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Exploring the Educational Experiences of Gifted Muslim Women at High
School in Canada

by

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Abstract

Despite having examined the relationship between gifted students' educational accomplishments and their cultural backgrounds, research has yet to explore the educational experiences of gifted Muslim women living in Western countries (e.g., Al-Lawati & Hunsaker, 2007; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). To address this gap, this study employed phenomenological inquiry to explore gifted Muslim women's curricular and socio-educational experiences at public high schools in Canada. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were performed with three purposefully-sampled gifted Muslim women between the ages of 21-24 at the University of Alberta. Inductive analyses revealed the following eight overarching themes regarding the participants' high school experiences (a) curricular shortcomings; (b) influences of instructional interactions; (c) diversity's impact; (e) obligatory extracurricular participation; (f) peer interactions as strained; (g) family as a beacon of knowledge and; (h) urgency for change. Implications for educators in the area of curriculum development, teacher training programs and cultural representation in schools are discussed.

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Glossary of Terms

Alhamdulillah: Arabic phrase used by Muslims that means “thanks be to God”.

Assessment Validity: The extent to which the material being tested is an accurate reflection of the material instructed in class during a term or a unit.

Cultural diversity: In this study, individuals who live in Canada and are Canadian citizens but were raised in a family where other cultural values present (i.e., parents or grandparents were originally from another country).

Curriculum: The content taught in a course or a class.

Dawah: Providing non-Muslim individuals with information about Islam.

Diversity: In this study, it refers to different ethnicities, cultures and religions.

Eid: The name of a religious holiday celebrated by Muslims.

Group Project: Instances in school whereby students work with two or more other students to complete a particular curricular outcome.

Hadith: Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that were recorded by his followers throughout his life.

Halaqa: A religious gathering between Muslim men, women and/or both where the primary purpose is the exchange of religious knowledge and the learning of theology.

IB Program: International Baccalaureate is a standardized degree program offered in some Canadian high schools, which employs accelerated programming.

IQ: Intelligence quotient; a score acquired primarily from standardized tests related to chronological age as a measure of intelligence.

Madrasa: Religious Islamic school where students are taught how to read Quran and also learn about the basic tenants of the faith.

MSA: Muslims Student's Association

PBUH: Peace Be Upon Him (a saying used by Muslims after speaking or writing the name of the Prophet).

Regular Stream: Courses in a high school that do not have any advanced curriculum or that do not require the taking of a placement test for acceptance.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Context and Purpose of the Research

Veiled for centuries by shrouds of patriarchy, Muslim women have emerged, within the past decade, as targets of both Western and Islamic scrutiny (e.g., Afshar, 2008; Bakht, 2007; Haddad, 2007; Syed, 2008). Often stigmatized and misrepresented by media entities, the 21st century Muslim woman has been compelled to navigate a sea of endless contradictory opinions about her supposed socio-educational roles and potentials (Sidani, 2005). Recent Muslim immigration to North America, which has become increasingly abundant and diverse in nature, has created an ideologically and denominationally diverse Canadian Muslim population (e.g., Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Government of Canada, 2001; McAndrew, 2010; Niyozov, 2010). The demographic realities of this growing community has also become increasingly apparent in Canadian schools, where educators have struggled to effectively address the complex socio-educational and pedagogical issues that have arisen as a result of this influx of diversity (Smick, 2006).

My interest in this topic originates from personal as well as professional experiences with issues related to the education of gifted Muslim women. As a first-generation Muslim woman, I have witnessed countless talented Muslim girls and women struggle with socio-cultural and religious pressures regarding their educational and professional decisions. I myself have experienced criticism regarding my academic endeavours. Although supported by immediate family

members, my decision to pursue graduate studies while engaged and childless was decried by a number of individuals close to me. In addition, I remember having often felt disenchanted with the curriculum used by my teachers and professors as well as frustrated with the lack of supports offered to students from diverse backgrounds. In speaking with other Canadian educated Muslim women, I learned that many of them shared similar experiences. Intrigued by these findings, I engaged in various informal dialogues with Muslim women regarding the issues of socio-cultural pressures and curricular relevance. These conversations revealed that a substantial number of girls, many of whom were incredibly talented, were generally dissatisfied with the extent to which public schools represented and promoted diversity. On the other hand, some of the women expressed having managed to successfully integrate their Islamic beliefs and ethnic backgrounds into the cultural value-system of Canadian society. These women's experiences in Canadian schools encouraged my desire to further explore these issues through research.

In the realms of gifted education, cultural background can have a profound impact on a woman's educational experiences and overall academic success. Several studies have suggested that cultural diversity is negatively correlated with gifted education referrals, which is evidenced in the homogeneous nature of the students currently receiving gifted education services in North America (e.g., Elhoweris, 2008; Ford, 2010; Lopez, 2000). Reis (2005) found that cultural beliefs about women's intellectual properties and talents as well as their societal responsibilities can have a significant impact on a gifted woman's recognition of

her full academic potential. Students from culturally diverse groups have been found to encounter identity crises when trying to both satisfy their unique academic needs and respect the cultural expectations placed on them by their families (Kopala, 2000). Although prolific in their analyses with gifted women from European, African-American and Hispanic descent, studies that examine the relationship between cultural background and gifted students' educational experiences have yet to include gifted Muslim women in their analyses (e.g., Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2011; Frasier, 1995; Peterson, 1999; Reis, 2002; Reis, 1995).

While some research has examined the educational needs of students from minority backgrounds in North America, few studies have explored the socio-curricular needs and experiences of gifted Muslim women in Canada (e.g., Al-Lawati & Hunsaker, 2007; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Ford, 2010). North American Muslims, the majority of whom attend public or private secular schools (Niyozov, 2010), are confronted with curricula and educational materials that often fail to recognize their unique cultural backgrounds (Haque, 2004). Although current curricular models have been developed to facilitate the integration of gifted students into the regular classroom, these guides neither address the unique characteristics of gifted Muslim women nor delineate the steps that need to be taken to accommodate their unique needs (Ford, 2010; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Treffinger, Young, Nassab, Selby, & Wittig, 2008).

The dearth of research that currently exists regarding gifted Muslim women's educational experiences and curricular needs impedes educators' ability

to design programs and services that effectively support their learning. Greater insight into the educational issues encountered by gifted Muslim women in Canada will therefore, assist in the procurement of developmentally and culturally appropriate programs for this group of students. Canada's Muslim community will also benefit from such studies in that they will help them enhance community-based programs that support these women's unique needs. Researchers in gifted education will also garner essential information about the particular educational needs of gifted Muslim women, which will facilitate the conduction of novel research in this area of study.

To address the abovementioned gaps is the research; this study's primary aim is to explore gifted Muslim women's educational experiences in Canadian high schools. The goal, more specifically, is to gain an in-depth understanding of these women's unique socio-educational and curricular experiences through the analysis of their perspectives. A phenomenological approach will be used as the methodological framework for the research, which suits its experiential and exploratory nature (Creswell, 2007). This particular approach will also provide women from an often marginalized community with the opportunity to articulate the issues they believe have had the greatest impact on their high school experiences.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A Socio-Cultural Conception of Giftedness

The context dependent nature of achievement discourages the affordance of a singular all-encompassing definition of giftedness. Previous attempts to delineate the term giftedness rarely acknowledged the multiplicity of meanings associated with this term (Mandelman, Tan, Alijughaiman, & Gigorenko, 2010), which resulted in definitions that were exclusionary, one-dimensional and ethnocentric in nature (Ford & Whiting, 2008). Many educational theorists argue that giftedness is an inherently variable construct whose significance is entirely dependent on the abilities or talents that are valued by a culture (e.g., Mandelman, et al., 2010; Plucker & Barab, 2005). According to Sternberg (1997), the initially unquestioned association of giftedness with IQ is now regarded as being too simplistic in that it limits giftedness to excellence in traditional Eurocentric models of academics, which is not necessarily an area of performance valued by all cultures. Extensive research exists to support these claims, demonstrating that cultural groups conceive, perceive and define giftedness in varying ways (Peterson, 1999). For example, Phillipson (2007), who purports that our understanding of giftedness is dependent on time and culture, found that many traditional African cultures regard individuals who use their abilities for the collective good of their communities to be gifted. The failure to develop definitions of giftedness that are culturally appropriate for the environments in which they are being applied could result in the use of constructs that are inherently in opposition to the beliefs of certain cultures.

In order to recognize the variability of the notion of giftedness, constructs used to define this term must refrain from using culturally-specific language, which risks excluding the beliefs or practices of certain cultural groups (Mandelman, et al., 2010). Researchers have recently begun to advocate for the re-evaluation of current conceptions of giftedness so that they better represent the socio-cultural backgrounds of the increasingly diverse student population in North America (e.g., Kopala, 2000; Lopez, 2000; Pfeiffer & Blei, 2008; Phillipson, 2007; Sternberg, 2000). Pfeiffer and Blei (2008) argue that giftedness needs to be regarded as being a superior ability in one or more culturally valued domains and that the number and types of gifts should only be limited by the values of that culture. These suggestions are supported by studies in which researchers have found that different ethnic groups within North America possess divergent conceptions of intelligence (e.g., Lopez, 2000; Sternberg, 2000). Similarly, other researchers have encouraged the use of broader and more culturally-relevant definitions; ones which recognize that giftedness is a dynamic quality with multiple meanings that are dependent on the historical, economic and socio-cultural contexts in which they are considered (Csikszentmihalyi, 1986).

In response to this advocacy for increased cultural appropriateness, I will, for the purpose of this study, use a socio-cultural perspective to define giftedness. According to Phillipson (2007), our understanding of giftedness is reliant on time, culture and socio-economic background. For example, high academic performance is a particular trait not equally valued in every culture; therefore it would not be a reliable measure of giftedness (Sternberg, 2000). In adhering to a

socio-cultural approach, I argue that it is not possible to articulate one comprehensive conception of giftedness as it would fail to accurately represent the unique cultural, religious and ethnic diversity present in this world (Phillipson, 2007). In response to the above findings, I propose that we define giftedness as a construct moulded by environmental influences, whose manifestation can only be accurately identified through the acquisition of evidence of superior achievement within a particular socio-cultural context (Plucker & Barab, 2005). Recognizing the impact environmental factors have on a particular culture's definition of giftedness will work to increase the authenticity of the constructs, identification procedures and supports that are used with these populations.

