of the school hosting three dances, an event not everyone enjoyed whether it is for religious reasons or personal, the school should organize only one dance and replace the other two with different activities that would include and appeal everyone, such as a talent show or a musical.

Farah made a thought provoking statement when I asked how accessible the social activities were in her school, she said:

Right now, I think they're accessible for everybody, but I think they could be more welcoming, because accessible and welcoming are different things; accessible is like, 'yah you can come' but welcoming is like, reasons to make you want to come, give you reasons to make you feel happy when you go, not be like 'Oh, I feel out of place' and stuff, because those are two different things.

I reflected on this statement for very long and felt enlightened as I looked back on my high school experience. I was never told I could not participate in social events at school, but indeed, I never felt like I was welcomed or that I belonged.

My interview with Farah ended with her making the following inspirational statement:

I think high school is what you make it...if you make it a bad experience it's your own fault, you decide you're going to be insecure, don't let yourself be insecure, don't let yourself get influenced by other people, don't care about what other people would think,

like, you don't even know, you're not inside their head. Why don't you shake up the world a little bit and do things differently. Why would I waste four years of my life letting other people govern what I do? What purpose does that serve me?

4.3 Sabina's Profile

Sabina is a Somali-Canadian who was in grade 10 at the time of our interview. My reflective notes on Sabina describe her as: *a very warm and personable person to talk with. Sabina is quite tall and I was not surprised to hear that she excelled on the school basketball team. She speaks with confidence and seems to be a very calm and collected individual.*

Background

Sabina began wearing *hijab* when she was in grade 2, at which time she was attending an Islamic school where *hijab* was part of the uniform. When Sabina made the transition from Islamic school to public school in grade 3, she explained that, that was her time to decide whether or not she would continue to wear it, and ultimately decided she would. Factors influencing this decision were the people around her such as friends and other female family members who also wore it and whom she credits with having a positive influence on her. She explains:

a lot of my friends were Muslim and they were wearing it and of course you know, when you're young, you wanna fit in, so I didn't want to be the odd one out not wearing it, so, it was a good peer pressure you could say.

She also attributed her decision to wear *hijab* to religion saying, "it's one of the parts of my religion, so of course I'm going with it." Sabina told me about her older sister who also used to wear *hijab* but a couple of years ago decided to stop wearing it. Sabina and her parents respected her sister's decision to take off the hijab stating "it was her own personal decision."

To Sabina wearing the *hijab* portrayed a sign of modesty as she explained:

It shows that I don't have to show my hair to people for them to accept me and I can also cover myself and dress modestly and people will still accept me while wearing *hijab*, so I definitely think it's a sign of modesty.

School Demographics

Sabina described her school as a very multicultural school with a large population of *hijabis*, Muslims in general and many other minority groups. With the school having a total population of approximately 1000 students, Sabina said that at least 150-200 of those students were Muslim, and while there were more Muslim boys than girls, almost all the Muslims girls wore *hijab*. Sabina described her friends as a mix of races and religions but said that half of her friends were *hijabi*, and that many of the Muslim girls only hang out with each other. She also told me that her brother and sister, who also attended the same high school some years earlier, always described the school as having a large Muslim population. Overall, in the school the dominant race was white people followed by black people, then an even mix of other individuals from various ethnicities.

Out of curiosity I also asked Sabina what the dominant race and gender was amongst her teachers; she replied that almost all her teachers were white females. I was surprised to hear that in a school Sabina described as very multi-cultural, the demographics of teachers remained the same as in schools with little to no minority students. I assumed that a school with a large representation of minority students would contain at least some representation amongst teachers.

I was anxious about this particular interview when I heard how large the *hijabi* population was at Sabina's school and was very curious as to what kind of data I would collect.

Social Activities in the School

Sabina was able to name many social activities offered in her school such as sports teams like basketball, rugby, touch football, as well as different clubs like Expose, a club that raised awareness about the harmful effects of smoking, an International Cultures United club where students shared their culture with each other, a band, and a student council.

Sabina explained in detail how the student council was comprised, explaining that each grade had 4 representatives after which 2 individuals were chosen as co-presidents. Student council, as described by Sabina, consisted of “a variety, there’s different people; there could be Asian, middle Eastern, that kind of thing.” The main responsibility of Sabina’s school’s student council was to organize school dances. The dances had no particular themes but were rather like a semi formal dance where students “kind of get dressed up, kinda don’t, guys wear dress pants and girls wear dresses.” Sabina described the school prom as a highlight for many of the non-Muslim students but an event that *hijabis* rarely attended. She mentioned the possibility of renting a hall with other *hijabi* girls and organizing an all girls prom for all *hijabi* high school graduates.

Sabina’s school also participated in a leadership camp that 60 students from different grades were chosen to attend. Sabina described it as a camp where students got the opportunity to enhance their leadership skills and meet other students from different schools. Sabina attended this camp and said she enjoyed the experience thoroughly because she “met so many people, people [she] wouldn’t necessarily hang out with, and [she] learn[t] a lot of life skills.” Sabina was the only *hijabi* girl who attended the leadership camp and was asked by fellow campers and counsellors why there were not more *hijabi* girls attending. Sabina replied “I don’t really think they’re into that kind of stuff and yah, they don’t really participate in like, that type of school

spirit.” When I asked Sabina what she thought the reason behind this was, she attributed it to the “cool factor” stating some *hijabis* just thought they were too cool to participate. I asked Sabina what kind of representation there was at this leadership camp and she said “they were all white people; there was one guy who was from Pakistan, and that was the only person of colour.”

Sabina played on the school basketball team and stated her tall height encouraged her initially to participate in the sport and also because she “likes basketball in general as a sport.” None of Sabina’s friends participate in school sports but she stated that there are a couple of *hijabi* girls who play on the soccer team.

The Impact of Social Activities

I asked Sabina if she was able to participate in all the social activities her school offered and she replied, “I would pretty much say everything, except personally, I am not into the whole dance thing, and religiously I’m not, you can’t really go into the dances and you can’t dance with the other gender.” I then asked her if there were other activities that she could not partake in because of religion and she elaborated on her previous answer stating:

Yah, it’s definitely the school dances. It’s kind of like semi formal, so that means you dress up and it’s usually short dresses, tight clothes, and you obviously go with a partner, so, I’d feel (pauses) yah (pauses) that would be the big thing.

If Sabina decided to attend a school dance she said she would feel “left out” but if the atmosphere of the school dances did not conflict with Sabina’s religious values she would be interested in attending because “it seems like something fun.” Sabina’s school hosted, on average, three dances a year and Sabina confirmed that rarely, if any, *hijabi* girls attended the dances.

Apart from the three dances, Sabina said prom was a major event that many seniors looked forward to every year. Sabina knew Muslims who had gone to prom in the past but did

not know of any *hijabi* girls who had. Sabina stated *hijabi* girls such as herself were hesitant about attending prom because it transformed into a “night club” once the dance portion began and there was a lot of under the table drinking that went on. She also mentioned that many people hosted after parties that consisted of an atmosphere that would make her feel very uncomfortable. Sabina then brought up an idea that the *hijabi* community of her school and *hijabi* friends from other high schools were considering; amongst themselves, the girls would pitch in money and rent a hall and host their own all-girls prom where *hijabi* girls could dress up in any way they wished, do their hair, get together and have a good time.

When participating on the school basketball team Sabina said her team mates wore shorts and a jersey but she was “allowed” to wear pants, a shirt under her jersey and of course her *hijab*, and that is okay with her basketball coach. The two *hijabi* girls who played on the soccer team also wore pants and, as far as Sabina knew, they did not face any restrictions. Our interview had very little discussion about school sport teams because Sabina said there was very minimal participation on the part of *hijabi* girls and she was not sure why this was.

Sabina's school hosted Friday prayer every week for Muslim students and even reminded students every Friday over the announcements. Sabina added that Friday prayer was to be done over students' lunch time rather than at the specially allotted time that Friday prayer was supposed to be held.

Perceptions of Muslims and the *Hijab*

Sabina explained how she felt people perceived her as a *hijabi*:

I think it helps with the fact that there are a lot of other Muslims in our school so it's not like I'm the only Muslim girl walking around in the hall, because at our school there's a lot of Muslims so it's not like I'm the only one, so they know the religion, they know why

I wear *hijab*, but if they were to ask me I would obviously tell them why, like you know, religion, I think they're comfortable with asking why.

Sabina said if she was the only Muslim or one of very few Muslims in her school, she would feel "left out" and "probably get more questions, more looks" but she believed because there was a large Muslim and *hijabi* population, non-Muslims students and teachers at her school were very well informed about Islam. Sabina made particular reference to one of her teachers who taught a cooking class; this teacher made sure that *halal* meat was brought in whenever students would be working with meat, so that her *hijabi* students could also eat what they made.

I was intrigued by Sabina's comment about her classmates and teachers knowing a lot about Islam because there was a large population of Muslims in her school, so I asked her to discuss this further. She explained:

I think it's just the fact that there are so many of us. Let's say there was just like 10 students, I don't think they'd be willing to give us a whole room [for prayer] every Friday.

I think it's just because they know that there is so many of us going to the school so they're like, you know, they're just as deserving as other cultures and religions, so why not accommodate to them too, just because there are so many people.

When I asked about teacher perceptions of *hijabis* she replied with a similar answer stating, "at my school because of the fact that there are a lot of Muslims, I've never really felt that a teacher was targeting me for the reason that I'm Muslim." However, later on in our interview, Sabina said:

You know, like sometimes, of course there's like, gonna be a couple of times when I'm in class and I feel inside, 'oh, why isn't this teacher doing that to a non-Muslim student?

Why is she doing it to me? It won't be a lot but once in a while I'll be like 'wow' you

know, 'I find this unfair' but you know, for the most part, I feel my teachers treat everyone pretty equally.

Sabina said occasionally her friends had problems with their teachers and felt it was because of racism. *Hijabi* girls sometimes felt targeted because of their *hijab*, sometimes because of race and sometimes because of ethnicity.

Sabina personally felt like she had a more developed sense of confidence and felt more secure when it came to handling perceived instances of discrimination because she attended leadership camp. She explained:

I wasn't really sure about going to leadership camp and they definitely gave you skills, confidence, that could be a part of it, part of self-esteem. Let's say someone has self-esteem issues, well they could like, break out of their bubble by going to leadership camp because you don't meet people that you would usually meet but I guess you could say it has something to do with that.

Sabina felt overall, she was experiencing high school the same way a non-Muslim at her school would and she attributed this to "multiculturalism" at the high. She explained:

I think if a small portion of my school was Muslim, then they would run into problems like the questions or what's Friday prayer, but because there are so many Muslim people in our school, they accommodate all of us.

If there was a smaller Muslims attendance in the school Sabina said "I'd like to think that...they would do the same, but I don't really think they would."

Suggestions for Change

Sabina said was thoroughly enjoying her high school experience and felt that, in general, her school was fairly accommodating towards *hijabis*. A change she mentioned that she would

like made was a designated prayer space at all times. She felt that her school needed to make available a place where students could go to pray whenever they needed to, not just on Fridays. Other than that, she felt that her school accommodated uniform for *hijabis* when it came to sports, and other social activities, besides dances, were all accessible.