Identifying Culturally Diverse Gifted Individuals

The identification of culturally diverse gifted students is most accurate when a comprehensive screening process, which acquires evidence from a variety of sources and individuals, is utilized (e.g., Clark, 2008; Ford & Whiting, 2008; Richert, 1997). Borland (2004) found that a case study approach, in which individuals exhibiting gifted traits were identified according to their specific backgrounds, situations and needs, afforded a reliable measure of giftedness in students from culturally diverse backgrounds. In order to address these findings, researchers have recommended the use of multidimensional screening processes that are collaborative and personalized in nature (e.g., Clark, 2008; Gallagher, 1997; Plucker & Barab, 2005). Richert (1997) argued against the use of test scores as the only indicator of giftedness, citing that this approach often results in the exclusion of culturally diverse students from accelerated programs. In order to

recognize the diversity present among students from different backgrounds we must therefore, use increasingly holistic identification measures that integrate qualitative data, such as community involvement, letters of recommendation, and quantitative assessments, such as grade point average (e.g., Clark, 2008; Treffinger & Feldhusen, 1996).

To establish validity and reliability in the identification of gifted students from diverse backgrounds, measuring instruments employed with these individuals must be equitable, defensible and culturally appropriate. Researchers have found that the underrepresentation of culturally diverse gifted students are due, in part, to the use of Western-based models of talent identification, such as standardized tests, which often fail to accurately assess these students' talents (e.g., Kitano & Perkins, 2000; Mandelman, et al., 2010; Peterson, 1999; Vasilevska, 2005). Several studies contend that conventional intelligence tests used in North America, which were developed according to the views of dominant cultural groups, have contributed to minority students' underrepresentation in gifted programs (e.g., Newman, 2008; Plucker & Barab, 2005; Kopala, 2000; Sternberg, 2000). According to Newman (2008), one of the major caveats of these tests is that they frequently use content and/or ask questions that are culturally loaded, which can significantly impede culturally diverse students from performing at their full potential. Similarly, Sternberg (2000) found that children from diverse backgrounds are frequently penalized on standardized ability tests due, in part, to the tests' lack of cultural sensitivity. In response to these findings, researchers have encouraged educators' use of assessment procedures and tests

that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for students from diverse backgrounds (Frasier, 1997).

Knowledge in Islam

There is a general consensus among Islamic scholars that the pursuit of knowledge is both an obligation of and a fundamental human right for all Muslims (e.g., Coles, 2004; Nor Wan Daud, 1989; Syed, 2008). Subhi-Yasmin (2009) argues that one of the foundational components of the Islamic faith is the acquisition of knowledge, which is supported by the Qur'an wherein it states that every human being has the right and responsibility to develop their intellect. Detailed analyses of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) sayings have revealed that he regarded the procurement of knowledge as compulsory upon every Muslim (e.g., Halstead, 2004; Mogra, 2010). Throughout his life, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who is believed by Muslims to be the last and final messenger of God, advocated for the implementation of mass education systems for all, which highlights the valour he held towards knowledge (Mogra, 2010). The scriptural evidence in support of Muslims' acquisition of knowledge highlights the value placed on learning in the Islamic faith.

Within the Islamic tradition, an individual's knowledge gains valour when it is in adherence with Islamic principles and teachings (Freeman, 2005). Despite learning being prescribed as a religious duty upon all Muslims, Halstead (2004) found that in order for this knowledge to be considered of value in Islam, it must be accumulated with the intention of increasing an individual's faith in God. For

example, in Malaysia, a predominately Muslim country, notions of giftedness are associated with an individual's pursuit of studies that reinforce their belief in God and that help maintain high moral standards (Freeman, 2005). According to Islamic teachings, education and learning becomes a valued act when it fosters the spiritual development of the individual (Mogra, 2010). Hassan and Kader (2008) argued that in Islam the ideal scholar or scientist is the one who studies that which has been deemed halal in Islam, which helps ensure that they will acquire knowledge and engage in activities that benefit individuals, society and the environment (Hassan & Kader, 2008). For instance, the knowledge possessed by a halal (lawful according to Islamic law) chicken farmer would be regarded in greater esteem than that of a senior oil company director because the latter is involved in activities that do not support the improvement of humanity and nature (Hassan & Kader, 2008). When the above conditions are met and knowledge is attained within the prescribed boundaries, one finds that the Qur'an repeatedly portrays individuals that seek such wisdom as being in a state of heightened spirituality (Nor Wan Daud, 1989).

Women in Islam

Regarded in Islam as spiritual equals in the eyes of God, women and men are told in the Qur'an that they must strive equally to please the creator.

Numerous Islamic scholars have argued that Islam revolutionized the status of women in 7th century Arabia in that it eradicated numerous cultural practices that subjugated women (Badawi, 1976). Prior to the arrival of Islam, women were regarded as lesser beings than their male counterparts, which led to their

mistreatment in society (Sechzer, 2004). The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) defied cultural traditions of the time with his claims that women and men were created by God as spiritual equals (e.g., Anwar, 2006; Roald, 2001). For example, a Muslim woman's salah (prayer) or fasting during Ramadan was said to have equal value to those performed by a man (Sechzer, 2004). Islam also advocated for women's full participation and responsibility in their faith, encouraging all believing women to focus their efforts on increasing their piety (Sechzer, 2004).

Despite the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) advocacy of equality of the sexes with regards to spiritual matters, many Islamic societies, following the death of the Prophet (PBUH), have denied women these rights and enforced oppressive regulations on their freedom. Sechzer (2004) argues that after Muhammad's (PBUH) passing, societal attitudes towards women became increasingly negative among Muslim men, which resulted in the increasingly poor treatment of Muslim women. For instance, women in several Islamic cultures were gradually told by men to pray either at home or in separate prayer halls, which were practices neither introduced nor supported by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Sechzer, 2004). Practices of female exclusion among Muslims have become increasingly prevalent amongst Canada's Islamic communities. For example, the majority of new mosques being erected in Canadian cities are building women's prayer spaces in secluded room or separate floors, which prevents the women from actively participating in congregational discussions (MacDonald & Narwaz, 2005).

According to Anwar (2006), the lack of religious jurisprudence amongst Muslim women has resulted in overwhelmingly male-centered interpretations of Islam, which has left women to be the objects of male authority, judgement and knowledge. The exclusion of women from social and religious life in Islamic cultures reflects a commonly held belief among many Islamic scholars that men are, with regards to social and political matters, superior to women (Roald, 2001). Countless interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith by male Islamic scholars have concluded that women's inherent biological nature causes them to be overly emotional and lacking in reason (e.g., Anwar, 2006; Roald, 2001). These interpretations have proliferated throughout Islamic cultures and have led men and women to believe that females are incapable of managing societal, economic or political issues outside of the home (Anwar, 2006). For instance, a majority of Saudi Arabian males surveyed in one study were found to associate terms such as dominant, independent and capable of leadership with men; whereas terms such as dependent, caring and child rearing were associated with women (Elamin & Omair, 2010). Although not representative of all Muslims' views towards women, the above findings suggest that such scholarly beliefs regarding Muslim women's roles in both religion and society have impacted beliefs about the nature of gender differences within certain Islamic cultures.

Female Education and Work in Islam

Modern feminist and progressive interpretations of Islamic texts have found little conflict between a woman's religious obligations and her academic or professional aspirations (e.g., Al-Lawati & Hunsaker, 2002; Bedeir, 2009;

Bartkowski & Ghazal-Read, 2003; Sfeir, 1985; Syed, 2008). According to this perspective, Islam gives women the right to select their career and to participate in all realms of social and political life (Syed, 2008). Sfeir (1985) argued that the vast majority of female readings of Islam consider women's participation in all social, professional and educational aspects of life to be supported by the religion. Advocates of these interpretations frequently site the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) wife, Khadija, as an exemplar woman, in that she was a prominent 7th century business woman and even became the employer of the Prophet (PBUH) himself (Syed, 2008). In-depth qualitative interviews with university attending American Muslim women revealed that the majority found no conflict with their educational pursuits and religious beliefs, citing often spiritual reasons for their educational decisions (Bartkowski & Ghazal-Read, 2003). The above findings suggest that there currently exists support amongst Muslims for women's right to pursue their academic and professional aspirations.

Despite a growing number of women who are performing analyses of Islamic texts, the majority of interpretations have been conducted by men and often impose oppressive sanctions on women's participation in social life. Numerous 21st century Islamic scholars claim that the ideal and most appropriate role for Muslim women in society is that of a homemaker (e.g., Al-Munajjid, 2011; Engineer, 2005; Roy, 2010). For centuries, many Islamic philosophers have associated female success and achievement with motherhood and wifedom, citing the Qur'an and prophetic traditions as proof of their claims (Anwar, 2006). For example, certain scholars have argued that a woman who dies breastfeeding her

child will receive an equivalent reward to that of a martyr (Anwar, 2006). Sidani (2005) found that numerous individuals within Arab societies believe that the most respectable profession for a woman is to stay at home and to devote her life to raising her family. Advocates of this perspective significantly limit and constrict women's participation in social society. They also equate female piety and success with a woman's dedication of her life to familial duties.

Despite the value associated with learning and education in Islam, a Muslim woman's right to pursue an education in Western countries is often limited to or impeded by familial pressures. Fears among the Islamic community regarding increasingly educated Muslim women are rooted in the belief that this knowledge could lead to a loss of religious piety and cultural commitment (e.g., Al-Lawati & Hunsaker, 2002; Afshar, 1989; Siann & Khalid, 1984). Afshar's (1989) study, in which she conducted a series of qualitative interviews with British immigrant parents of South Asian descent, found that the majority regarded British secular schools as a vice that could potentially threaten the piety of their pubescent daughters. Several mothers noted that while they did not want to deny their daughters an education, they worried that the social and educational influences they experienced at school would lead them astray from their faith and culture (Afshar, 1989). Immigrant Muslim women from a variety of backgrounds living in Western countries have been found to consider the education of their daughters of lesser value than that of their sons (Moaddel, 2010). Although they did not regard women as being intellectually inferior to men, these women's discouragement of female education was rooted in the fear that their daughters

would become too distracted to seek marriage or would adopted un-Islamic Western practices (Siann & Khalid, 1984). Despite the recognition that their qualms regarding female education in the West were not rooted in Islamic jurisprudence, Muslims' possession of these beliefs can significantly affect the nature of a Muslim woman's educational experiences in North America.

In some Islamic traditions, a woman's right to work is mandated according to stringent and oppressive interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith. A number of Islamic scholars claim that the most appropriate societal roles for women are those of wives and mothers and that work outside the home should be carefully limited to situations in which such work is needed for survival (e.g., Al-Munajjid, 2011; Anwar, 2006; Bedeir, 2009). This particular ruling is founded in the belief that when women choose to work outside of the home, the quality of family life suffers and deteriorates (Elamin & Omair, 2010). In addition to fears associated with the perceived negative effects working women will have on the wellbeing of the family, certain Islamic cultures purport that there exist professions that are gender specific, which must be respected by both women and men (Sidani, 2005). For example, numerous Islamic jurists argue that women should only pursue work in professions that they believe have been prescribed for women (i.e., nurse, physician or teacher) and that enable them to work in environments wherein excessive contact with men will not occur (e.g., Al-Munajjid, 2011; Anwar, 2006; Bedeir, 2009). In a recent lecture given at the University of Manitoba, Dr. Reda Bedeir (2009) argued that the increased problems faced by the Islamic community with drug use amongst its youth are, in part, the result of a greater number of

Muslim women choosing to work outside of the home. These comments highlight the stigma often associated with women that decide to pursue higher education or a professional career. Although not indicative of the beliefs held by all Muslims, the prevalence of this perspective amongst certain North American Muslim communities has the potential to limit Muslim women's educational and professional endeavours.

Female Success and Achievement in Islam

In contrast to Western societies' value of individualistic qualities, many Islamic cultures regard the dedication to one's community, family and religion as the most desirable of traits. The majority of Islamic scholars and Muslims alike consider the family to be a foundational pillar of society as well as the primary indicator of its wellbeing (Anwar, 2006). According to Keddie (2010), commitment to one's familial responsibilities is considered of greater importance, primarily for women, than the pursuit of personal goals, of self-serving career ambitions or education-related interests. Several studies have found that a number of Muslim cultures possess a deep reverence and respect towards women that dedicate their lives to supporting and improving the family (e.g., Afshar, 1989; Basit, 1997; Elamin & Omair, 2010; Keddie, 2011). Islam's emphasis on a woman's lifelong commitment to the betterment of the family could therefore, act as an impediment to some gifted Muslim women's achievement in Canadian classrooms and society.

Islam's reverence of a woman's dedication to her community could have a significant impact of the manifestation of talent in gifted Muslim girls. Several studies, which have explored the experiences of young Muslim women studying in the West, found that a large number of these girls felt confused by the conflicting messages they received regarding the nature of their academic potential, responsibilities and achievement (e.g., Afshar, 1989; Hamdan, 2005; Keddie, 2011). For instance, British parents of Muslim South Asian descent were found to expect their daughters to attain superior results in school while simultaneously preserving their faith, culture and familial responsibilities (Afshar, 1989). In order to better understand the way in which Muslim girls reacted to socio-cultural pressures, Basit (1997) performed in-depth interviews with high-achieving high school aged Muslim girls; findings revealed that many girls were deeply conflicted, wanting to participate in society and maintain their traditional cultural values. Gifted Muslim girls' expression of their talents could therefore, embody an amalgamation of both Islamic and Western traditions regarding achievement, which could present educators with significant challenges.

Operationalization of the Term Gifted Muslim Women

In this study, giftedness was operationalized based on a socio-cultural conception of the term and developed according to the unique socio-cultural and religious backgrounds of the participants. Adherence to the basic tenants of Islam (i.e., belief in one God, performance of the five daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, giving charity and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca) is regarded in utmost esteem by Muslims (Engineer, 2005; Sadaalah, 2004; Sidani,

2005). In addition, high achievement in both secular and religious educational studies is revered amongst Muslims (Engineer, 2005). In order to recognize the value placed on piety and education in Islam, giftedness in this study represents individuals that: observe the basic tenants of their faith and exhibit superior academic achievement; this can be demonstrated in a variety of ways depending on the age of the student (e.g., honour roll achievement in secondary school or GPA of 3.5 and above at the undergraduate level) (e.g., Hasted, 2004; Mogra, 2010; Subhi-Yasmin, 2009).

Educational Support for Gifted Muslim Women in the Western World

Despite the widespread recognition of gifted students' unique academic and social needs, teachers in Western countries frequently lack the adequate training or background to support the needs of gifted students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Esquivel & Nahari, 2000; Ford, 2010; Niyozov, 2010). According to Ford (2010), educators that are aware, accepting of and sensitive to students' cultural differences are more apt and able to make the necessary adaptations that will address the needs of a diverse student body. As a religious minority group in Canada, Muslim women that are gifted will require the support of teachers who are sensitive to and aware of their unique backgrounds and beliefs. Culturally diverse gifted students are however, vastly underrepresented in gifted programs, which Esquivel and Nahari (2000) argue is partly the result of teachers' insufficient knowledge of and training on how to identify and educate this group of gifted individuals. Niyozov (2010) found that numerous North American public school teachers possessed negative stereotypes about their

Muslim students, which could significantly impede these students' receipt of the adequate educational supports.

Despite the reported value of developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant curriculum for gifted students (e.g., Kulik, 2004; Perrone, Wright, Ksiazak, Crane, & Vannater, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, 2003), the curricular supports currently afforded in schools have been found to be inadequate for culturally diverse gifted students (Ford, 2010). Although it can have negative educational consequences on the academic success of culturally diverse gifted students, culturally irrelevant curriculum continues to be used in regular and gifted classrooms (e.g., Ford, 2010; Gay, 2002; Gunel, 2007; Howard, 2004). Gifted Muslim women's unique cultural backgrounds place them at an even greater risk of not having their needs met in school (e.g., Afshar, 1989; Douglas & Dunn, 2003; Gunel, 2007; Niyozov, 2010). For example, Niyozov (2010) found that the curriculum and materials used in North American classrooms frequently failed to include Islamic perspectives in their analyses about historical and political issues. Gunel's (2007) in-depth interviews with Muslim American women revealed that there were significant gaps in both the school curriculum and teachers' understanding of their unique cultural practices, which often made them feel alienated in class. The overwhelming lack of resources that are both culturally relevant and appropriate for Muslim students in North America highlights the difficulties educators face when trying to develop or adapt the curriculum to suit gifted Muslim students' unique needs (Douglas & Dunn, 2003). Overall, the current lack of curriculum and academic resources that meet the

needs of gifted Muslim women could affect these students' educational experiences as well as hinder their academic successes.

Unheard Perspectives

While a handful of studies have explored the issue of giftedness in Muslim women, their analyses have failed to adequately convey the educational experiences of this particular population. Several studies about intelligence and giftedness in Muslims have been examined from a Western perspective, using culturally-inappropriate definitions of these terms in their analyses (Subhi-Yasmin, 2009). Researchers that have examined giftedness from a more culturally-authentic perspective have yet to explore the educational experiences of gifted Muslim women; rather focusing on the experiences of teachers or parents (e.g., Al-Lawati & Hunsaker, 2002; Al-Lawati & Hunasker, 2007; Siann & Khalid, 1984; Sidani, 2004). For example, Al-Lawati and Hunsaker (2002) used quantitative questionnaires in their analysis of the factors that motivated young gifted Muslims girls to succeed, which afforded minimal information about their experiences as gifted Muslim women. Al-Lawati and Hunsaker's (2007) administration of a similar quantitative-style survey helped identify the educational strategies used by Muslim teachers when assisting gifted Muslim students, but did not provide insight into the nature of these students' experiences at school. In order to address these gaps in research it is therefore, imperative that future studies employ more diverse research methods, such as in-depth interviews, and specific populations, such as gifted Muslim women, in their analyses, which could afford a more holistic portrayal of their needs.

Although a significant amount of research has looked at the relationship between culturally diverse gifted students' perceived successes and the school curriculum (e.g., Ford, 2010; Gay, 2002; Howard, 2004; Kulik, 2004), few studies have examined the educational and/or curricular experiences of gifted Muslim students. For example, research examining teachers' ability to adapt the curriculum to suit the needs of gifted students from diverse backgrounds frequently focus on students from African American, Asian and Hispanic backgrounds in America (e.g., Borland, 2004; Esquivel & Nahari, 2000). Studies that have attempted to explore the supports available in North American schools for Muslim students rarely distinguish between male and female students and have not yet focused on gifted Muslim students (e.g., Douglas & Dunn, 2003; Gunel, 2007; Niyozov, 2010). For instance, Gunel (2007) explored Muslim women's curricular experiences in America, which, due to the nature of its sample group, could not generalize its findings to gifted Muslim women. In order to address these gaps, future studies need to integrate the perspectives of gifted Muslim women living in the West into the existing body of literature that addresses the socio-educational needs of culturally diverse gifted individuals.

Framing the Research Question

In order to increase the cultural-relevance and efficacy of the educational supports available and developed for gifted Muslim women in Canada, educational researchers must acquire a more comprehensive understanding of this population's lived educational experiences. Current findings helped identify the following three areas as the primary focus of this study (a) experiences with the

curriculum; (b) sources of knowledge and/or learning and; (c) experiences and means of coping with socio-cultural issues in school.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative methodology. The theoretical framework for this study was based on a qualitative approach, which supports the exploratory nature of the study's research questions (Lichtman, 2010). Qualitative research designs are employed to explore issues that are absent from the literature or that have not yet been thoroughly examined in the research (Rumrill, Cook, & Wiley, 2011). The lack of existing research about the educational experiences of gifted Canadian Muslim women in high school highlights the need for greater qualitative insight to be generated about this phenomenon.

Qualitative methodology also endorses the use of individual experiences as information for explicating a phenomenon, which is indicative of its appropriateness for this study. One of the main aims of qualitative research is the acquisition of a more holistic understanding of a phenomenon by examining the perspectives of individuals experiencing that incident (Rumrill et al., 2011). This study's use of a qualitative approach, which theoretically supported the acquisition of in-depth information about the participants' experiences with the phenomenon in question, helped answer its main research questions (Rumrill et al., 2011).

The involved nature of my role, as the primary investigator, with the study's topic, participants and data further highlights its qualitative characteristic (Rumrill et al., 2011). In qualitative research, the researcher is regarded as an

integral component of the research process; actively integrating their personal skills, background and experiences into the conceptualization and conduction of a study (Rumrill et al., 2011). Throughout the writing of my thesis, I became increasingly cognizant of the extent to which my own personal identity functioned as an integral component in the research process. For example, the conceptualization of the research topic and corresponding questions were generated from my own personal educational experiences as a high-achieving Muslim woman as well as the many conversations I had had with gifted Muslim women about the challenges they faced in high school. In addition, my pre-existing relationship with the Muslim community was vital in recruiting participants willing to share their experiences.

Furthermore, the participants' ability to share authentic and detailed insights about their educational experiences was supported by the use of a qualitative approach. As a Muslim woman, my ability to relate to the participants on a personal level and to engage in meaningful dialogue rooted in empathy and understanding increased the participants' willingness to share their insights about the research questions (Rumrill et al., 2011). Despite being mere acquaintances at the commencement of the study, the participants and I became closer over the course of the research. This burgeoning friendship was fostered by the collaborative nature of their participation in the study, in which their thoughts, suggestions and opinions were actively encouraged (Rumrill et al., 2011).

Phenomenological framework. Phenomenology's methodological foundation rests in its desire to explore and illustrate an individual's

consciousness or lived experience as a textual representation of its essence (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Moran, 2010; Van Manen, 1990). In an attempt to acquire a more profound understanding of the significance of our daily experiences, phenomenology places the individual at the centre of the research process and works to unearth the underlying meaning of their lived experiences (Benner, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology is inherently imbued in ambiguity; Van Manen (2002) argued that the phenomenological researcher not only begins their journey in wonder but must also recognize that the process itself will generate and often end with similar if not greater wonder. Phenomenology's intrinsic generation of novel conjectures, as well as its reliance on subjective judgement and interpretation, renders the completion of analyses virtually impossible; therefore there is a recognition amongst phenomenological researchers that their analyses are neither final nor beyond challenge (Van Manen, 2002).