4.4 Zainab's Profile

Zainab is Pakistani-Canadian who was in grade 9 at the time of our interview. She had been living in Canada for 13 years and in Ottawa for 6 years. Prior to moving to Ottawa she lived in Winnipeg and before immigrating to Canada, she resided in Pakistan. In my reflective notes I described Zainab as a *“very bubbly girl who speaks with excitement in her voice. She's proud to be Pakistani and she's proud to be Canadian.”*

Background

Zainab began wearing *hijab* when she was in grade 5 at the suggestion of her Father. Her mother also decided to start wearing *hijab* at the same time, which Zainab stated, made the transition easier because she felt she had moral support. Zainab did not mind wearing *hijab* and had made the final decision to wear it herself.

Zainab felt wearing a *hijab* showed others that she was Muslim and differentiated her from other religions, especially Hinduism. She said before she wore *hijab* people often asked her if she was Hindu and now that she wore *hijab*, she no longer was asked this question. Zainab stated that being recognized as a Muslim by her *hijab* was very important to her.

School Demographics

Zainab described her school as predominantly white with minimal representation of minorities. Besides Zainab, there were only two other *hijabis* attending her school out of a total population of 1200 students. The other two *hijabis* were in their senior year and were friends, but

Zainab had no other *hijabi* friends because she was the only *hijabi* in the junior division. Zainab identified her friends as either Muslim or Chinese.

Overall Zainab said there were approximately 100 South Asian students at her school, but she was unsure how many of them were Muslims. She said walking through the halls of her school she mostly saw white people and that all the South Asian and Muslim students were clustered together on the second floor of the school. Zainab related that she did not feel overwhelmed by the amount of white people at her school only because she attended a very white elementary school, and she had since become accustomed to being one of the few minority students in her school.

Social Activities in the School

Some of the social activities offered at Zainab's school were sports teams, a drama club, band, critic's corner, yearbook committee, intramural sports, and student council led activities like dances, prom and semi-formal.

Because Zainab was only in grade 9, she knew very little about how social activities in her school had been organized in the past, but said that year there had 3 dances, 1 semi-formal dance and an end of the year Prom for senior students. Unlike other school, Zainab said prom and dances were not popular events at her school, at least not to her knowledge. Most of the main social activities mentioned above occurred during school hours and had the most student participation. As she explained, band practice took place before school and extra curricular activities such as yearbook committee, critic's corner and intramural sports took place during lunch hour.

Student council elections were held near the end of year and Zainab had run for a position but another candidate received the title. Zainab also tried out for sports such as basketball,

volleyball and badminton but had not made it on any teams yet but had participated in intramural sports during lunch hours. Zainab noted that intramural sports did not require any uniform.

Teachers at Zainab's school hosted barbecues approximately twice a year at which they served burgers and hotdogs to students. These barbecues were typically held after special tournaments as well as at the beginning of the year during orientation for first year students.

Zainab also told me that for Chinese New Year her school had organized a day of celebration with the Chinese students and hired a guest to come in and teach Chinese calligraphy. For Black History Month, informative presentations about famous Black figures in history were displayed throughout the school. Friday prayers for Muslims were also offered.

The Impact of Social Activities

Zainab had not yet qualified to play on any of the sport teams at school, and had also never seen the two other *hijabi* girls in her school on a sports team either; however, she said, the other two *hijabi* girls did not look like the type to participate in sports, as she described them to be "always really calm, reading a book or something." Zainab stated that not qualifying for a team one year would discourage people such as herself from trying out again the following year. Overall, Zainab stated, the sport teams consisted mostly of white people, especially on the female teams, she had only seen 3 South Asian participants. On the male teams she said there was a much larger number of "brown people" participating. When we discussed team uniforms, Zainab did not think uniform would have been an issue and if she told the coach she was Muslim, she was confident that she would be "allowed" to wear pants instead of shorts.

When Zainab's school hosted barbecues, Muslims such as herself could not participate because of the meat used was not *halal*. She said:

I just can't eat at the barbecues at our school, like we had a rugby tournament a little while ago at our school for guys and girls and then they had a barbecue and some ice cream with some kind of animal product in it too, so I couldn't eat that even though I wanted to.

Zainab added that there were also similar food items in her school cafeteria she could not eat, but there were other snacks available to purchase. Also, Zainab could not eat at classroom pizza parties because of the toppings selected, but said "we had a million other things like coke chips and stuff like that, so I just ate those." Zainab felt there was a balance between what she could and could not do, as she explained "I lose some but then I win some."

When I asked Zainab how she felt her high school experience compared to her non-Muslim peers she said she did not compare it that way; she focused on herself and how much she was enjoying herself. She did not focus on the things she could not do, rather, on the things she could do. Zainab's positive attitude was helping her enjoy her high school experience to the fullest.

Perceptions of Muslims and the *Hijab*

When I asked Zainab how she felt people at her school perceived her she replied, "I don't think they really have a way of seeing me, they're just really questioning; they don't really know what Muslim people are, so they just keep on questioning." Some of the questions Zainab was asked often were "Why do you wear *hijab*?" "What's the difference between Muslims and Christians?" "Why can't you wear shorts or tank tops?" "Why can't you date?" "Do you have arranged marriages?" Zainab welcomed the questions people asked about Islam and was very proud to be Muslim and Pakistani; in fact, Zainab told me she often wore her traditional Pakistani clothing to school and received many compliments on it from her peers. Zainab did

admit that sometimes it was difficult to answer all the questions people asked because when other Muslims answered the same questions differently, she did not always know how to explain why there was a discrepancy amongst answers.

Zainab told me about individuals in her classes that made comments and jokes to each other about the war in Iraq and terrorism. She had heard some students make “jokes” about “brown people” being terrorists. She said this offended her and had confronted the students about it and did not face any problems after that. Zainab found it interesting that non-Muslims were nicer to her than their “own white friends.” She thought the reason behind this was because she was the only person wearing *hijab* and “they didn’t know how to handle it” and therefore they picked only people “they knew about.”

Zainab said she did not let other people’s perceptions of her affect her. She told me about her experience of trying out for the badminton team saying, “[I] had the most amazing times and honestly didn’t care what other people were thinking.” When it came to trying out for other sports she said:

there are a lot of white people and not a lot of brown people so their wondering what I’m wearing, *hijab*, why I’m not wearing shorts or whatever, but honestly I just want to play for fun and everything...I think they just think I’m dressed differently than them.

Suggestions for Change

Zainab felt that for the most part her school was equitable and that social activities were accessible for all students regardless of religious obligations. She suggested that school officials and students organizing social activities encourage minorities to participate in events more. Zainab thought that minority groups were being discouraged from participating because of the perception that only the school’s white students qualified for sports teams.

Zainab also thought her high school needed to enrol more minority students to even out the gap between the European and minority students. She felt having a larger representation of *hijabis* such as herself would encourage more minority students to participate in activities together.

4.5 Seema's Profile

Seema is a Somali-Canadian who was in grade 11 at the time of our interview. My notes about Seema describe her as “*bubbly and friendly*.” I also described Seema as “*sincere*” after speaking to her on the phone. Seema had forgotten to attend our first interview appointment and was apologizing profusely stating that she felt very guilty for having forgotten. Seema was a fairly new student at her school having only started attending at the beginning of the current school year.

Background

Seema used to wear *hijab* on and off from a young age but began to wear it permanently at the age of 13 when she was in grade 9. When she first wore the *hijab* at a younger age she said she did it because her mother and cousins wore *hijab* and she felt it was what she should be doing too. Later on as she matured, she said she wore it because she understood why she should be wearing it. No one pressured Seema into wearing the *hijab* and she knew she could stop wearing it at any time if that is what she wanted to. Seema's number one reason for wearing *hijab*, in her own words, “[God] asked me to do it and it's my responsibility as a Muslim to do it...I know it's my duty to wear it.” Seema said her Mother wears the *hijab* but her sister does not.

I asked Seema the personal meaning the *hijab* had for her and she replied, “it means a lot of things; first of all it means that I am able to express myself as a Muslim...yah, God has asked

me to do it and it's something mandatory that I have to do." She further explained, "I'm a Muslim, a Canadian, that I'm allowed to be normal." Seema also emphasised that she was a normal girl just like any other her age, and that wearing a *hijab* did not make her any different than her peers.

School Demographics

Seema described her school as having a "large *hijabi* population" and in general a very diverse student body. Her school consisted of a population of 1000 pupils and amongst them a large amount of Muslim student. In Seema's own circle of friends, she estimated that 14 of her friends were *hijabi*. This was an impressive number of *hijabi* friends to have considering Seema did not only hang out with Muslims. Seema said that many of the other *hijabi* students in the school only hung out with each other outside of class but in class students were, for the most part, friendly with everyone.

Social Activities in the School

Some of the social activities Seema named were: expose, sports clubs, a book club, an anime club, a tutoring club, which Seema was a part of, and student council. She said the biggest social events were the sports clubs and the events that the student council hosted. Seema stated that the main events student council hosted were semi-formal and prom, as well as other dances with themes such as Spring. Dances were main events for many students, mostly non-Muslim. Seema noted that most of the members of Student council were white and that she felt there should be more minority student involvement since the point of student council was to represent the student body, and currently they were only being representing by white people. Seema felt this was problematic because the school was diverse and should be represented by a more diverse student body.

Popular sports teams offered at Seema's high school were soccer, basketball and rugby. Seema did not know if mandatory uniforms were required of soccer and basketball because none of the *hijabi* girls in the school participated on these sports team, or any other sports team at school. The only physical activity *hijabi* girls participated in at Seema's school was during physical education class, which was also a compulsory class. Later on during our interview Seema remembered that there was one *hijabi* girl on the basketball team and said she was "allowed" to wear pants instead of shorts because "the coach is really nice." Seema used to participate in rugby but no longer played because the coach required that all athletes wear shorts as the uniform. Seema understood that this was because of safety reasons, and that playing with loose clothing was a potential safety hazard.

Seema mentioned that her school had a small Muslim Students' Association (MSA) but it was not a very active association in organizing social events; its activities were limited to Friday prayer.

The Impact of Social Activities

I asked Seema if she participated in any student council events and she said that she could not since most of their events were dances and that was an event she would not attend because it conflicted with her religious beliefs. She stated that events such as semi-formal and prom had a very bad reputation at her school because many students attended intoxicated and parties hosted after the event consisted of a similar atmosphere.

Seema stated that there was one *hijabi* girl on student council as well as a Muslim boy who was campaigning to be the next co-President. Overall, she said there were not many Muslims and *hijabi*'s on student council, nor did any *hijabis* tend to attend student council led events. I asked Seema why she thought there was not more Muslim involvement on student

council and she replied that if a minority student member ran for a student council position they “would not stand a chance” because the majority of the students were white and they would only vote for other white candidates. When I asked Seema if teachers and school authorities knew about this and she replied,

Of course they know about it. I mean, our school is really [diverse] so they can make it seem like there’s a percentage of cultural people, but as much as we like to say there is no cultural discrimination or whatever, there always is.

I asked Seema to discuss more on her and fellow *hijabis* participation on sports teams since she had stated earlier than there was very little involvement on behalf of the *hijabi* community in her school. She said:

I think the reason why is because (pause) I don’t know, like, for *hijabis* when you play a lot of sports it’s not really fair because you have to be wearing, especially now, it’s Summer and it’s hot, and you have to wear long stuff...it’s a hassle. I know a lot of girls that like sports and whenever we get together we play sports a lot of times, but not in school.