A phenomenological framework was selected for this study because it supported the experiential nature of its research questions (Lichman, 2010). This study aimed to acquire greater insight about the experiences of gifted Muslim girls in Canadian high schools by providing those that experienced this phenomenon with the opportunity to explore and convey their lived experiences (Lichman, 2010). My desire to learn more about this issue through the analysis of the women's lived experiences highlights its adherence to phenomenology's methodological framework; which purports that only through immersion into an individual's lifeworld can meaning be brought to an event (Van Manen, 1990).

This study's primary purpose was not to generalize its findings but to afford greater insight into the educational experiences of gifted Muslim women, which implored the use of an exploratory qualitative approach such as phenomenology. Rather than collecting data to make casual inferences about the nature of a phenomenon, or to generalize findings beyond the sample group, phenomenology implores the construction of highly personalized accounts of an individual's unique experiences with a phenomenon (Langdrige, 2007). Although this study will not procure generalizable results, it will provide comprehensive descriptions of the issue at hand, which in generating meaning will elucidate an unexamined issue and help to focus future research in this area (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants and Sampling Procedures

Participant recruitment was guided by purposeful sampling techniques. This study's unique target population as well as its designation of specific participant selection criteria justified its employment of purposeful sampling procedures (Tuckett, 2004). The use of purposeful sampling, which enables for the deliberate selection of participants based on unique characteristics, increased my ability to recruit and interview individuals that met the participant selection criteria; therefore increasing the credibility and trustworthiness of their experiential accounts (Rurmill et al., 2011).

Developed according to current cross-cultural theories of giftedness, the participant selection criteria were essential for ensuring that participants met this

study's definition of giftedness. In order to be included in this study, the participants had to meet the following criteria (a) female; (b) undergraduate student or recent university graduate (less than one year); (c) attended public secondary school in Canada; (d) regard themselves as observant Muslims and; (e) have or had a grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 or higher. Individuals that did not meet the abovementioned criteria were not recruited to participate in the study; the rationale for their exclusion being that the aim was to interview gifted Muslim women, which required the participants to match the learner profile of this study's operationalization of the term gifted (Rumrill et al., 2011).

Personal community-based connections were employed to disseminate information about the study as well as to recruit participants. The primary researcher's previously established relationships with Edmonton's Muslim community were employed as the primary means through which participants were recruited. Information about the study itself, as well as the participant selection criteria, was initially explained to potential participants after weekly on-campus religious events (i.e., Friday prayer and halaqas). Interested participants that met the selection criteria and that expressed an interest in the study were then sent a more comprehensive overview of the study and participation requirements via email.

A total of three Muslim women volunteered to participate in the study; this number is supported by the in-depth nature of phenomenological data and analyses (Langdrige, 2007). This small sample size also encourages the affordance of thorough and precise analyses of the interviews, which is one of the

primary goals of phenomenological research (Langdrige, 2007). In addition, the use of three participants enabled each individual to explore their educational experiences in a thorough manner, which facilitated the provision of a comprehensive description and discussion of their perspectives.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews. The phenomenological orientation of this study's research questions guided the use of one-on-one face-to-face interviews, which were both semi-structured and in-depth in nature, as the sole means of data collection (Lichtman, 2010). In-depth interviews are ideal for qualitative research in that they facilitate the acquisition of detailed information about the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007). The data acquired during interviews are ideal for phenomenological studies in that they provide rich and detailed information about the human experience, which help afford a deeper understanding of the issues being explored (Van Manen, 1990). In-depth interviews also provide individual participants with a greater opportunity to explore their experiences, which increases the comprehensiveness and credibility of the data and subsequent analyses (Van Manen, 1990).

The use of an open-ended semi-structured interview format also allowed for greater control over the nature and direction of questioning, which helped ensure that the research questions were explored in their entirety (Lichtman, 2010). Semi-structured interviews also foster an environment wherein participants can explore their experiences with directed freedom, which encourages a more

detailed description of their experiences (Levesque-Lopman, 2000). This interview style also provides a level of balanced flexibility in that the interview's direction can be adapted according to the issues raised by the individual participants.

Interview guide. An interview guide was developed and used to increase the directionality and focus of the interviews. Prior to conduction of the interviews, an open-ended interview guide was created based on the study's research questions, which facilitated the generation of several overarching topics and corresponding questions. The creation of this guide was a vital component of the research process in that it enabled for the structuring of the interviews according to the intentions of the study (Lichtman, 2010). At the beginning of the guide, time was allocated for informal dialogue, which increased participant comfort and encouraged the development of rapport (e.g., Lichtman, 2010; Smith & Osborn, 2003). The questions included in the guide increased the focus of the investigation as well as improved alignment between participants' responses and the study's research questions (Hébert, 2004). The open-ended and non-judgemental nature of these questions helped elicit detailed responses that captured the participants' unique experiences (Lichtman, 2010). Please see Appendix III for a copy of the interview guide.

Interview location and duration. The selection of a location for the interviews was a collaborative effort involving both the researcher and the participants. Prior to the interviews, the participants were given several locations where the interview could take place, such as the community mosque, the Muslim

Student's Association office, the meditation room at the university, a coffee shop or the researcher's home. Each participant agreed that conducting the interview at the researcher's home would be the most conducive for sharing of experiences; in that they would not need to worry about people overhearing the conversation. Providing the participants with the opportunity to choose the interview location worked to increase their comfort with the interviews, which encouraged discussion and sharing of experiences (Lichman, 2010). There were no individuals, apart from the researcher and the participants, present during the interviews, which worked to create an environment wherein the participants felt comfortable expressing themselves. Conducting the interviews at the researcher's place of residence also enabled the participants to pray either during or after the interview.

To increase the participants' overall comfort with the interviews, as well as to facilitate their sharing of experiences, a flexible and accommodating approach was employed when determining interview durations. Despite telling participants that the interviews would last approximately one hour in length, I emphasized the flexibility of its length so as to ensure that they did not feel pressured to finish. For example, during the interviews the participants were never prevented from continuing their sharing of experiences simply because of time, which increased the authenticity and fluidity of the discussions (Lichtman, 2010). This flexibility was imperative to the phenomenological process in that it accommodated the unique nature of the participants' experiences, each of which required varying amounts of time to explore (Benner, 1994). A total of one

interview was conducted with each participant; each ranged from approximately 1 hour and 15 min to 1 hour and 30 min in length. The interviews were conducted during the month of September, 2011.

Data Management

Interview protocol. The interviews were structured according to a qualitative interview protocol, which facilitated data management and increased the consistency across interviews (Creswell, 2009). Prior to the commencement of each interview, written permission regarding participation in the study was obtained. Permission for use of a recording device was then acquired, which enabled the accurate transcription of its contents (Lichman, 2010). The use of a tape-recorder also minimized the amount of notes that needed to be taken during the interviews, which increased my ability to interact with the participants in a more naturalistic and fluid manner (Lichman, 2010). Following completion of the interviews, participants were thanked for taking the time from their busy schedules to participate in the study, which, in recognizing the value of their efforts, helped develop a more trusting relationship between researcher and participant (Creswell, 2009).

Note-taking. Handwritten notes were taken by the primary investigator throughout each interview to capture the key-points and non-verbal emphasizes made by the participants. The purpose of these notes was to record the emotive atmosphere of the interviews, which was conveyed through bodily gestures (e.g., waving of the hands) or facial reactions (e.g., scrunching of the nose) and could

not be captured on the tape-recordings (Lichman, 2010). The key-points raised by the participants were also recorded by hand, which worked to increase the data's trustworthiness (Creswell, 2009).

Interview transcription. The audio-recordings of the three interviews were transcribed one-at-a-time by the primary investigator in the month following their conduction. Prior to commencement of the transcription process, the recorded and hand-written data from each interview was sorted, labeled and organized. In order to facilitate the transcription process, as well as to increase its accuracy, the data migration and integration software *ScribeSoft*© was used to transcribe all three interviews. A computer program designed to assist with the transcription of audio recordings, *ScribSoft*© has several useful features that accelerates and facilitates this process. For example, there is an option that allows one to reduce the speed of the recording.

The following procedure was followed for the transcription of each interview (a) creation of a pseudonym for the participant; (b) listening to the interview recording in its entirety without transcribing; (c) transcribing as much of the interview as possible using the reduced speed option; (d) reviewing the transcription using the reduced speed option; (e) listening to the interview at regular speed and making any final changes and; (f) summarizing the key points that were recorded by hand during the interview.

Data Analysis

Ongoing reflection. Engaging in abiding reflection with the data helped increase the credibility of the inferences made about the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2009). In-depth retrospective analyses were performed throughout the data collection, transcription, analysis and writing phases of this study, which encouraged the generation of meaning about the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2009). This process of ongoing reflexivity, during which I actively questioned, compared, and considered the significance of the participants' experiences, also worked to increase the rigour of my analyses (Benner, 1994).

Analysis procedures. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, an inductive thematic approach was used to analyze the data, which enabled the natural and progressive emergence of themes over time (Leonard, 1994). Inductive thinking encourages the identification of patterns in data; from which general claims about a phenomenon can be made (Hatch, 2002). This particular analytic method's dedication to generating meaning through rigorous exploration of qualitative data supports the methodological orientation of phenomenological research; whose primary aim is to convey the complexities of individual experiences with a phenomenon (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

In order to increase the accuracy of the findings, a series of pre-analysis organizational procedures were followed (Creswell, 2007). The first step involved the sorting, labeling and filing of the data (i.e., audio-recordings and interview notes) in a safe location; following which transcription of the interviews began.

Once complete, the interview transcriptions were sent to the participants; each woman was asked to review their respective interview and add/change any information they found did not accurately represent their experiences or required greater clarification. Engaging the participants in these preliminary steps of the analyses worked to increase the trustworthiness of the data (Levesque-Lopman, 2000). This organizational process was also essential in preparing the data for analysis in that it helped increase the credibility of the themes later identified (Langdridge, 2007).

In order to encourage in-depth analyses of the data, the following steps were followed after transcription of the data (a) the interviews were read one-at-a-time; emerging themes and sub-themes were noted in the margins; (b) the themes identified during the initial reading were grouped according to similarities; (c) the preliminary thematic structure was revised and condensed; (d) the structure was used to analyze the data (i.e., themes and sub-themes were ascribed to segments of text); (e) novel themes or sub-themes that emerged during this coding process were added to the thematic structure; (f) the themes and sub-themes were abbreviated and then operationalized (i.e., defined and an example was provided) and; (g) the revised structure was used to code the data for a second time (e.g., Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Lichman, 2010). In this study, themes represent the most significant and overarching issues identified by the participants with regards to their high school experiences; whereas sub-themes reflected the pertinent issues within each theme (Hatch, 2002).

In order to facilitate examination of the interview data, the qualitative software program ATLAS.ti© was employed during analysis (Creswell, 2009). ATLAS.ti© is a German-developed qualitative data analysis software program that assists in the evaluation and interpretation of qualitative data (Creswell, 2009). I was able to access this program through a University of Alberta computer laboratory. For this study, the program was employed to organize, manage and code the interview data. The document management feature, which facilitates the organization of uploaded qualitative documents, as well as the quotation and code management features, which provide an overview of all codes and changes, were used to organize the data (ATLAS.ti, 2002-2011). The program's ability to support a wide array of data formats (e.g., PDF and Rich Text), its easy to navigate data exporting features (i.e., text files can be exported as PDFs with the corresponding codes) and its reliable backup options increased the ethical handling of the data.

Data analysis was also facilitated by the use of ATLAS.ti's© memo, comment and coding features. Following transcription of the interviews, the individual documents were uploaded into ATLAS.ti© and labelled according to their date of conduction. During preliminary analysis, the comment feature allowed for the inclusion of easily accessible and modifiable remarks in the margins of the transcript. After having completed this initial review, I was able to view all the comments that were made, which facilitated the identification of themes. Coding was also performed and expedited by the coding feature available in ATLAS.ti©. The thematic structure that was developed in the preliminary

phases of data analysis was uploaded to ATLAS.ti© as a coding list and then used to code the interviews with color coded identifiers. These features helped increase the credibility of the analyses in that they allowed for the ongoing review of the coded text to ensure correspondence with the themes.

Designing for Trustworthiness

In order to increase the trustworthiness of this study, several methodological protocols were implemented and followed during the research process. Described as the credibility and authenticity of a study's results, trustworthiness is an essential feature of qualitative research and must be designed for and monitored in an ongoing manner (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The following sections delineate the efforts taken to improve the accuracy with which the phenomenon of gifted Muslim women was represented.

Understanding the context. As an active and involved member in Edmonton's Muslim community, I have met and developed friendships with various high-achieving Muslim women, which facilitated my recruitment of participants. For example, throughout the past two years I have volunteered with each participant on various projects within the Muslim community. These experiences enabled me to become acquainted with these women's extraordinary abilities, talents and accomplishments. Despite having met numerous high-achieving and gifted Muslim women, the unique nature of these three women's talents implored their recruitment for this study. Therefore, my pre-existing relationships with multiple high-achieving Muslim women as well as my

knowledge of their gifted potentials facilitated the recruitment of three participants that effectively met the selection criteria.

The interviews were conducted at the primary researcher's home to accommodate the unique nature of this study's target population. Due to my pre-existing relationship with the participants, conducting the interviews at my home was a feasible option. The fact that my place residence was located within walking distance of the University of Alberta campus positioned it as an ideal location. In addition, conducting the interviews at my home enabled the participants and me to briefly break from the interviews to perform our obligatory prayer. It also gave me the opportunity to prepare lunch and/or sweets for the participants, which was offered as a token of my appreciation for their participation in the study.

Researcher reflexivity. In order to provide readers with a greater understanding of the experiences and beliefs that I brought to this study, regarding the phenomenon in question, I engaged in multiple instance of research self-reflexivity. The credibility of qualitative findings can be significantly reduced when a researcher fails to articulate the personal characteristics and assumptions that are in-place upon pursuing the investigation of a phenomenon (Rumrill et al., 2011). When engaging in phenomenological research, it is regarded as standard practice to explicitly state and reveal one's beliefs, assumptions, biases, presuppositions and/or concepts about the phenomenon under investigation (Van Manen, 1990). Despite its inability to eliminate the presence and/or influence of personal biases, research reflexivity improves the credibility of conclusions by

revealing the lens through which analysis took place and by encouraging the researcher to remain cognizant of their biases throughout the study (Lichtman, 2010).

Over the years, I have developed several assumptions and personal beliefs regarding the nature of gifted Muslim women's socio-educational experiences. Upon commencing this study, I held the following opinions about gifted Muslim women's high school experiences (a) the curriculum does not adequately reflect their cultural and/or religious backgrounds; (b) the materials and activities used in schools are not meeting their unique socio-cultural and educational needs; (c) the school staff are struggling to create a learning environment that truly fosters these students' diverse needs; (d) there is a lack of knowledge amongst school staff regarding Islamic history, religion and values and; (e) these women lack interest in subjects that do not address their needs.

My personal educational experiences as a high-achieving Muslim woman also resulted in my possession of certain biases regarding this study's research questions. Throughout my secondary education, I frequently struggled to relate to the materials used in several of my classes; these experiences contributed to my underlying belief regarding its prevalence amongst other high-achieving Muslim women. In addition, I often became frustrated with the fact that diversity, both religious and cultural, was often excluded from the secondary curriculum. As a high school student, I also valued teachers that recognized my unique interests and tailored curricular decisions to my needs and my background.

Member checks. Performing member checks helped increase the accuracy of this study's findings (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Member checks consist of having one's interview transcripts and/or preliminary conclusions reviewed by participants (Brantlinger et al., 2005). During these revisions, participants assess whether the documents are an accurate representation of their experiences, which helps confirm the validity of the raw data and interpretations (Creswell, 2009). Member checks help identify areas in the data or analyses that are regarded by the participants as inaccurate depictions of their experiences, which can then be used to modify the results so that they possess greater validity (Rumrill et al., 2011).

In order to increase the accuracy of this study's results, I performed member checks with the raw data. Following transcription of the interviews, the participants were given approximately one month to review their respective interviews and make any necessary changes. In addition, after the interviews the participants were provided with a hard-copy of the interview guide and informed that they could contact the primary research via phone or email until December 2011 if they wanted to convey any additional information or experiences. All three participants took the opportunity to review their transcripts; each edited small segments of their respective transcripts and added a couple of short experiences.

Peer debriefs. Throughout the course of this study, I engaged in ongoing peer-debriefs with fellow masters students and my supervisors, which provided alternative perspectives regarding my research (e.g., Rumrill et al., 2011; Shenton,

2004). In an attempt to support each other's research, I met, at several instances during the Fall 2011 and Winter 2012 term, with several Special Education masters students to discuss our studies. Organized as round-table discussions, these meetings served as a way to acquire formative feedback regarding my research. I also met with my two co-supervisors throughout the planning, conducting and writing phases of this study, which gave me the opportunity to acquire feedback regarding the methodological soundness of my research.

Audit trails. A means through which the credibility of qualitative results can be assessed, audit trails were maintained throughout the course of this study (e.g., Bratlinger, et al., 2005; Rumrill et al., 2011). Keeping audit trails requires the systematic documentation of key steps in the research process (e.g., interviews or observation dates and times), which increases the credibility of a study's findings (e.g., Bratlinger et al., 2005; Rumrill et al., 2011). Rumrill et al. (2011) proposed that audit trails consist of (a) raw data (i.e., audiotapes, interview notes and memos); (b) outcomes of data reduction and analysis processes (e.g., coding procedures); (c) products of data syntheses and; (d) any additional notes taken throughout the research process.

In order to increase the credibility of my results and to facilitate readers' ability to assess trustworthiness, I documented the steps taken throughout the research process (Rumrill et al., 2011). The following list outlines the audit trail maintained throughout this study (a) once complete, the interviews and their respective recordings were kept on the principal investigator's password secured computer; (b) once transcribed, the interviews were kept on the same computer in

a folder labeled “Interview Transcriptions”; (c) updated versions of the interview transcripts, which were received following performance of member checks, were saved as new files in the same folder; (d) during analysis, the interview transcripts were re-saved as new files after each major step in the analysis procedure (i.e., addition of comments, initial coding and secondary coding); (e) all preliminary thematic structures were saved, dated and kept on the principal-investigator’s computer in a folder entitled “Thematic Structures”, which facilitated the monitoring of analyses and; (f) the coding of interview transcripts was documented according to the thematic structure (i.e., preliminary vs. final) used to code the data.

Ethical Considerations

Various measures were taken to ensure that the highest ethical standards were maintained throughout the course of the study, which helped increase participants’ comfort with the study and encouraged their sharing of experiences. Practicing ethical behaviour while conducting research works to ensure the proper treatment of participants (Lichtman, 2010). In order to ensure that this study met the University of Alberta’s prescribed standards for ethics in research, my research proposal was submitted to and approved by the University’s Human Research Ethics Review Process (HERO). Due to the nature of this study’s data collection, which required the conduction of face-to-face interviews, a consent form was developed and submitted with my HERO application. An initial letter of contact, a letter of information and a preliminary interview guide were also created and submitted for approval. Following submission of the entire

application, I received notification in mid-August 2011 that the study had received ethics approval.

Following approval, I began the participant recruitment process, during which several ethical considerations were taken. For example, I provided potential participants, all of whom fit the participant selection criteria, with an initial letter of contact and a letter of information regarding the study. I also told several potential participants about the study in-person. Those that expressed interest in the study were provided with more detailed information about the purpose and aims of the research as well as the requirements for participation. Once the three participants agreed to take part in the study, the respective interview locations and times were decided via email.

Prior to commencement of data collection, the study's purpose, aims and overarching research questions were re-articulated to the participants, which worked to support their active engagement in the study (Lichtman, 2010). For example, I explained that this study aimed to provide Canadian educators and officials with greater insight about gifted Muslim women's experiences. The communication of the above information was essential in maintaining high ethical standards in that it ensured that the participants were aware of the purpose(s) their experiences would serve. Failure to communicate this information would reduce the ethical soundness of this study in that participants would not have sufficient information to make an informed decision regarding participation.

The interview guide also helped mitigate potential ethical dilemmas. For example, the guide was designed so as not to require the recollection of any painful or traumatic experiences, which reduced the possibility of personal discomfort. Participants were also given the freedom to withdraw, end or modify their participation at any point before analysis of the data began. Although this information was articulated in both the letter of information and the consent form, I also spoke with each participant in person regarding this issue and explained how withdrawal could take place.

Several ethical considerations were also integrated into the actual data collection and analysis procedures, which worked to ensure that the participants felt at ease with the material being presented. For example, neutral language that neither victimized nor discriminated against individuals of any background was employed (Lichman, 2010). Pseudonyms were also employed following data collection, which helped protect the identity of the participants. The data was stored on my personal password encrypted computer, which remained locked in a safe-deposit box in my apartment. The study's co-supervisors were the only two individuals that were able to view the raw interview transcripts, recordings and/or preliminary analyses. The raw and analyzed data will be kept on a secured hard-drive for a total of five years after completion of the thesis, following which they will be erased.