However Seema did state that if it were not for uniform restrictions, she would like to play on the rugby team.

The school MSA was not a very strong association unlike the school’s other clubs that gathered on a weekly basis to discuss plans and future goals. Seema felt her school’s MSA was too influenced by the “white culture” of the school and that the organizers of MSA were easily peer pressured into doing “other things that leave behind the important things like being Muslim and being known as a Muslim in the school.”

Perceptions of Muslims and the *Hijab*

I asked Seema how she felt people at her school perceived her and she replied:

There's a lot of stereotypes going around... [People] think of me as someone whose parents rule [her] life, someone who has no choices in life so she's doing that because her parents are telling her to do it; in reality it's not like that.

Seema blamed the media for portraying Islam in a negative light and skewing peoples' perceptions of women in Islam, in particular, *hijabi* women.

When it came to school dances, Seema felt attending would cause more of backlash from Muslims than the non-Muslims at her school. Seema felt her Muslim peers would be judgemental; however, she stated that "people talking would not stop me from going" but that most probably it would affect other *hijabis* decision to go. "I know some girls that are just too scared to do anything because of what other people think, because people like to talk a lot."

I asked Seema to compare her experience of high school to how she perceived non-Muslims experienced high school; she explained:

I think they have more of an advantage in some ways; they get to do *so* much. They get to leave more of an impact, like you know, Kristin went here, she did this...not an advantage per se but I'd describe it as like, we don't get to leave our mark.

Seema clarified her reference to leaving a "mark" explaining that *hijabi* girls like herself were restricted when it came to participating in school activities. She personally did not feel like a member of the school community and when it came to school spirit she had no real attachment. She felt there was a cultural difference between the Muslims and the non-Muslims and the high school was following the "white culture."

Suggestions for Change

Seema felt that if her school's MSA made a greater effort to create a stronger Muslim community in the school, they could raise a greater awareness of Islam which would result in more activities being available for Muslims, especially the girls who wore *hijab*. She stated that, because the Muslim community was not making an effort in her school, either was the school and its non-Muslim students. As put by Seema, "the thing is that it's both parties involved that aren't doing enough. We're not doing enough, they're not doing enough; therefore, no one just does anything."

Since Seema would be graduating the following year, she suggested that school authorities develop end of the year trips that everyone could participate in. Currently, all senior graduates went to Cancun for their end of the year trip where Seema described "they just drink all day and party all night." No *hijabis* were ever able to attend these trips because of the party atmosphere. Seema understood that many non-Muslims genuinely enjoyed the trip but suggested that other options also be made available for those students that could not partake in such events.

Seema also felt her school needed to encourage more students to participate in school sporting events and to be more flexible when it came to accommodating uniform for *hijabi* students. Seema said that if her school was more vocal about accommodating uniform, she strongly believed more *hijabi* girls would try out for athletic teams.

4.6 Mariam's Profile

Mariam is an Afghani-Canadian who was in grade 10 at the time of our interview. She worked at the mall which is where we met to conduct the interview. I note Mariam to be *very well dressed in appearance and articulate in speech*.

Background

Mariam began wearing *hijab* when she was in grade 5 at which time she was attending a school she described as “very un-Islamic” because of the lack of Muslims attending. She identified herself as the only *hijabi* attending her elementary school and one of a handful of Muslims attending.

Mariam attended many Islamic events growing up such as festivals and camps, as well as a weekend Arabic school. She credits the Islamic atmosphere she was raised in to what led her to wear the *hijab*. Because many of her friends outside of school also wore *hijab*, Mariam recognized this as a factor influencing her decision.

When I asked Mariam what personal value the *hijab* had for her she replied, “when I go to school, it’s representing my religion and I am very proud of my religion, so it shows that through the *hijab*.” Mariam’s mother also wore *hijab* but began after Mariam started. Mariam also had an older sister who did not wear *hijab*, as Mariam explained it was a decision that their parents had no influence on.

School Demographics

Mariam was supposed to attend the high school in her neighbourhood district but decided against it when she learnt there was hardly a minority population at that school. Instead, Mariam chose to go to another high school with a known reputation for diversity, even though it meant a longer commute for her. The high school Mariam was now attending had a very large *hijabi* population and a significant number of minority students.

Mariam’s school had a population of approximately 1000 students of which 350 were Muslims. Most of Mariam’s friends were *hijabi* and she said there was a large representation of *hijabis* in each grade.

Social Activities in the School

Some of the social activities Mariam named were a multicultural show, pancake breakfasts, student council, dances and sport teams. Mariam stated that her school was quite active and there were many more activities offered but she was not aware of all of them since she was not an active participant in most.

The multicultural show as Mariam described, invited students to share with the school their culture through food, dance, clothing and music. A grand show was put on every year in the cafeteria that included a fashion show from around the world and students, teachers and parents were all invited to come and watch.

Student council hosted approximately 5 dances a year with different themes; Mariam said the latest dance had been a beach theme where students wore “school appropriate” clothing such as “shorts, skirts and summer dresses.”

There were many sport clubs offered at Mariam’s school including a sport marathon where students played various sports for 24 hours in order to raise money for a charitable organization. The typical uniform students wore in order to participate on a sport team was shorts and a jersey.

The Impact of Social Activities

Mariam told me the school’s multicultural show was a huge success because all the minority students collaborated with each other. She said almost all the Muslims and *hijabis* took part in bringing the event together and contributed to the final fashion show as well. One of the downsides of the show was that it was *just* the minority students that took part, with very little participation from the non-minority students.

Mariam thought her school's student council hosted a lot of dances considering it neglected the interest of most of the Muslim and all of the *hijabi* students. Neither Mariam nor her friends attended the school dances because she said "I wouldn't want to [go] religiously, like especially the beach one; I would go in as a *hijabi*, long pants and shirt? I would look out of place." Mariam stated that some Muslim girls did go to the dance but none of the *hijabis* ever attended. Like some other participants had also mentioned, Mariam said she heard there was going to be an all-girls prom this year and that she was interested in attending.

Mariam's school's student council consisted mostly of "white people." Muslims in Mariam's school found student council activities "stupid" and were described within her friend circle as "white people stuff." She felt the student council mostly catered their activities towards "their own."

I asked Mariam why more Muslims did not join student council in an effort to promote new social activities; she replied that there were more non-Muslim students than there were Muslim students and the chances of the latter being voted in would be hard. Mariam admitted that if other *hijabi* girls were on student council she would also be interested in joining. Mariam felt more comfortable being around other *hijabi* girls because she said it helped her feel like she "fit it" more and in a student council context she would feel "weird" being the only *hijabi* because "it's so dominated by white people."

The sports marathon was another event Mariam did not feel comfortable attending because it meant spending the night at school with no privacy from her male peers. For sport teams Mariam said although she did not participate, there were a couple of *hijabi* girls who did. She said uniform was not an issue at her school and the *hijabi* girls that wanted to partake in a sport wore long pants and a full sleeve shirt. When I asked Mariam why she did not participate in

sporting events she replied, “like, even though you can wear the pants, [I] kind of feel like, like [I’m] being put out there, singled out; everyone else is wearing shorts and there you are in full clothing.” If Mariam did not have an issue with uniform, she would likely participate in some sports. Mariam also added that it was easier for Muslim boys to participate in school activities because uniform was never an issue for them.

When I asked Mariam how her experience compared to her non-Muslim peers she replied, “there is a difference; I am enjoying high school but (long pause) they get to try new things and they get to see different things, and be involved in things I might not be able to be involved in.” She said the only reason she enjoyed high school was because of her own “little network of *hijabi* friends.”

Perceptions of Muslims and the *Hijab*

Within her school Mariam did not feel people perceived her in a stereotypical way; she said this was because her school was multicultural, but had she attended another school, she may have experienced some problems. Outside of school, Mariam felt people perceived her in a stereotypical way. Mariam said, “with all the media going on, they see *hijabi* and their like ‘oh terrorist’ especially since I am from Afghanistan too.”

Suggestions for Change

Mariam did not think it was fair that the *hijabi* girls in her school had to organize and pay for their own prom. She understood that all students had to pay for tickets, but students’ using their own resources to pay for a venue was not feasible. Mariam also understood that prom was an important high school tradition for many people but would like to see more end of the year activities organized that Muslims could also take part in.

Mariam thought her school should encourage *hijabis* to participate in sports. In order to do this, Mariam suggested that coaches vocalize their willingness to accommodate *hijabi* students. She suggested coaches approach *hijabi* students first and encourage them to participate on teams and support their needs as Muslims. Mariam felt this would make a great difference for many *hijabi* girls who hesitated from trying out for sport teams.

Overall, Mariam felt her school was quite accommodating when it came to creating an inclusive atmosphere. She thought if the Muslim students requested more activities that they could partake in, student council and other event organizers would accommodate their needs. As Mariam explained, “our school is pretty good about these kinds of things because it’s such a multicultural school, and there’s a high population of *hijabis* and Muslims.”

4.7 Imaan’s Profile

Imaan identified as a Pakistani-Canadian and was in grade 10 at the time of our interview. I described her as “*soft spoken and polite with a gentle voice*” in my reflective notes.

Background

Imaan began wearing *hijab* when she was in grade 7. She explained to me why she decided to wear the *hijab*:

The main thing was that I understood that *hijab* is compulsory on all women, my mom and everyone explained that to me, and also, that’s the main thing I understood that it is so we don’t attract members of the opposite gender, and yah, just that because it’s [compulsory] on women.

Imaan stated that her Mother and older sister also wore *hijab* and they both had a positive influence on her decision to also start wearing it.

When I asked Imaan what it meant to her to wear the *hijab* she stated, “I think it shows that you’re a dutiful Muslim, that you care that much about Islam, that you love God that much that you’re going to take that extra step.” Imaan hopes that by wearing *hijab* she has a positive impact on other Muslim girls who do not wear *hijab*, and for those that do and other people in general, she hopes it shows them that she is a good person.

School Demographics

Imaan described her school as being “really multicultural” and that out of approximately 900 students, there was a little under 100 Muslim students. Imaan stated that out of all the Muslim girls, half wore *hijab* and she felt this to be a fairly large representation. The Muslims in Imaan’s high school were comprised mostly of Arabic, Somalian and Pakistani students. The other students were a somewhat equal mix of Chinese, Indians and Anglo-Europeans, with the latter being the dominant group.

Social Activities in the School

Imaan defined social activities as “somewhere where you could represent yourself, go to meet people and represent your school.” She stated that she thought social activities and participation in them was an extremely important part of student life and an overall high school experience.

The Social activities in Imaan’s school were peace club, an association described by Imaan as “mostly multicultural.” The peace club organized activities that represented different countries and their cultures. Imaan’s high school also had an Islamic Association for all the Muslim students. The Islamic association organized Friday prayers and opening the fast during the Islamic month of Ramadan. Imaan also said her school hosted many dances and organized sporting events.

Imaan's school had approximately 6 dances a year, which she admitted was quite a high number considering the significant number of Muslims at her school. The school dances had themes that followed the Christian calendar, such as Valentine's Day and Halloween. Her school also had a Prom for senior students and a semi-formal dance for junior students.

An overnight leadership camp was also held at Imaan's high school. It was an activity organized by teachers to teach students confidence and self-esteem building strategies. It was also meant for as a way to students to learn how to deal with peer pressure and problem solving skills.