Methodological Limitations

As a novice researcher, my lack of experience with designing and conducting qualitative research could have reduced the credibility of the results (Government of Canada, 2006). Despite having taken several graduate level research methods courses and having worked as a research assistant on a project that required the conduction of qualitative analyses, I have never designed and/or conducted my own qualitative study. In addition, the minimal experience I have with phenomenology could have negatively impacted the trustworthiness of my results.

The nature of the sample group, with regards to size and composition, could have limited the scope of the results. Despite being regarded as an appropriate number for phenomenological analyses, the use of three participants limits my ability to examine trends across the participants' unique experiences (Van Manen, 1990). The participants were also either in their third/fourth year of undergraduate studies or were recent university graduates (i.e., within the past year), which could have reduced the credibility of their experiential accounts.

Due to the variable nature of semi-structure interviews, I was unable to follow the interview guide consistently across participants, which could have reduced the trustworthiness of the results (Litchman, 2010). Failure to adhere to the questions outlined in an interview guide could have caused a lack of continuity between interviews or the inadequate covering of the research questions, which would reduce the credibility of the conclusions (Litchman,

2010). In addition, the use of an interview guide could have also limited the participants' ability to explore their experiences, which may have discouraged the disclosure of revelatory information about the phenomenon being explored (Lichtman, 2010).

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Overview

In this section I outline the knowledge that I acquired throughout the analyses. Therefore, the aims of this section are (a) to represent the participants' experiences using in-depth thematic analyses and (b) to generate meaning from the participants' individual and collective experiences.

The results are organized into the following sections (a) description of the participants and, (b) an exploration of the participants' experiences. The first section provides a brief narrative account of each participant's cultural, religious and educational backgrounds. The second section depicts the participants' high school experiences using thematic representation and rich descriptive accounts. Included continuously throughout the latter section are quotations, which were taken directly from the interviews and help support the interpretations.

Biographical Portraits of the Three Women*

Aicha. Identifying as an Indian Shia Muslim, Aicha is a talented and pious young woman; one who exudes a sense of demure poise upon entering a room. Her headscarf, which she draws ever so carefully around her head, serves as a visible indication of her Islamic identity. Born in Zambia to Indian parents, Aicha repeatedly reminisced about her time in Africa. During the interview, I noticed Aicha frequently peering off into the distance as she explained her educational and community-related experiences in Zambia. Although she recounted her parents' decision to move to Vancouver, when she was 11 years old, with evident

discontent, Aicha did express a degree of fondness towards the city where she settled. Described as being a primarily “brown” or Indo-Canadian community, Aicha regarded her new Vancouver neighborhood, and its cultural and religious resemblance to her background, as having assisted her family integrate into Canadian society.

A political science major and anti-racism activist, Aicha possesses an acute desire to utilize her skills and knowledge to effectuate social change. An involved and active member of the city’s Shia Muslim community and non-profit sector, Aicha’s desire to improve the social wellbeing of Muslim and non-Muslim citizens alike is remarkable. She spoke about her various extracurricular activities with an overwhelming sense of passion and commitment. Aicha’s ambitions of pursuing a Master’s degree in political science or working for a non-profit organization are visibly linked to the activist work she so passionately endorses.

Despite noting her once insatiable desire to become a lawyer, Aicha explained that this dream was slowly eroded by cultural and religious pressures/customs. Although she chuckled over her lingering desire to take the LSATs, to prove to her family that she could have attended law school, Aicha explained, with a degree of sombreness, that studying law was simply not a feasible option; her main rationale being that the educational requirements conflicted with varying parts of her identity. For example, she felt as though she was getting old and needed to focus on finding a spouse and establishing a career before pursuing more post-secondary education. Despite exhibiting sadness regarding her inability to pursue a career in law, Aicha’s commitment to her

values appeared to be an innate part of her identity, which she neither overtly criticized nor resisted.

Despite conveying a sense of pride in her Shia identity, Aicha also displayed an acute awareness of her minority status, both within Canadian society and the global Muslim community. Prior to the commencement of the interview, Aicha expressed trepidation regarding the possibility that her experiences would be generalized to represent those of all gifted Muslim women. Aicha vehemently explained that even I, a Sunni Muslim woman, could not accurately compare my own educational experiences to those of a Shia woman. Upon becoming aware of her reservations, we discussed the fact that I did not intend to generalize my findings; rather I hoped to afford rich descriptions about each participant's experiences.

Aicha also expressed a degree of trepidation regarding the use of the label gifted to define her abilities. When asked about her hesitation, she paused and said that to be gifted, in her mind, meant to have extraordinary prodigal talent, which she could not admit to having. In order to appease these concerns, I discussed the inherently ambiguous and fluid nature of the term giftedness, which has and continues to procure distinctly unique conceptualizations. I also explained that for the purpose of this study, a context-dependent socio-cultural definition of the term was being employed, which worked to recognize its inherently variable nature. Following this discussion, Aicha appeared more at-ease with the use of the term. She later noted that her initial worries were based on the very specific and often alienating associations connoted by the word giftedness. Aicha's lingering distrust

of the term became apparent during our salutations, wherein she reiterated that she still found it hard to dismiss the notion that to be gifted meant you were a genius. However, she also noted that our discussion had given her a new perspective and that she felt as though she could identify better with more diverse and culturally-sensitive conceptualizations of the term.

Iman. An undergraduate student in her first year of pharmaceutical studies at the University of Alberta, Iman is an outgoing, passionate and socially-engaged young woman committed to creating and fostering sisterhood amongst Muslim women. A Sunni Muslim of Egyptian decent, Iman speaks three languages (i.e., Arabic, English and French) and has lived both in Egypt and in Canada. Despite possessing a deep sense of respect for her cultural background, Iman regards being Muslim as the most central part of her identity. As a practicing Muslim woman, Iman's faith is not only apparent in the way that she dresses, but in her dedication to prayer and her ongoing attempt to encourage her fellow Muslim sisters to increase their faith in Islam.

Iman approaches all aspects of her life with palpable passion and fervour. She contributes much of her free time to the organization of events for Muslims at the university. Iman's modesty regarding the exceptional work that she does both in school and for the community at large is humbling. In talking with her about her various endeavours, she continuously attributed her successes to the devotedness and contributions of other Muslims. A veritable community activist, Iman is incredibly adept at utilizing her unique skills and talents to empower unity amongst Muslims at the university, which is a significant accomplishment seeing

as she also manages a very heavy course load and a demanding family life. Amazingly, Iman neither displays any overt signs of anxiety regarding her multiple duties nor complains about the work she must complete. Her positive attitude is not only refreshing but also empowering.

Despite completing her primary schooling in French in Quebec, Iman attended a French-Immersion junior high school and an English senior high school in Edmonton. Having grown up speaking Arabic and French at home, Iman's first experience learning English was in junior high school. Iman winced ever so slightly as she recounted this experience, which she found slightly challenging yet also incredibly exciting. Iman repeatedly emphasized her love for learning different languages; she speaks all three languages with impeccable fluency. Although her junior high school did not have any advanced programming, Iman enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program for senior high school. In addition to taking advanced placement courses, Iman was also elected class president in Grade 12.

Despite mentioning that she once dreamt of becoming a medical doctor, Iman noted, with a sense of accepted defeat, that the pursuit of medical studies in Canada presents often insurmountable obstacles for a practicing Muslim woman, which deters many from pursuing it as a profession. Iman readily provided herself as an example, noting that the extensive schooling, residency requirements and on-call hours would make it nearly impossible for her to pursue medical studies while simultaneously remaining involved in the community, getting married at a culturally-acceptable age and having children. Although she appeared to have

accepted this obstruction as an inevitable reality for Muslim women, she did express a degree of frustration over the rigidity of this system.

Marwa. A fourth year biological sciences undergraduate major at the University of Alberta, Marwa is an exceptionally articulate and empowered young woman who expresses her opinions with vehemence and certitude. With hopes of attending medical school following the completion of her undergraduate degree, Marwa's interest in this profession appeared to be rooted in her desire to use the skills she would learn to improve people's quality of life. Despite her overwhelming commitment to academics, Marwa's multiple and diverse talents are evidenced by her involvement in various extracurricular and community-based endeavours. Marwa is a pivotal member of the Muslim Student's Association at the university; she dedicates extensive amounts of time and effort to creating a strong sense of community amongst Muslims. Marwa's timidity regarding these accomplishments was humbling; she frequently downplayed their importance during our interview asking instead about my studies and work.

A Sunni Muslim of Bangladeshi origin, Marwa moved to Canada when she was two years old with her parents and sister. Despite admitting that she understands and speaks Bengali, Marwa noted that she does not know how to read and write in the language. She explained that at home her family speaks a mixture of the English and Bengali. Marwa subsequently mentioned that she can also read and write in Arabic but does not understand the language. Likewise, Marwa reluctantly admitted to possessing, what she regarded as, weak French language

skills, which she acquired from French as second language taken classes during her primary and secondary education.

Marwa attended both primary and junior high school in Ontario, following which she moved to Edmonton, where she completed senior high school. Despite having attended a regular primary school, Marwa attended a junior high school for gifted students, which focused on accelerated programming in the maths and sciences. For senior high school, Marwa enrolled in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Interestingly, Marwa ridiculed the fact that she attended “gifted” programs, which she felt gave the false impression that she was more intelligent than she actually was. It later became apparent that Marwa’s aversion towards associating herself with the term gifted was related to the often elitist and one-dimensional conceptualizations of the term that are employed by teachers and in schools.

Although she now wears the Islamic head covering and possesses a firm sense of religious identity, Marwa explained, with noticeable anxiety and desolation, that she was not always a practicing Muslim. Despite growing up in a Muslim family, Marwa mentioned that her parents were not practicing at the time. Marwa explained that she never attended any halaqas (religious learning circles) or madrasas (religious schools) while she was growing up, which, by the distraught look on her face, appeared to have left a spiritual void in her life. Marwa started wearing the headscarf when she moved to Edmonton, explaining that she felt it would be easier as she did not know anyone in the city or school. While she is now an avid attendee of various religious events, both on-campus

and within the larger Edmonton Muslim community, she explained that her lack of religious education as a child resulted in her not knowing the reasoning behind the religious practices she performed, which caused significant frustration and discontent.

*Names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

Voices Seldom Heard: The Educational Experiences of the Gifted Women

Experiences with the curriculum. Participants were initially asked to explore and recount their experiences with the high school curriculum. Before embarking upon this retrospective journey, participants were provided with a brief overview of the study's operationalization of term curriculum. However, the participants were also encouraged to explore any and all experiences they felt were related to the curriculum. The following sections outline the themes that emerged from our discussions regarding this issue.

Limitations of the regular curricula. Overall, the participants expressed disapproval of and frustration with the curriculum used in regular programs. Having all taken at least one regular class during their junior and/or high school experiences, the participants expressed unique and at times congruent complaints regarding the curriculum employed in these classes; which suggests its inability to effectively meet the educational needs of these women.