The Impact of Social Activities

Imaan was a member of the peace club as well as the Islamic association. She also was on the soccer team. Imaan said she wore long pants and a shirt with her school jersey on top and her uniform had never been an issue for her at school or games. She admitted that she was hesitant to try out at first because she did not think she would be "allowed" to wear pants since the regular uniform required shorts and a t-shirt; however, after speaking to the soccer coach and explaining that it was against her religion to show certain parts of her body, the coach agreed to let Imaan wear pants and a long-sleeved shirt with the school jersey over top. Imaan said there were other *hijabi* girls on the soccer team, as well as the football and basketball team, and that now the fully covered uniform for *hijabi* girls had become a common sight.

Imaan said for the most part, the majority of *hijabis* at her school did not participate in the social activities offered. I asked her why she thought this was and she responded that it seemed many Muslims did not seem to care and that it also may be their friends' influence. I asked her who did participate in school activities and she replied it was mostly the "Canadian"

kids. I asked her what she meant by Canadian and after some hesitation she replied “the white kids.” I could tell Imaan was uncomfortable using this term.

The main activity Imaan felt conflicted with her religion were the dances. This was unfortunate because the dances were also the most frequently offered social activity in the school. Imaan explained, “[I] don’t listen to music, especially my family, so if I go there, I just feel awkward, and even just dancing with the opposite gender. Even if you go, you’re seeing all that, so I don’t feel comfortable going.” Imaan felt left out because she was missing six major events of the year; she said, “because you sort of want to [go], you want to be with your friends at the time and go to the events at the school but you can’t.”

Imaan described the leadership camp as having a positive message but many components of the event made it difficult for *hijabis* such as herself to take part in it. She explained that firstly, it was an overnight event that involved boys and girls sleeping in close quarters of each other and this was something she was not comfortable with. Secondly, at the leadership camp, it was quite common for boys and girls to be paired up together to do activities. Imaan said some of these activities involved partners to act out boyfriend/girlfriend scenarios, but since as a Muslim, Imaan did not believe in the concept of dating, she felt offended by such an activity. What concerned her even more was that teachers approved such activities.

When I asked Imaan if she was satisfied with her overall high school experience she said the following: “I feel like mostly I am, because, I go to some of the clubs, I’m allowed to participate, I do what I can. I feel like I’m getting about the same.” I felt Imaan was very uncertain about the statement she had just made so I asked her to elaborate and she said, “I mean, there’s like those dances that I can’t participate in, the whole social aspect, but I don’t feel like I’m missing *that* much really.”

Perceptions of Muslims and the *Hijab*

I asked Imaan how she felt people at her school perceived her and she replied:

Well a lot of times I hear people say like ‘oh poor you’ you know, like especially in the summer their like ‘oh you must be so hot’ you know, they show pity on me but I try to explain it to them but sometimes I feel like they think I’ve been forced into it because, I don’t know, there are some Muslim girls at my school who have complained that they have been forced into it so then they think that everyone was force into it; so I try to explain to them that no, I *chose* to, I don’t have to If I don’t want to, but yah, I think they feel sorry for me.

Imaan put emphasis on the fact that she did not want people to feel sorry for her because wearing the *hijab* was a decision she personally made and was happy with.

Imaan said some people in her school occasionally asked her why she wore *hijab*, but this was rare she said because there were a lot of *hijabis* at her school and people were accustomed to seeing it. She also felt that people at her school, for the most part, knew why Muslim women wore *hijab* and therefore did not ask many questions.

Suggestions for Change

Imaan suggested her school replace some of the yearly dances with other activities that more Muslims could partake in. She felt 6 dances a year were a lot considering her friends attending schools with a less diverse population hosted only 3 dances a year. Imaan considered her school to be more multicultural than most and was surprised that Muslims and *hijabi* students were not taken into consideration when it came to organizing social activities.

4.8 Fatima's Profile

Fatima is an Egyptian-Canadian who was in grade 11 at the time of our interview. In my notes I describe my first impression of Fatima which is "*very fashionably, yet modestly dressed, wearing a perfectly coordinated hijab to match her shoes and bag.*" In personality I describe Fatima as "*very sweet, with a sweet, quiet voice*" and "*although she looks confident by appearance, her quiet tone of voice make her appear to be very shy,*" a quality she admitted in our interview to be true.

Background

Fatima began to wear *hijab* in the middle of her grade nine year. She explained to me in detail about the day she decided to start wearing *hijab*:

It kind of came to me. So, one day I was at home, my Mom wears *hijab*, and I started trying them on, and my mom told me if you want to wear it to keep on going, but if you don't want to, don't, because she doesn't want me wearing it then taking it off. So I thought about it and I said okay, I'll go out with you guys with the *hijab* on and I'll see how I feel. So we went out to eat [and] it went well because it wasn't like anyone I know, people just kind of saw me with it, and the next day I went to school (laughs) with it on. Everyone just kind of came up to me and was like 'oh my God we didn't even recognize you' and started asking me why I wore it and stuff. You know, it's not like I tried to copy my friends, because not all my friends wear it, I kind of like had a feeling I needed to wear it.

Fatima described to me what her first days at school as a *hijabi* were like:

Like my guy friends, not boyfriends but guy friends, they all came up to me and were like questioning me and like asking 'why did you wear it?' they thought it looked weird that I

put it on because, I don't know, I kind of made up my mind really quickly, but my friends handled it really well and some of my friends even came up to me and gave me some *hijabs*.

Fatima said her female friends were very supportive of her decision. She told me about one friend in particular who had talked to her about putting on the *hijab* when Fatima was in grade 8. Fatima said that at the time, she never thought she would decide to wear it one year later but felt satisfied with her decision and was glad she did start wearing the *hijab*. Some of Fatima's Muslim male friends did not react so positively and told her she looked ugly with it on while some told her it was a good decision that she made. Her non-Muslim male friends did not ask her anything about her *hijab* but she said some of them even started acting 'weird' around her after she started.

Fatima said she decided to wear *hijab* because "it felt right" and when I asked her what it meant to her she said:

It's not only my appearance, it's the way I act, I am presenting my Islam, so I have to act good, I have to act modestly, dress modestly and that kind of stuff. It's kind of hard to keep up with this stuff when buying clothes because you have to change your closet, because the first year I was wearing [*hijab*] it wasn't the proper way, like my shirts were short and I couldn't do anything about it because I couldn't change my closet right away, and that was one thing I put in my mind, that I didn't prepare for it, but within a year or so I started finding long clothes so I'm getting there.

Fatima also told me about the difficulties she faced when she first started wearing *hijab* because she no longer had an adequate wardrobe to work with. Many of her clothes pre-*hijab* she now considered inappropriate for a *hijabi* to wear, such as half sleeve tops and short

shirts. She described her first summer as a *hijabi* to be “the worst summer of [her] life because [she] was always used to wearing t-shirts and capris and then came summer and [she] was wearing sweaters and was so hot!” She discussed how she gradually learnt to adjust her wardrobe:

I had a lot of support from my mom and my friend. She helped me and we went shopping and she was like, this shirt is not that thick and you could put a long sleeved shirt under. I felt like shopping became really hard for me now (laughs) like, it’s very hard. Before I used to go and just pick up a shirt; now it’s like, is it too tight? Is it long enough? And I feel like the more years are going by, I will have more experience with *hijab*, to have more clothes. I’m kind of growing into it; I may not be perfect right now.

School Demographics

Fatima stated that when she first started attending her high school there was a very small *hijabi* population, but over the past couple of years she had seen the population increase rapidly. She described her school has presently having a large Muslim population of which half are girls, and of that half, 25% are *hijabi*. Out of Fatima’s group of 15 girls, she also had 4-5 *hijabi* friends.

Fatima also said that some of her friends who did not wear the *hijab* when she was in grade 9 had since started. I asked her what she thought the reason behind this growing phenomenon was and she replied:

For the younger girls, I would say either their parents talked to them about it or their getting influenced by their other friends. Like, if all your friends put it on, you kind of feel left out. Also, I know this girl, she’s Iraqi and she said that in her culture you put it on once you hit 13 years old, that’s why I see a lot of Iraqi girls put it on.

Overall, Fatima felt her school contained a diverse population of students with a considerable amount of Muslims and *hijabis*.

Social Activities in the School

Some of the social activities offered at Fatima's school were: athletic teams, such as soccer, rugby and volleyball; a club called Link crew that aimed to help grade 9 students adjust to high school; band, drama club, coffee house, student council, dances including semi-formals and prom.

Fatima described coffee house as an after school event that invited students to come on stage and perform something, or come to hang out with friends. Fatima said it usually transformed into a dance later on in the evening and that she did not know of any *hijabis* that went. Fatima said, "I notice actually a lot of non-Muslim people go to these things, like the student council events and all that kind of stuff." She also said that if Muslims did ever go, it would not be the ones who wore *hijab*.

Fatima said prom was held on a boat cruise every year and was a much anticipated event by many students, many she described as, "the white kids." Fatima described prom as a "club" where students danced inappropriately, drank a lot of alcohol and smoked weed. Although Fatima had never attended Prom, she had heard many stories about the events that took place at prom from her older sister, who was not a *hijabi*, who had attended the prom and from friends who had also attended.

Fatima described a special fitness course offered by her school that was an advanced physical education course. The fitness course was co-ed in nature and involved activities such as various sports, running and swimming.

Student council at Fatima's school consisted mostly of non-Muslims with only a select few Muslims students, none of whom wore *hijab*. Fatima was not sure why there was not more *hijabi* involvement, but suggested that perhaps the *hijabi* girls were not confident enough to run for student council. I asked if a *hijabi* student would have a fair chance of winning if she did run for council and Fatima replied that it depended on her friend circle and whether or not they outnumbered the other candidate's friends. I suppose this was true for any one running for council, regardless of religion.

Sports teams such as soccer and volleyball required a uniform to be worn consisting of shorts and a jersey in the case of soccer and for volleyball, spandex shorts and a sleeveless jersey.

Fatima's school hosted a culture show every year that had the largest participation of *hijabi* students than any other activity; in fact Fatima stated that it was mostly Muslim students who participated in the show.

A private room for Friday prayers was offered at Fatima's school and she stated that it was something fairly new because when she started in grade 9, there were no accommodations. She said there were also weekly announcements made to remind students about it.

Fatima felt there were very few activities offered in her school that allowed Muslims, especially *hijabi* girls to participate. Fatima noted that this was surprising since she felt the Muslims and non-Muslims population at her school were approximately the same. Many activities offered conflicted with her religious beliefs and the beliefs of her friends who also did not participate. I asked her why she thought so many non-Muslims participated in the school's social activities and she replied "culture wise, they're really more into that kind of stuff, that

would be the main reason, they don't have a culture, their kind of more free, they have the freedom to do whatever they want."

The Impact of Social Activities

Fatima enjoyed playing soccer and used to play on the school team in grade 8 before she began to wear the *hijab*. Now that she covered, she felt discouraged from joining her high school soccer team because the uniform required her to wear shorts. She also said she wanted to try out for the volleyball team and had even inquired about uniform accommodations for herself. She was told by the coach that she would have to wear the shorts because it was part of the uniform, but she could wear leggings underneath to cover her legs. This also discouraged Fatima away from playing because she felt "it would look awkward" in comparison to her team mates. Fatima also said she was very interested in taking the fitness course offered by her school but regretted that she could not because the swimming portion of the course was not segregated. Fatima felt that any possible accommodations made to sports at her school could only be achieved if the *hijabi* community worked together and "pushed for it." I asked her why she does not try to speak to school officials about this and she replied, "we feel if we do go and ask, their gonna be like 'oh no, you can't,' so everyone is backing away."

When I asked Fatima whether or not she would go to her school Prom she said it depended on if any of her *hijabi* friends were going; she said, "I wouldn't feel out of place if I had my friends and they wear *hijab*." She said it was important to her that she not be the only *hijabi* when it came to attending social events. Before Fatima began wearing the *hijab* she attended dances because, as she explained, "I didn't have it in my mind that it's a bad thing, but once I got to high school, I stopped." Fatima mentioned that she had heard through some friends

at other high schools that a special prom was being organized by a group of *hijabi* girls to be held just for Muslim girls. Fatima said if this was the case, she would definitely attend.

Fatima noticed that student council events were mostly attended by non-Muslims and that her *hijabi* friends and her felt “out of place” going to events that mostly consisted of dancing and mixing freely with members of the opposite gender.

Fatima was content that her school allowed Friday prayer but added that there were still setbacks with the room allocated for Friday prayer as students often found the door locked and had to go and look for a teacher or caretaker to open it for them. This was problematic because students had to conduct Friday prayer during their own lunch period and this limited time even more. Also, Friday prayer was the only prayer that was accommodated for so if students needed to pray during another time of day, they would have to find their own space. She also stated that during Friday prayers “the white people just stand at the door and stare at us praying”; however, Fatima added that this was not necessarily a negative thing; she felt it was good for her non-Muslim peers to see how dedicated Muslims were to their religion.

Since Fatima stated that before she began wearing *hijab* she participated in many social activities such as sports and dances, I asked her to explain why, besides religious reasons, she had stopped participating, and why she backed away from asking for accommodations for her needs as a Muslim; she replied;

I would say I am not confident enough to speak up by myself; if I had a group of girls and we planned it and said ‘okay it’s time for us to go and tell them how we feel,’ then for sure I would do it, but I don’t see anyone else so I’m like, ‘okayyy.’

I asked Fatima if she always felt apprehensive about speaking up and she said:

I would say after I wore the *hijab* I started being a little more shy than I used to be only because, I feel like, I know it sounds weird but, you feel like everyone is staring at you. I'll be sitting on the bus and someone will be sitting right in front of me and she's staring at me (laugh) and I don't know what to do so I'm just looking away. And some people make you feel uncomfortable too, so if I was in my country, I would speak up, but here you're like, you feel like an outsider.

Fatima also said that if she was not a *hijabi*, she would speak up more when it came to asking for accommodations. She told me about an experience she had in grade 8:

When I didn't wear *hijab*, me and my friends decided to try out for student council. We didn't make it but we tried and I actually went in front of the school and said a speech! So, that was one thing I did that I was proud of, and then after that, I don't think if I was wearing the *hijab* then I would do it.

I asked Fatima how she felt her high school experience compared to her non-Muslim friends and she said it was not the same in a negative sense, as she explained:

They have more fun, a lot more fun, because they're always like, they're participating in everything, they're always going out of class to do band, to tournaments. I could have been going to those tournaments too, but they have more fun I think.

Fatima also said if there were more social activities that she could participate in, she would graduate high school feeling like she enjoyed her time there; instead, she currently felt like she was always just doing school work.

Perceptions of Muslims and the *Hijab*

Fatima was asked a lot of questions about her *hijab* by many non-Muslims. Some of the examples she told me about were "do you sleep with the *hijab*?" and, "do you shower with it?"

Fatima got the impression that her school mates felt she was forced to wear *hijab* and that *hijabi* girls in general disliked wearing a scarf. Fatima also discussed the curiosity many non-Muslim girls had about her *hijab* and what was beneath it, as she explained, “they always go, ‘oh can I see how your hair looks? Can you show me one day in the washroom? It’s like, calm down, it’s just hair!’” Fatima said this curiosity only came from her female classmates and rarely from the male. As Fatima explained about the boys in her school:

I would say they won’t even consider looking at me, like you know how guys like checking girls out? I think when they see a *hijabi* girl their just like ‘okay,’ their just like, used to it...they don’t bother me or check me out. Their kind of just like ‘oh okay, that’s a *hijabi*, moving on.’

Overall, Fatima felt that her teachers and classmates did not know enough about Islam and it effected the way she interacted with them and the amount she could participate in school social activities.

Because of the large amount of *hijabis* in Fatima’s school, she said there was also a lot of politics and judgments that were passed amongst the Muslim girls. Fatima explained that she felt that there was a difference between the Arab *hijabis* and the Somali *hijabis*:

I feel like Somali girls have more freedom than Arab girls; for example, when they dress, they can wear short sleeve and no one says anything, but when an Arab girl does that, everyone is like ‘oh, what are you doing?’”

Fatima clarified that by “they” she was referring to the other *hijabis* in her school. She also added:

Out of the 50% of girls that do wear *hijab*, you would see, I would say, 15% wearing it the right way. I did talk to a girl once and she kind of thought I was trying to judge her, she was like ‘are you judging me?’ so I never did that again.

Fatima also said she noticed that *hijabi* girls that hung around other *hijabi* girls all dressed modestly but the *hijabi* girls that hung around non-Muslims were the ones that wore short shirts and tight clothing. She assumed it was because of the influence of non-Muslim friends.

The reason clothing differences amongst *hijabis* concerned Fatima was because of the message it gave to non-Muslim people; as she explained:

If a non-Muslim comes and sees a Muslim girl dressed in a proper way, he is gonna say ‘okay that’s normal’ but then he sees girls wearing short sleeves and dresses and he’s going to say ‘I’m confused, which one is right?’

I asked Fatima what she thought the solution to this was and she suggested that girls should either wear the *hijab* the “right way” and that meant covering fully, including arms and legs, or consider taking off the *hijab* because maybe that meant they were not wearing it as their own choice. Fatima told me about one of her friends who had just recently stopped wearing the *hijab*:

I guess she wasn’t comfortable wearing it, I’m not sure what it was, but she took it off and I remember her first day coming back everyone was like staring at her and looking at her hair and she felt really awkward, but then a week later she got used to it and so did everyone else.

The politics that went on amongst *hijabis* were very interesting to learn about because not only did Fatima feel non-Muslims perceived her in a stereotypical way, she also felt fellow Muslims and *hijabis* were judgmental towards each other.

Suggestions for Change

Fatima felt that several changes needed to be made within her school in order to accommodate the large Muslim and *hijabi* population. She thought the policies for athletic team uniforms needed to be re-examined and updated so Muslim girls such as herself could participate in sports like soccer and volleyball. She did not feel wearing shorts was a necessary component of excelling at a particular sport, rather, having the appropriate skills was much more necessary. For her school's fitness course Fatima suggested the swimming portion be segregated because not only would it mean the Muslim girls could participate, she also knew a lot of non-Muslim girls who did not feel comfortable swimming with the boys.

Fatima felt her school hosted too many dances and coffee house events, which she explained, were almost the same thing "but they just have different names." She understood that her peers enjoyed dances but suggested that coffee house be distinctly different and held during the day rather than the evening. Fatima explained, "because if it finishes late at night, you wouldn't want to be coming home that late, if you're even allowed to stay out that late. Also, you feel left out because everyone is on the dance floor dancing." Instead, Fatima suggested, day events such as field trips would be more appropriate.

Fatima suggested that her school prom be closely monitored by school authorities to ensure students were not secretly bringing in alcohol and drugs. She said if her school's prom had a better reputation and had more of an atmosphere where students could go and celebrate their graduation, she would like to go. She would still not dance but she would like to dress up and enjoy the evening with her friends on a boat cruise.

When we talked about her school's student council Fatima said the individuals running for positions should ask people other than their friends what kind of activities they would like to

see organized. She felt there needed to be more awareness of what minority groups like *hijabis* wanted because as she explained,

The only reason we aren't participating is because we are being held back by some stuff, like uniform and that kind of stuff. I feel like if someone speaks up then more *hijabis* would speak about it and they would do something.

Fatima said she appreciated the accommodations made for Muslims at her school for Friday prayer but suggested that because of the sheer volume of Muslims attending her high school, a permanent space be allocated for students to use for prayer every day, not just one day a week.

In her closing statements Fatima said she currently felt her school revolved around the "white people" and explained:

If they are white and they are born here, they can go ahead and girls can wear the shorts and go ahead, and they don't mind, but they know that some of us can't and they don't put it in mind as much, they probably feel like 'oh they don't want to join,' they feel like since we have the *hijab* on we don't want to do anything, but really we do.

Chapter 5: Emergent Themes from *Hijabi Girls*'

Experiences of Social Activities

5.1 Introduction to Emergent Themes

Four major themes emerge from this analysis of how *hijabi* youth experience social activities in schools; they are: *Us Versus Them*, *Fighting Stereotypes*, *Culture Differences* and a *Desire to Participate*. The first theme, *Us Versus Them*, explains the alienation *hijabi* students feel when it comes to participating in school activities and interacting with their Muslim and non-Muslim peers. Covered under this theme are issues of feeling confident and comfortable around other *hijabis*, feeling outnumbered by non-Muslim peers and the overall segregation between *hijabis* and their peers, regardless of religion and ethnicity. The second emergent theme, *Fighting Stereotypes*, explains the questions and assumptions *hijabis* receive from non-Muslim peers and the perceived judgment *hijabis* pass amongst each other. The third theme, *Culture Differences* explains how social activities offered in high schools conflict with the religious principles of *hijabi* students. The fourth and final theme, a *Desire to Participate* illustrates participants' willingness and in some cases, eagerness to participate in school social activities.

The first three themes are closely connected: *Us versus Them* describes the alienation *hijabi* students feel in their school communities. Alienation results from *hijabi* students sticking together to avoid their peers, the questions they ask and the *Stereotypes* they construct. Finally, *Culture Differences* is seen as the underlying cause of both the alienation and stereotyping *hijabi* students face. These themes play an important role in understanding how *hijabi* girls experience social activities offered in their schools. Combined, the analysis of these themes helps answer this study's two research questions: *How do hijabi women in Ottawa secondary schools*

experience the social activities offered by their schools? And, In what ways are hijabi girls being included or excluded from social activities because of their religious obligations? The following chapter serves as an exploration of the three emergent themes with reference to other relevant studies noted in chapter 2's literature review.

5.2 Theme One: Us Versus Them

Us versus Them describes the segregation *hijabi* students feel between their peers and themselves. Us versus them does not refer solely to *hijabi* students versus their Anglo-European peers, rather, *hijabi* students versus all of their peers. This segregation has led *hijabi* students to feeling like “outsiders” from the rest of their peers, even the other Muslim youth. *Hijabi* participants described feeling “alienated” from their peers when it comes to participating in social activities because they feel they can not actively participate in. This theme resonates with the studies of Zine (2000, 2001 & 2003) who reveals the marginalization *hijabi* girls face in schools on a day to day basis. Seema described the relationship between *hijabis* and the rest of the peers in her school as having a “lack of unity.” Participants related that *hijabi* isolation was partially based on their perception of how non-Muslims viewed them and that for many of them, their feelings of isolation were due to their own perception of how they *felt* they looked amidst non-*hijabis* and non-Muslims.