Having transferred from an elementary school with advanced programming to a high school with only a regular program, Aicha found the curriculum employed in the latter school to be repetitive and too simplistic in

nature. Aicha explained that much of the information taught in her Canadian high school was a complete review of the work that she did in Zambia. She also recounted that no advancements or adjustments were made to the curriculum by her teachers. The following excerpt highlights Aicha's sentiments regarding this particular experience:

“It was basically across the classes; but predominantly in math and science I didn't feel challenged because I'd already learned that stuff (...). In grade 7 I found the stuff that they were learning, I had already learned so it wasn't hard for me at all to pick up.”

Aicha's experiences with the curriculum employed in her high school suggest that the minimal amounts of work given to students in the regular classes increased her disenchantment and laziness towards school-work. For example, Aicha recounts that: “I was surprised at how little you had to do so it was actually grade 8 and 9 I basically turned into the most laziest student ever because it was just really laid back.” This excerpt suggests that when not presented with appropriate and/or adequate curricular challenges, Aicha did not seek out other academic opportunities but became apathetic towards schoolwork. Therefore, the perceived insufficiency of the curriculum had a negative effect on Aicha's commitment to school in general.

Despite having taken all IB classes in high school, Marwa was visibly perturbed with the fact that she had to take, in addition to IB assessments, the regular provincial exams. Described as a waste of time, the curriculum needing to be covered for the provincial exams failed to adequately challenge or support

Marwa's educational fervour. Marwa also explained how she felt that her boredom with this curriculum was exasperated by the fact that she had become accustomed to the accelerated nature of the IB curriculum. Marwa explains this conundrum in the following quotation:

“Another difficulty with the IB program was that there is the Alberta high school diploma and there is the IB (curriculum), and those teachers in the high schools in Edmonton have to do both; like they have to fulfill both requirements. So when you are a full time IB student, most of the time the stuff that the Alberta curriculum makes you do seems either trivial or just unnecessary because you are already doing so much and more for IB.”

Challenging and rigid; curricula used in advanced classes. In general, the participants' experiences in advanced classes in high school indicate that they regarded the curriculum employed in IB programs as having challenged them and facilitated their understanding of the material. Despite recognizing the rigidity of the IB curriculum, the participants did not regard this issue as having deterred from their overall positive experiences with the curriculum.

Marwa portrayed the rigid and pre-determined nature of the IB curriculum as a positive feature of the program in that it made her feel as though all students in IB would be assessed fairly. Marwa explains the reasoning for this preference in the following quotation:

“We did have a set curriculum just because (...) IB is an international program so they want all students to be doing same thing like across the

world just so people don't have more of an advantage or disadvantage. So we all had to write our exams at same time.”

Iman explained how she felt that the IB curriculum's detailed and pre-determined nature provided students with interesting and educationally stimulating tasks. The following quotation highlights Iman's positive perception of the IB program's pre-determined curriculum:

“I loved the IB program. They have specific requirements; one of them is that you do an extracurricular that is related to the social aspect so that fell under that one. Another one was like for example we took a class called world history so we would have this long essay to write and you would have- to search up a topic that you are interested in. It was pretty structured; it wasn't like the teacher really made up anything it was all like just what came out of their curriculums.”

For the two participants enrolled in the IB program, the curriculum was described as having enhanced their overall educational experiences. For example, Marwa explained how she felt that she learned more in high school, where the IB curriculum was used, than in junior high, which only offered accelerated math and science classes. In the following quotation she explains this point in greater detail:

“I learned a lot (laughs) in my two years in IB; I felt like I learned a lot in Grade 11 and 12 and I actually would say more so than the enriched program at the other school because it was so much more structured within the IB program. They have so many strict regulations and so you know

what has to be taught and what has to be covered and what is going to be on the test.”

Likewise, Iman noted that she preferred the IB curriculum, as opposed to the curriculum used in her high school’s regular classes, as it presented her with greater cognitive and educational challenges. Iman explains these sentiments in the following quotation:

“It wasn’t even so much more work; it was just a little bit higher level work and honestly it was the maturity level of class; it was a lot better. So I preferred it a lot compared to my regular classes with the people who were just not interested in education versus those classes where, it just made a difference that people were paying attention. You just had so much fewer interruptions.”

On the other hand, the participants did describe the inflexible nature of the IB program as having prevented them from contributing to curricular decisions. In the following excerpt, Iman explains the extent to which this curricular rigidity limited students’ ability to participate in curricular decision making processes:

“The profs, our profs, minimized them (the options) to let’s just say five books and maybe like we were able to choose four out of five. But it was fairly rigid just because in the program those were the books that were accepted in the IB world.”

The benefits of group work. All three participants described their memories of group work in high school as being invaluable educational

experiences. Group work was portrayed as a useful curricular strategy that facilitated students' ability to comprehend the material, encouraged peer interactions, increased collaboration amongst students and improved the overall social atmosphere in class.

At several instances throughout her interview, Marwa referenced, with fervent praise, one particular experience with group work. Depicted as being a fruitful learning experience, this instance of group work provided Marwa with an opportunity to employ the skills she had learned throughout the term to effectuate social change. In the following excerpt, Marwa explains the curricular foundation of the group project as well as why she found it to be of such great value:

“This one project that the group of us actually led together that was really fun it was a campaign based on a documentary that we had been shown in social studies class it (had) to do with Uganda and there was a war going on at the time and all of that and so we all felt really passionate about we did something together, which was really nice.”

The participants' experiences with group work revealed that they regarded this method of assessment as having encouraged social connectedness among classmates and having increased students' ability to collaborate effectively with others. For example, Iman explained how she felt that her teachers' frequent use of group work provided students with the opportunity to develop better relationships with their peers. Iman emphasizes this point in the following quotation:

“We did have group work; it was like a chance for me to get to know my peers better which was really nice and I guess that thing (the fundraiser) that I did in Grades 11 and 12 with my IB classmates was a great experience.”

Uselessness of language classes in regular programs. The participants’ experiences revealed dissatisfaction with the materials employed in both first and second language classes offered in regular programs, which suggests that the curricula did not adequately meet the educational needs of these gifted Muslim women.

Aicha’s experiential accounts about the curricula used in her French as a second language classes were laden with bitterness and frustration, which were directed at its perceived tedious and useless nature. More specifically, Aicha found the materials used in these classes to be unrealistic, simplistic and repetitive. In the following quotation, Aicha explicates the reasoning behind her disapproval of the content covered in these classes:

“We had to do a lot of conjugating verbs a lot of that and like writing out paragraphs. It was so focused on the grammatical aspects of French; I don’t think we ever bothered or we never had a chance to actually ever start liking it. I remember even in grade 7 when I first came it wasn’t French class it was you basically colored or you said the ruler, eraser; it was just like okay you have to do this and write it. And in elementary school it is a really easy class so you just slack through it. Again an easy ‘A’ it wasn’t ever enjoyable at least it was like fun in the sense that you

would learn about the ice palace in Quebec or something and you watch these funky videos but I never actually felt that I learned anything.”

The fervent disdain expressed by Aicha upon recounting her experiences in second language French classes appears to suggest that the lack of curricular diversity (e.g., activity enhancements) negatively impacted her fondness for these classes, which in turn affected her willingness and desire to learn the language. In the following excerpt Aicha explores, with unyielding frankness, how the curricula used in her French as a second language classes reduced her overall interest in the subject material:

“French class, it was never the actual language that you hated; it was the class. So it was like ‘Man! It’s French; it’s time for French class now (sighs)’. Because French class somehow ended up being that class; it was never enjoyable and I felt like you always learn the same stuff over and over and you are always stuck on the ‘être’ and ‘er’ verbs for as long as I can possibly remember. So we had to write paragraphs but there was never any conversational French so we never spoke in it and we were never taught to speak in it.”

Aicha also expressed noticeable frustration with the lack of grammar taught in her high school English Language Arts (ELA) classes and openly criticized the unreliable nature of the curricula used in these classes. According to Aicha, the lack of curricular structure resulted in frequent and unjustified changes to the curriculum, which impeded students from achieving mastery in certain

areas of study (i.e., grammar). In the subsequent quotation, Aicha describes her experiences in an ELA class:

“Each of the classes was structured very differently. Basically it was up to whatever the teachers wanted it to be for every single class I remember. In grade 11, we had English and this grammar book was finally introduced; this small little grammar book. And I think it is a great thing to introduce because everybody’s grammar is really bad; they really need to refocus on English right it is ridiculous that nobody knows where to put a period or like ‘your’ or ‘you’re’. Like holy! And the funny thing is that we did that grammar book like we did two lessons from it and then the teacher stopped teaching from it because he was like we just won’t do this anymore. But we paid for it; we paid 12 bucks for it I remember and most of us were actually happy because it was tough right and none of us had known it before. But looking back I wish we had done it like then. As a typical student I was like ‘oh great I don’t have to do this one less thing’. But now looking back I was like why did we opt not to do it.”

Issues of diversity in the curriculum. All three participants expressed disappointment with the underrepresentation of diversity in the curriculum. Despite their cognisance of the difficulties associated with accurate curricular representation of diversity, each participant was adamant in her advocacy for increased efforts to integrate more diversity into the curriculum. Throughout the interviews, each participant explicated several instances wherein she had been dissatisfied with the cultural homogeneity of topics and issues covered in the

curriculum. None of the experiences relayed by the participants regarding curricular diversity were positive in nature; each was described as having deterred from the positive aspects of their high school experiences.

The participants relayed several experiences wherein they expressed feeling as though their teachers had failed to employ materials authored by Muslims and/or that explored issues related to Islam. The participants' acute awareness of Islam's absence from their high school's curriculum suggests that curricular homogeneity was noticeable to these women throughout their high school experiences. In the subsequent quotation, Marwa remembers the extent to which diversity was integrated into her school's curriculum:

“It is true that there was not a lot of discussion that I can think of regarding Muslims or the Middle East in that class or other classes so like in English. The teacher basically gets to choose the books with our input and none of the books that he chose kind of covered anything like that.”

All three participants were in a state of visible discontent upon recounting their numerous experiences with curricular homogeneity in high school. Each experience was recounted with a degree of angered disbelief; the participants appeared embarrassed at their classes' and schools' failure to represent cultural diversity holistically in the curriculum. The participants' frustration with this lack of diversity appeared to be rooted in the belief that curricula used in Canadian schools needs to adequately represent diverse cultures, countries, peoples and religions. For example, Iman offered staunch criticism of the absence of culturally diverse books from her world literature class “The class that we took was world

literature so they were supposed to be translated works, but the books that he chose were all European writers; there was nothing oriental or nothing South Asian or anything like that.”