When discussing school dances, all participants used terms like, “out of place,” and “awkward,” to describe how they would feel attending such events. These statements reflect the work of Rezai-Rashti (2005) and Keaton (2006) whose studies explore the alienation Muslim girls experience in schools. Even Farah who did attend her school dances because of student council duties wanted to make explicit that although she attended, she did not participate. She said participating in events such as dances and casino night could possibly ruin her “image as a

hijabi,” and it would look “weird” if a *hijabi* girl was dancing with boys. Farah stated that wearing the *hijab* made her feel more “conservative,” a notion that resonated true with other participants such as Mariam and Imaan who stated wearing *hijab* made them feel there was a certain “code of conduct” to abide by. Fatima stated that her *hijab* was “presenting [her] Islam” and therefore participating in certain activities could misrepresent the principles she believed in as a Muslim and could possibly give “others the wrong idea” of how Muslims were supposed to act. All participants voiced that wearing *hijab* was a personal decision primarily made for religious reasons. These findings confirm what Meshal (2003) and Zine’s (2001) studies reveal, and that is, that more and more Muslim girls are choosing to wear the *hijabi* based on religious values as opposed to cultural.

One of the biggest examples of segregation between the *hijabi* community and their peers was the all-girls prom that three of the seven *hijabi* participants mentioned. It is important to note that Sabina, Mariam and Fatima, the participants that mentioned the idea of a segregated prom, all attended different schools. This indicated to me that having an all girls prom was a wide spread and popular idea amongst the *hijabi* community of Ottawa. Because *hijabi* girls felt they could not participate in their school prom for various reasons, they had made a decision to remove themselves from the school community and create their own network in order to organize a dance that they could attend. Zine (2000) refers to this as “formalized resistance” (pg.293) in her study that explored the increasing number of Muslim student organizations in Toronto, Ontario. The experiences of *hijabi* girls in this study resonate with what Zine’s (2000) study claims, in that, students are separating themselves from their school community to come back to “their own kind.”

Furthermore, *hijabi* participants said they felt more confident when they were around other *hijabis*. Mariam said she would be inspired to join student council if other *hijabis* were on it because then she would feel like she “fit in more.” She also said she would like to join a school team if her other *hijabi* friends did. Mariam concluded our interview by saying the only reason she was enjoying high school was because of her “own little network of *hijabi* friends.” Fatima said it would be easier for her to speak to her non-Muslim peers and teachers about “creating more opportunities for *hijabis*” if she had the moral support of other *hijabis*. She said “if some *hijabis* speak up, then more *hijabis* would speak [up] too, and maybe then, they (referring to her school’s student council and teacher authorities) would do something about it.” Seema suggested that the reason many *hijabis* do not ask for accommodations in social activities is because “they’re afraid of the outcome...people thinking or seeing them as someone else maybe.” Therefore, the fear of rejection from school authorities and skewing other students’ and teachers’ images of Islam and women in *hijab* were main factors that held *hijabi* girls back in asking for accommodations and ultimately maintained a rift between *hijabis* and their peers.

When we discussed participation in sporting events, participants such as Seema felt it was a “hassle” for *hijabi* girls to participate because of uniform issues. Having to wear full pants and shirts during summer sports was seen as a discouraging factor for many *hijabis* who otherwise were interested in playing sports. Imaan also used the term “hassle” when explaining why she thought more *hijabis* did not ask for accommodations. Furthermore, participants like Sabina felt that although her schools may accommodate team uniforms, she would feel “singled out” being the only participant wearing pants. She also said, “it’s not fair that we have to wear pants but they are all wearing shorts. We kind of look awkward then.” Mariam said, “even though [we] can wear pants, [we] kind of feel like [we’re] being put out there.” Statements such as these are

what Farah described as *hijabi* girls “preventing themselves from getting a good experience.” Farah said that to an extent, some *hijabi* girls alienated themselves because “they assume they know what the other kids are thinking.” I did not want to devalue anyone’s experience by suggesting to my other participants that they were perhaps choosing to segregate themselves. I also understood that my participants were telling their experiences as they perceived them.

For those participants who did participate in school sports such as Farah, Sabina and Zainab, they said they had to ask “permission” to wear pants and in return were “allowed” to wear what they felt was a necessary aspect of their religious beliefs. Their accounts resonated with my own experiences of playing on school sport teams; however, as I heard their stories I questioned why *hijabi* girls had to ask for permission to take part in an activity that was supposed to be accessible to everyone. I did not provide my insight on the topic to the participants, but each of them sounded thankful for their school’s accommodations and used words like “appreciative” and “lucky” to describe how they felt about their coaches. Seema said *hijabi* girls in her school were allowed to wear pants for sporting events because “the coach was really nice.” Sabina felt her school made accommodations only because of the multicultural populations of students and that if that if her school was predominantly white, she may have “run into some problems” when it came to asking for uniform accommodations.

For those participants who attended schools with a small portion of minority students, in particular *hijabi* students, they complained that their schools did not do enough to “welcome” and “encourage” *hijabi* students to participate. Farah described it as “accessible versus welcoming” stating that there was a difference between the two terms and that currently many schools were not welcoming enough and gave *hijabi* students little encouragement to get involved in school activities. Imaan said this was due to the over-representation of “white

people” that dominated all social activities. She felt that the needs of *hijabi* students went “unnoticed” and were “drowned out” by the wants of non-Muslim students. All participants also made similar statements, even those attending “very multicultural” schools. Dei (1994) refers to these experiences as being silenced by the “culture of domination,” while Rezai-Rashti (1994) notes the failure to focus on the needs of Muslim students has resulted in reinforcing colonial attitudes.

When high school experiences were discussed, Fatima felt as a *hijabi*, she did not experience the social aspects of high school, rather, she only got to “do school” as in, the in-class, academic aspects of it. She felt like she had missed out on a lot of “fun” because she was not able to participate in many social activities. Seema felt social activities were what made high school memorable, and because she was not able to participate in many, she could not leave her “mark” like many of her peers. Cartledge (1996) suggests that experiences such as these have left Muslim youth, especially *hijabi* youth, vulnerable to “inappropriate programming” (pg. 38) that has the potential to result in long term failure as Kincheloe and Steinberg (1995) note that school experiences “lay the groundwork” for how students interact in society “for the rest of their lives” (pg.3).

Participants identified a distinct difference between being a *hijabi* Muslim and being a non *hijabi* Muslim. Participants felt they did not necessarily identify with the non-*hijabi* Muslims in their schools. Imaan felt the Muslim girls who did not wear *hijab* “got away with more” especially when it involved interacting with boys. She also said, “[Non-*hijabi* Muslim girls] feel more comfortable mingling with members of the opposite sex, so it doesn’t hold them back as much for school stuff.” Farah confirmed this by stating Muslim girls at her school attended

dances because “they don’t wear the *hijab*, and plus, no one really knows they’re Muslim so they don’t stand out as much as we would.”

To summarize, *hijabi* participants felt “different” than the rest of their peers. Even participants such as Farah, Zainab and Sabina who felt they were “different than most *hijabis*” because they participated in school activities, made several statements throughout their interviews that indicated they also felt a barrier between themselves and their peers.

5.3 Theme Two: *Fighting Stereotypes*

The second major theme, *Fighting Stereotypes*, explores the numerous questions and assumptions that *hijabi* participants face when participating in school activities. In some cases, the questions asked by their non-Muslim peers are what discourage some participants from partaking in school activities at all. Another important aspect explored is the politics amongst *hijabis* and the perceived judgments they exchange with one another.

Participants felt that non-Muslims did not fully understand why Muslims girls chose to wear *hijab* and that this led to many questions. Some questions like, “if I see a strand of your hair, do you have to marry me?” Farah acknowledged as a joke, but according to Raby (2004) could also be interpreted as perpetuating stereotypes about the religion of Islam. Sabina said her school had a “pretty good” awareness of Muslims and their beliefs but also admitted that teachers seemed “racist” at times and that her peers asked “silly questions” about her *hijab*. Participants like Farah and Zainab described in their interviews several questions they were asked by peers (as outlined in their participant profiles) and suggested the lack of knowledge was due to the small population of *hijabis* attending their schools. However, participants who stated their schools contained a large *hijabi* population, such as Mariam and Imaan, were also asked many questions they described as “dumb.” This resonated closely with the Muslim participants

of Hoodfar's (2003) study who described the questions they received from non-Muslim peers as "stupid."

Participants said at times they felt discouraged from participating in social events because of the lack of awareness their peers had about Muslims. This linked to the previous theme of alienation where participants felt too different than their non-Muslim peers to take part in the same activities, even when it did not conflict with religious principles. Farah, who was an active member of her student council, stated that some non-Muslim individuals had even questioned her presence at dances in the past by asking "aren't you not supposed to be here?" to which she replied "I'll do what I want." She felt that her non-Muslim peers had "one perception" of Muslims and assumed that all *hijabis* behaved the same way. This confirms the thoughts of Said (1978) who noted that many individuals hold a "static image" of what Islam is. Farah was offended by such a perception because she viewed religion as a "very private thing" and felt no one had the right to influence the way she practiced her religion. Zainab said her peers often asked her "what she was wearing" during sport activities and when she participated in swimming during a class field trip, she received "funny looks" because she wore full clothing along with her *hijab*.

An interesting revelation was the perceptions that *hijabis* had of each other. Some participants related the perceptions they had of other *hijabis* and vice versa. There seemed to be stereotyping of *hijabis* from different countries and different cultures. Fatima felt "Somali girls [had] more freedom" than Arab girls. She said the Somalian girls in her school could "get away" with wearing shorter and tighter clothes, but if an Arab girl did, "everyone would ask, 'what are you doing?'" Fatima also felt that many Iraqi girls in her school wore the *hijab* because of pressure from home. She told me about an Iraqi *hijabi* girl at her school who "comes to school

and she doesn't dress like a *hijabi*." Fatima felt this put a distorted image into the minds of non-Muslims. Farah said the other *hijabi* girls in her school did not agree with her decision to participate in school dances. She also said her *hijabi* friends often asked if she felt "weird hanging out with the White people." Seema felt the *hijabis* in her school were very "judgmental" and it would affect her decision to part take in some activities; however, Seema felt she would ultimately do what she felt was right, but other *hijabi* girls would be discouraged from participating because "people like to talk."

In summary, *hijabi* girls felt they were being stereotyped and judged by their peers, both Muslim and non-Muslim. This resonates with the commonly held perception non-Muslims have of *hijabi* women as described by Rezai-Rashti (1994). For some participants, this played a factor in discouraging them from participating in social activities. For those that did participate, they acknowledged stereotyping as a form of discrimination. Farah and Sabina accredited their confidence as a main factor that helped them overlook the comments some of their peers made, while Fatima stated she did not have enough confidence to speak up against false stereotypes her peers made.

5.4 Theme Three: Culture Differences

All participants stated that their schools, regardless of how multicultural they perceived them to be, were dominated by "White people." All seven participants used the term "White people" to describe the audience that social activities at their schools were catered to and Mariam referred to the activities itself as "White." Grumet (1995) uses the term "ancestor worship" to describe the Eurocentric activities preformed in schools which, according to Lewis (1995) neglects the needs of non-European students. Participants also described their school's student council as consisting mostly of White people. As described by Fatima "the school revolves

around White people." This term was used repeatedly throughout each and every interview to describe the non-Muslim peers *hijabi* participants were referring to. Participants did not narrow their focus on any specific religion but felt that students of European decent were the ones dominating over social activities offered in their schools.

Participants discussed the cultural differences they felt between themselves and their peers in various ways. Farah described high school for her Anglo-European peers as "partying" but that religiously, this was not appealing to *hijabi* students like herself. Seema used the term "culture difference" to describe the social activities in her school and how it prohibited her from participating at times. Cartledge (1996) explains that many minority students experience a degree of cultural difference within schools because the average teacher, White, middle class, female, does not know how to relate to her minority students. This proved to be true for all the participants who stated that the majority of the teachers in their schools were White females. Fatima explained the cultural difference for her non-Muslim peers as having "freedom to do whatever they want." When Fatima was discussing school dances and the dominant attendance of non-Muslims she described it as "culturally, their more into that stuff." McIntosh (2005) refers to this as "white privilege" a term that describes the many day to day things non-whites can not automatically take part in while white people can, and quite often, take for granted.

Sabina, Farah and Imaan said most of the social activities offered in their schools did not "appeal" to them. All participants mentioned that some of the social activities offered in their school conflicted with their religious beliefs and, as Imaan said, seemed to follow "Christian values." Farah and Zainab said it was possible to participate in social activities as long as *hijabis* "watched" what they were doing, meaning, not overstepping the boundaries they believed in according to their religion. Fatima stated that if she wanted to participate in events she would

have to "keep her limits." Overall, students found it "easier" to not attend social events at their schools because so many events involved "*haram*" actions.

Student council was a major issue discussed throughout interviews. Participants felt there was little to no representation on their schools' student councils and regardless of how diverse some participants felt their school was, student council was always dominated by the European students. Seema felt student council had the biggest influence when it came to organizing social events and said, "I wish student council had more cultural people instead of just White people." Mariam described the student council activities in her school as "White" and felt they were "sticking to the traditions of White people." Participants related that if more *hijabi* students were elected on to student council a wider range of activities may be offered, but this seemed like a difficult task since "we are always outnumbered" said Imaan.

A major student council event that was the number one conflicting activity for *hijabi* students were the school dances including prom. School dances occurred at least three times a year and up to six times a year at particular schools. Participants considered dances to be the most frequent social activity offered at schools. Participants stated that, religiously, they were not comfortable participating in school dances because of the overall environment. Sabina said students wore "short dresses" and "tight clothes" and that would make her feel uncomfortable if she attended. Imaan said listening to music with obscene and suggestive lyrics conflicted with her religious beliefs. Other participants described dances and prom as similar to a "club" with boy and girls dancing provocatively and alcohol and drugs playing an active role. Mariam stated when Muslims organized events such as the multicultural show at her school, it was not supported by the non-Muslims and very few attended. This confirms the claims of Zine (2003) and Lee (1995) who both state that trying to create a multicultural atmosphere is not enough,

rather, educators need to go beyond and strive towards an anti-racist atmosphere. Focusing simply on “the dances, the dress, the dialect, the dinners” (Lee, 1995) is regarded as a superficial approach to promoting awareness.

In summary, participants felt cultural difference was a significant factor when it came to their lack of participation in social activities. Participants such as Seema and Sabina felt their institutions were not doing enough to ensure *hijabis* could participate in a range of social activities. Farah and Zainab felt their schools needed to do more in order to encourage *hijabis* to participate in school activities. Overall, most participants revealed that the lack of social activity accessibility was taking away from their high school experience.

5.5 Theme Four: *A Desire to Participate*

The fourth emergent theme describes participants’ sincere desire to partake in social activities offered in their schools. Even participants who did not take part in any school activities regarded social activities favourably and showed interest in joining. Almost all participants stated that social activities played an important part in education and being accepted as a member of a social group played an important role in their overall high school experience.

Out of the seven participants, three were actively involved in school activities such as student council and sport teams. Although Farah did not feel like she could fully participate in all of the student council led activities because of her religious beliefs, she was still an active member who attended many events and thoroughly enjoyed it. Sabina participated on the basketball team as well as attended leadership camp. Both were activities she would continue participating in. Imaan was a member of two multi-ethnic clubs as well as an athlete on the school’s soccer team. These participants related that participating in school social activities

helped them achieve a higher quality of the high school experience many of the other participants also spoke about.

Two of the seven participants were interested in participating in social activities but felt discouraged by various obstacles. Zainab had previously run for a position on student council and had tried out for different sports teams. So far she had not been able to secure a position for herself on either one and ultimately this discouraged her. However she did say she would consider trying out again for both student council and an athletic team because she enjoyed meeting new people and being active with her friends. Seema who played for her school's rugby team in the past had stopped because of uniform issues but she would be interested in joining rugby again if uniform accommodations could be made to suit her needs.

The remaining two participants, Mariam and Fatima were not currently participating in any social activities but did express interest in joining. Mariam said she would be interested in joining student council if there were more Muslim students, specifically, more *hijabi* students involved. She stated that being the only *hijabi* on student council would make her feel "awkward," however, if there were more *hijabi* students on student council, it may result in more inclusive student events. Similarly, Mariam was interested in joining a sports team if some of her friends or any other *hijabi* girls were also a part of the team. Fatima made similar comments showing her interest in being a part of student council and joining a sports team. Fatima also stated that she would feel more comfortable joining if other *hijabi* girls were a part of any of the school's social activities.

This theme suggests that if adequate accommodations were made to suit the needs and welcome *hijabi* girls, there would be a considerable increase in the participation of social activities on their part. It also appears that there could be a 'snowball effect' if schools were to

make accommodations for *hijabi* students, as many participants related, having other *hijabis* taking part in school activities would heavily influence their decision to partake as well.

5.6 Going Beyond Current Literature

The themes discussed resonate with the studies that have been conducted by other researchers; however, current literature on the subject of Muslims and education fails to focus on the growing population of *hijabi* girls. All literature that I located on this subject analyzed a broad spectrum of Muslims and their experiences within education, but did not take into account the possible differences and inter-relationships amongst Muslims themselves. This is one of the ways this study is unique and goes beyond the scope of what has previously been explored. The analysis of *hijabi* girls revealed there were judgements Muslims exchanged with one another that, at times, influenced (encouraged and/or discouraged) participation in social activities at school. Judgement was passed between *hijabis*, *hijabis* and non-*hijabi* Muslim girls, and Muslim girls and boys.

This study also introduces the sense of appreciation *hijabi* participants feel towards their teachers and coaches for “letting” them participate in school activities such as sports. While most students have taken it for granted that it is possible for them to partake in any social activity that interests them, *hijabi* students feel they need to seek permission from school authorities for activities such as sports to modify school uniforms in order to participate. Furthermore, *hijabi* students feel the need to consciously be aware of their level of participation in social activities so to not cross the boundaries of their religious beliefs. While most of their peers participate completely in all activities, *hijabi* students can only participate to a certain extent in activities such as school dances, sport teams and barbecues.

Data collected from participants also revealed that although participants felt social activities were accessible, they did not feel their schools' activities were welcoming. Many social activities currently being offered in schools come with a set of unarticulated conditions and barriers that prevent and ultimately discourage *hijabi* girls from participating. There were very few activities that *hijabi* participants felt they could participate in contributing to the reasons some *hijabis* avoided participating at all.

This new information that previous studies have failed to acknowledge assist in creating a better understanding of how *hijabi* youth experience education, in particular, the social aspects of high school. The emergent themes and data collected crystallize the experiences of *hijabis* at an individual level. This thesis can be used as a resource to help educators towards creating an inclusive school environment, one that enables the growing population of *hijabi* students to actively partake in their school activities and thus achieving the desired high school experience.

Chapter 6: Amalgamation – The Essence of How *Hijabi* Youth Experience Social Activities in Ottawa Secondary Schools

6.1 Introduction

In keeping with the methodology of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method, I describe the overall essence of how *hijabi* students experience social activities as "*feeling left out.*" This quote was used several times throughout all my participant interviews and links in various ways to the three themes identified in chapter 5. Using the description of "*feeling of left out*" as the primary essence, the following chapter serves as a detailed outline of the specific ways *hijabi* students feel excluded.

6.2 Feeling Left Out

Today's *hijabi* youth choose to wear *hijab* because of their own personal beliefs as Muslim women and as a symbolic commitment to their religion. Wearing a *hijab* is a constant reminder for themselves that they represent modesty in Islam and a message to others of their status as Muslims.

Hijabi youth feel different than their peers, who include, non-Muslims, Muslims and non-*hijabi* Muslims. This difference stems from the apparent physical differences of wearing *hijab* and covering fully, and from the activities *hijabis* do not feel comfortable doing that the rest of their peers engage in. Feeling different has caused *hijabis* to segregate from the rest of the peers at their schools and form friendships, for the most part, amongst each other. This provides a comfort zone for *hijabi* girls, one in which they find confidence and moral support in numbers.

Hijabis feel alienated and isolated from their peers. *Hijabis* feel as though they stand apart from the rest of their peers because schools are primarily dominated by people of Anglo-European decent. As a result, *hijabis* feel unwelcome attending and participating in their schools'

social events. *Hijabi* students feel as though an effort is not being made to encourage them to take part in school activities, and accommodations to meet their needs are not being facilitated by teachers and coaches.

Speaking out against stereotypes about Muslims, Islam and *hijab* is an ongoing issue for many *hijabi* girls. Students are faced with many questions and perceptions of why they choose to cover and feel their non-Muslim peers know very little about them. *Hijabi* girls feel media plays a negative role in distorting the way non-Muslims view women in Islam and think schools need to promote a greater awareness of their religion.

Hijabi girls also face perceived stereotypes and judgement from amongst their *hijabi* peers. Passing judgement is a result of different religious boundaries held by each *hijabi*. Some *hijabis* choose to ignore the comments of other *hijabis*, while others are influenced by it greatly and allow it to affect the way they socialize in school.

Hijabi students feel there is a difference in culture between non-Muslims and Muslims. Social activities non-Muslims engage in conflict with many of the religious beliefs held by *hijabi* girls and deter them from participating. Prominent school activities such as school dances are viewed as following a Eurocentric tradition, and as a result, neglect the interests of many *hijabi* students. *Hijabi* girls also identify a distinct difference between themselves and non-*hijabi* Muslim girls. Non-*hijabi* Muslim girls are regarded as having more freedom and looking less "out of place" than a *hijabi* girl would at particular social events.

Overall, *hijabi* girls feel they are leaving high school with a less fulfilling experience than their peers. *Hijabis* feel many social activities offered in their schools conflict with their religious beliefs, and as a result, exclude their participation.

Chapter 7: Implications and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This study aimed to explore how *hijabi* students in Ottawa secondary schools experienced social activities offered. By researching the topic thoroughly, I hope to have made a contribution towards closing the gap in literature that failed to explore how one of the fastest growing populations in Canada was experiencing education. Like many studies, my research has implication for further academic research in this area of inquiry that I hope to also explore in the future. Primary questions this study has produced in my mind are: What role does a *hijabi* girl's self-esteem play in her decision to partake in social activities? And, how does self esteem differ between *hijabi* girls who participate in social activities and those that do not? Researching these questions can assist educators in further understanding and accommodating their *hijabi* students.

Recommendations are largely a reflection of the suggestions made by participants; because the purpose of this study was to understand my participants' experience, it was important to me that their suggestions are taken verbatim from their transcripts. These suggestions were made explicit during participant profiles in chapter 4, and will be categorized here for accessibility. I also suggest my own recommendations based on my experiences as a *hijabi* in high school.

7.2 Accessibility versus Welcoming

Currently, social activities are made available for student participation and are considered accessible for all. Uniforms are accommodated for students with diverse needs and social events are considered optional for those students who would like to attend. Although schools may have accessible activities, an effort to encourage students to participate needs to be made. It is not enough to provide the resources for an activity, school officials must create an atmosphere of

belonging and unity that will encourage students to participate. In order to do this, schools must break down the barriers that exist between students, be it because of race, culture or religion. Schools must promote the notion that students belong to one school community. Furthermore, schools must promote that attending school events is the right of every student and ensure that every student feels welcome and safe when attending.

7.3 Inclusive Social Activities

In order to help students feel welcome, schools must re-access the social activities offered in schools and ensure that all activities are inclusive. Dances were regarded as a main social activity, occurring more often than any other activity in schools, yet excluded almost all of the *hijabi* students. Schools should consider replacing some school dances with other activities that would allow all students, regardless of religion, the opportunity to attend.

School field trips, dances and prom need to be supervised closely by adults to ensure a safe and legal environment. Teachers must ensure that students are not using offensive body language or abusing the use of alcohol and drugs on school property. Students attending social events should feel confident that there is responsible adult supervision available in the case of inappropriate behaviour.

7.4 Teachers Playing a Pro-Active Role

Teachers must play an active role in helping *hijabi* students feel welcomed and accepted in the social realms of school. In order to encourage students to participate in sports, teachers should personally make an effort to approach *hijabi* students and vocalize the accommodations made available for those interested in participating; students should not feel they have to ask for "permission" in order to participate or wear an altered uniform.

7.5 Promoting Awareness

School authorities need to invest more time into promoting awareness about various religions and cultures. Teachers should be more acquainted with the diverse backgrounds of their students and in return, educate and promote school diversity on a day to day basis rather than only on special holidays. Raising awareness will help prevent the perpetuation of stereotypes and will help *hijabi* students feel more comfortable partaking in social activities such as sports.

Promoting religious awareness will help towards the elimination of many of the problems *hijabi* students currently face. For example, a greater understanding of Islam will help non-Muslims face their perceptions of *hijabi* women and the way they dress. If *hijabi* women do not feel they are being perceived in a certain way, many may gain the confidence they need to play a more active role in their school community.

Chapter 8: Concluding Discussion

The goal of this thesis was to answer two primary questions: 1) How do *hijabi* women in Ottawa secondary schools experience the social activities offered by their schools? and 2) In what ways are *hijabi* girls being included or excluded from social activities because of their religious obligations? After conducting thorough interviews with seven participants undergoing the phenomenon in question, four main themes emerged. *Us versus Them*, *Fighting Stereotypes*, *Culture Differences* and a *Desire to Participate* explored the ways in which *hijabi* youth experienced social activities in their high schools. Revealed within these themes were the specific activities that compromised the religious principals of participants. Issues of athletic uniforms and school dances were two significant ways in which *hijabi* youth felt excluded from participating. Regardless of the level at which each participant was involved in school social activities, all participants expressed interest in being a part of their school community and a desire to take part in the social activities offered.

The essence of how a *hijabi* experiences social activities in Ottawa Secondary Schools was described as “*Feeling Left Out*.” This was the one statement that all participants made in each interview when speaking about their involvement or lack thereof, in school social activities. The phrase “feeling left out” captured the very essence of how all participants felt about their current school involvement, and all of them expressed their desire to feel included and accepted by their peers.

The implications and recommendations portion of the thesis suggests four interactive ways in which school authorities can help *hijabi* students such as the ones in this study feel included when it comes to participating in school activities. *Accessibility versus Welcoming* details the need for schools to promote an atmosphere of school community so that each member

feels as though they play an integral part of the student body. *Inclusive Social Activities* call for school authorities to re-examine the traditions of current social activities. Activities offered should not interfere with the religious beliefs of students. *Teachers Playing an Active Roles* asks teachers to vocalize their efforts to make accommodations for students with various needs. The fourth and final recommendation, *Promoting Awareness* explains the responsibility of the school to promote religious and ethnic awareness on an everyday basis rather than on specific occasions. This works towards an anti-racist discourse rather than simply a multicultural one.

Several other discussion-worthy topics of interest emerged from the participant interviews and were discussed in participant profiles which I would also like to discuss in this portion of the thesis. One such topic is the influence other *hijabis* had on participants' initial decision to wear *hijab*. Although all participants said religion was the number one reason they decided to put on the *hijab*, participants such as Sabina and Seema also credited "positive peer pressure" from friends who already wore *hijab*. Friends may not have vocalized any influence, but simply having friends who wore *hijab* was a silent influencer. This again relates back to Zine's (2000) notion of formalized resistance. Rather than attempting to fit in with their non-*hijabi* peers, *hijabi* participants give more importance to fitting in with their fellow *hijabis*. This reinforces the *Us versus Them* theme where *hijabi* students unite amongst each other while feeling a lack of connection with their other peers.

Another issue that was revealed in participant interviews was the lack of Anglo-European participation in minority interest events such as multicultural shows. Two participants, Mariam and Fatima, each attending different high schools, noted that there was a minimal amount of European attendance at their schools' multicultural shows. The Schools' minority student population took greater interest in showcasing their culture and learning about each other's

culture than their non-minority peers. I reflected on this issue for quite some time, wondering why only minority students attended multicultural shows. One could stipulate that just as some minority students felt ‘out of place’ attending European dominated events, might the opposite also be true? Obviously the scope of this study can not adequately address this issue, however such a topic would be interesting to pursue in further research.

Also interesting was the perception *hijabis* held of themselves. It appears as though often participants’ own perception of how they would feel or look at events discouraged them from attending or participating. All of the *hijabis* in this study used words like “awkward” and “weird” to describe how they would feel if they attended an event such as a dance. Similarly, participants felt they would look out of place if they wore pants on a sports team where the rest of their teammates were wearing shorts. None of the participants explicitly said they were harassed by peers for wearing pants, rather, it was their own perception that others were passing judgement. In the case of sports teams, it may be useful for coaches to address issues of student uniform openly for both *hijabis* and non-*hijabis*. Taking the initiative to explain to all students trying out for a team that uniform can be accommodated for all individuals who are interested in playing may encourage many more students to participate.

One of the most interesting topics for me was the perception of what a “multicultural” school was for the participants involved in this study. Out of the five schools under discussion, three of them were described as “very multicultural” or “pretty multicultural.” What this meant for participants such as Mariam, Fatima, Seema, Imaan and Sabina was that, on average, 22%³ of their whole school population was Muslim. This percentage appears to be low in comparison to

³ This average was based on the number of Muslim students out of the total number of students attending each respective school, as indicated by participants. This information is also provided under the “School Demographics” portion of Chapter 4’s Findings.

the amount of Anglo-European students participants refer to, but it could be a higher percentage when compared to the number of other minority populations at each school.

Furthermore, schools identified as multicultural seemed no more accommodating or inclusive than the schools of Farah and Zainab, who described their schools as “white schools.” For example, Seema’s school, which she refers to as multicultural, did not allow her to participate in rugby because wearing a *hijab* was considered a safety issue and the uniform required that she also wear shorts. Therefore, attending a “multicultural” school did not necessarily mean students’ needs were met more than those students attending a mono-cultural school.

Ironically, Farah and Zainab were involved in more social activities than their co-participants attending “multicultural” schools. Farah was an active member on student council, even though that meant being the only *hijabi* girl present at many social events, and Zainab ran for a position on student council regardless of the fact that she was one of very few *hijabi* students at her school. Participants such as Mariam and Fatima who referred to their school as diverse were only interested in being on student council if their *hijabi* friends or other *hijabi* peers were also a part of it. This particular point is what sparked my curiosity to research the role self esteem plays in *hijabi* girls’ involvement in school social activities.

8.1 Concluding Remarks

It is my hope that by identifying and explaining the major themes that emerged from participant interviews, I am helping educators and researchers better understand how *hijabis* are experiencing social activities in Ottawa high schools. As stated earlier in my thesis, I acknowledge that the experiences related by these participants may not be true for other *hijabis*, but my goal was to understand how a particular group experienced the phenomenon in question.

I hope my study serves as a building block towards creating a sustainable, more inclusive social environment for *hijabi* students.

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Appendices

Hijabi Youth and Social Activities in Ottawa Secondary Schools

Research Participants Needed

Volunteers are needed to take part in a study which will engage issues related to Hijabi youth and social activities offered in public secondary schools in Ottawa

***You are invited to participate if you:**

- 1) Are a Muslim woman
- 2) Wear a Hijab
- 3) Are currently attending a public high school in Ottawa
- 4) Are between the ages of 14-18
- 4) Speak English

***Participation would involve one interview (45-60 minutes long) and a follow up meeting to review and respond to data collected during the study**

Your input and responses will be an integral part of the research process and the final research document.

For more information about this research, or to volunteer as a participant, please contact:

**Saba Alvi (principal investigator)
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa**

Messages may be left at:

**Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Ruth Kane
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa
Phone: (613) 562-5800, Ext. 4068
rkane@uottawa.ca**

This research has been reviewed by and has received ethics clearance through the Protocol Office for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions	Probing Questions
<p>Reasons for wearing hijab</p> <p>Can you tell me why you choose to wear hijab?</p>	<p>Does anyone else in your family wear it?</p> <p>Is it because of them you decided to wear it?</p> <p>What were some the influences that led you to wear hijab?</p>
<p>Hijab in the School</p> <p>Is there a large hijabi population in your school?</p>	<p>How many of your friends are Hijabi?</p> <p>How many Hijabis are there in ratio to non-Hijabi</p> <p>How many Muslims are there in your school?</p> <p>Do most of the Muslim females in your school wear hijab?</p>
<p>Social activities within the School</p> <p>Can you name some of the social activities in your school? That is, activities that take place outside the classroom.</p>	<p>Can you describe some of them?</p>
<p>Student participation</p> <p>Do you participate in any of these social activities? Why or why not?</p>	<p>Do other hijabi peers participate in any of these?</p> <p>Who usually seems to participate in these activities?</p> <p>Are a mix of cultures and religions usually involved?</p>
<p>Would you be able to participate in all of the social activities offered in your school? Why or why not?</p> <p>Are certain activities you can't participate in?</p>	<p>Are any of these activities conflicting with your religion?</p> <p>Do any of your hijabi friends participate in these activities?</p> <p>Have you or any of your hijabi friends been unable to participate in social activities because of religion reasons?</p> <p>Can you provide any examples?</p>
<p>Hijab awareness</p> <p>Do you think your school is doing everything they can to provide accessible social programs for all their students?</p>	<p>Could you suggest any that you would like to see implemented?</p>
<p>Hijabi vs. Non Hijabi</p>	<p>Socially/ Social activities?</p>

How do you feel your high school experience compares to that of your peers and friends?	Muslim friends? Non hijabi Muslim friends?
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