The participants also conveyed several experiences whereby the curriculum employed in their classes misrepresented issues of culture and religion, which exasperated their negative perceptions of curricula in general as well as contributed to their distrust of information and authorities in school. For example, Aicha recounted a disheartening experience in particular from a world history class wherein the textbook used by the teacher provided an inaccurate and personally-offensive representation of an Islamic religious figure. The following excerpt outlines this experience and highlights how the misrepresentation of diversity led Aicha to distrust the teacher and the school as a reliable curricular authority:

“We took world history and that was a really good class. I really liked it because they actually taught you practical stuff in the sense that we actually learned the history of World War I and the history of all these battles. The only odd memory that I have is that they had this page of all these dictators and there was like Stalin and there was Hitler and there was Pol Pot and then they had a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini and as a Shia for me to see him lumped in with dictators I was like wow because we didn’t view him that way. As the people who supported the Islamic revolution we said okay maybe he didn’t think it out the best or maybe it didn’t work out the way he wanted to but he was never a dictator like you

would never put him with Stalin or Hitler. He didn't kill people on mass. So I just remember being very, that really just shook me.”

The participants' experiences revealed that the lack of curricular diversity also alienated them from their cultural backgrounds. Due to the minimal information taught in schools about diverse cultures, the participants were unaware of key historical, political and/or social information about their country of origin, which caused them to feel disconnected from their cultures. In the following quotation, Iman explains the relationship between the underrepresentation of diversity in the curriculum and her feelings of cultural isolation:

“In history class I definitely did feel like what about Africa. And I think that I felt it more going back to Egypt because my cousins, like when I talk to them, they know Egypt's history at the back of their hands and when they are talking they are like how do you not know what happened on or ‘October 6th’ the ‘sit Octobre’ because it's a huge event (that) happened. It was just like because we don't learn about that in our curriculum. So I would have to go home and (be) like ‘Baba what happened on October 6th?’ So everything that I know about my own country is because of my parents or my own research just out of personal interest. So yeah I definitely felt, like you don't feel it here because everyone here learns the same thing and no one really asks you ‘did you know about October 6th in Egypt?’ (...) So yeah it's just I felt it a lot more

when I was in Egypt and they were shocked that I didn't know anything about my own country.”

Invalid assessments. Each participant noted, at least once during their respective interviews, that they felt as though their teachers employed unfair assessment practices. The sentiments appeared to be rooted in experiences whereby assessments lacked validity and were not applicable to their real lives. In addition, the participants expressed frustration with teachers' failure to provide adequate feedback regarding their rationale for grades given. The participants also expressed discontent with the lack of clarity regarding assignment expectations, which caused them to question the educational pertinence of these assessments.

Iman was visibly aggravated when recounting her experiences with invalid assessments, which she regarded as lacking in educational value. The following excerpt highlights the negative impact such assessments had on Iman's educational experience in Chemistry class:

“In my materials (section) I forgot to write ‘beaker 500 ml’; I wrote 250 ml instead. And then the prof wrote was like minus two and I was like ‘you are testing me on if I can copy paste like instructions?’ Like not even instructions just materials that we used throughout the lab. I was like that was really odd. So I learned nothing from that. Nothing whatsoever. But so yeah, I didn't like chem for that reason.”

Iman was also dissatisfied with use of assessments that did not align with the curriculum. According to Iman, the likability of a course was dependent on the extent to which its assessments were representative of the material taught in class.

In the following excerpt, Iman relays her very first assessment experience in the IB program and the impact it had on her overall perception of the class:

“I remember I hated IB first in grade 10 because you had just gotten in from junior high, we don’t know what studying is and our very first bio exam our prof literally said that this was a first year university, university exam. I got like 30% and that was pure luck. And I just didn’t understand the purpose of testing us (like that).”

The participants’ ability to perceive value in assessment was dependent on the extent to which and the clarity with which teachers communicated assessment purposes. For example, Aicha vehemently disapproved of the ambiguity that often surrounded the assessments used in her classes for the reason that she was unable to perceive any value in the assessment, which reduced her motivation to complete the task. The subsequent experience highlights Aicha’s feelings regarding this issue:

“We would do a project and we wouldn’t do a very good job; just slap something on together hand it in. And you would still get a fairly okay mark. And it’s not even like you would get an okay mark and the teacher would comment on it and would be like ‘oh you know you could have put more effort in.’ It was just like ‘good job’ or something which I feel that didn’t make you want to try next time. Why would try harder? There was no reason for you to try harder.”

Unclear assignment requirements caused Iman to disengage from her school work as well as to perceive the assignment as being of little educational

value. Iman expressed significant discontent with teachers' provision of vague assignment instructions, which, she argued, led her to regard the work as pointless. In the following quotation Iman explains one such experience in Chemistry class:

“We had to do labs with barely any instruction whatsoever. The prof just sent us in and said ‘oh read the textbook’ and we would read it. But you want a person at the front just to walk you through it a little bit; there was none of that. And then when you had to write out reports we literally like plagiarized the book because at the very back of book it was an IB follow up thing and so you would have to write word for word what that said and then you would have to fill in the blanks depending on the lab that you did.”

Experiences with teachers. The participants relayed several teacher-centered experiences with vivid detail and passionate fervour, which suggests that the women's overall educational experiences were influenced by the relationships formed with teachers. I chose the term teacher-centered to describe these experiences because it emphasized the extent to which the participants, upon recounting their experience with a particular teacher, became completely absorbed and lost in the memory of these encounters.

Fostering interpersonal interactions in-class. Teachers that fostered dialogue and interpersonal interactions amongst students were regarded as having supported an educational environment that encouraged active learning and socialization amongst peers. All three participants credited a select few teachers

for having helped them create some of their most positive educational experiences. More specifically, the positive nature of the experiences appears to be an outcome of their teachers' ability to employ unique strategies to engage students in ongoing and active dialogue with one another.

Teacher-centered experiential accounts revealed that each participant deeply valued teachers that created learning environments wherein students were encouraged to engage in discussions with individuals they would likely not have interacted with outside of class. The following experience highlights the extent to which Aicha respected teachers that fostered interpersonal relationships between students:

“Oh grade 9 social; we had this funny, he was French, and well I mean he was French Canadian. He had the very distinctive accent (...) but he would basically teach us about the Metis and this and that; it's typical the things he taught but we would always have debates in class so that was actually fun. So you would have six people on this side and six people on this side and for every point that you made right he would just give you a one. And he would keep track of how many you said and that was fun because he wasn't that strict and so someone could say a point and you could say a point just in response. You would be like 'no I don't agree' and he would give you a point for that. So basically everybody's hands were always up trying to stand and talk because he would actually count that towards your marks (...) And I remember we talked a lot more in his class; as in you talked to students you wouldn't normally talk to because

usually you have your clicks and your friends that you talk to and he actually created an atmosphere where we would all just talk amongst each other. And yet, it's funny because you put those same kids in a different class and they wouldn't but he managed to create this kind of (environment). And I don't know how he did it; I couldn't tell you but it was, just he did. He was able to do it in such a way that we were all it was a very easy class we knew we would do well but at the same time you learn something.”

Classrooms wherein teachers provided multiple opportunities for students to interact with one-another (e.g., group discussions) fostered a learning environment whereby the participants felt at ease with and closer to their peers. In the subsequent quotation, Iman comments on the positive outcomes of her teacher's fostering of interpersonal interactions: “And then he just he really made it feel like we were family that class like I knew everyone in that class (laughs).” This brief yet telling experience exemplifies how these close family-like bonds between classmates developed as a result of the teacher's efforts to engage students in discussion.

Teachers that challenged students. The participants spoke positively about their experiences with teachers that employed in-class activities, assessments and instructional strategies that targeted higher-order thinking skills. All three participants expressed an overwhelming appreciation for the efforts taken by some of their teachers to develop tasks and assignments that challenged students academically.

The participants experienced fruitful learning opportunities in classes where the assessments used by teachers required students to perform complex and challenging tasks. Marwa expressed admiration and respect for her Grade 10 English teacher, and recounted multiple positive experiences from his class, because he used assignments that targeted high order thinking skills. The following excerpt highlights one such experience:

“His teaching style was very much open in that he would make us do assignments that he felt would really enhance us. He gave us a very, I would call it a very high level project where we all took a chapter of this novel that we were reading and he asked us to make these specific notes on it so each person would have their own chapter. And he put it all together into this one really big handbook for that novel. So just having that was a very useful resource in terms of analyzing the novel.”

The participants praised teachers’ encouragement of in-class discussions; each arguing that this particular teaching strategy created integral learning opportunities for students. In the following quotation, Iman rationalizes why she valued her arts (e.g., English language arts, history, social studies, etc.) teachers’ frequent use of classroom discussions as an educational tool:

“In the arts classes it was almost always an open discussion because it was such a small class. It’s interesting to compare that to my Grade 9 English, where we actually read the book aloud in class--looking back now that seems like such a waste of class time--and had very little discussion. In Grades 11 and 12, I guess they expected us to be mature enough to

complete the readings outside of class and we would just discuss and ask questions in class.”

Teachers’ individual personalities. More so than their ability to instruct the curriculum, teachers’ individual personalities resonated deeply with the participants and had an impact on the nature of their experiences. The comprehensive zeal with which the participants described a number of their teachers’ personality traits is indicative of the substantial influence these individuals had on their overall educational experiences

The participants’ experiences revealed that their level of interest in a course was related to teachers’ knowledge of the material, personalization of the curriculum and ability to establish relationships with students. For example, Iman explained how her history teacher’s in-depth knowledge of the material, willingness to share insights from his life and attempts to foster interpersonal relationships with students increased her overall interest in the course. The following excerpt highlights the nature of this experience:

“My Grade 10 one (teacher) he (laughs) was this really really old man with so much history and so much knowledge and just sharing his stories it’s just like wow there is just so much more to life than your stereotypical go to school get married blah blah blah get a job. I loved him for that and he was really understanding and he made an effort to know something special about each student and yeah and make us feel like this isn’t just a class. That is really what I liked about my Grade 10 one.”

Similarly, Marwa appreciated teachers that shared their plethora of both curricular and non-curricular related knowledge with students, which she felt benefited students' learning experiences. The subsequent quotation highlights the positive impact teachers' communication of both personal and content related knowledge had on Marwa's overall educational experiences in high school:

“They (the teachers) would just talk and waste time for like half of the classes. But we never stopped them because what they were saying was either entertaining or just useful to us; you know life experiences that we just won't get otherwise. So the physics guy the European guy would just tell us about systems in Europe which are very very different from here and how life works there. Whereas um like the chemistry guy that I had would just tell us stories about what had happened with other kids or like what is happening at home, and I felt like it helped.”

Iman also conveyed notably positive learning experiences in classes where teachers actively sought to integrate non-curricular related issues and topics into their teaching of the material. For example, she expressed the following thoughts about her English language arts teacher:

“So half of the class would be him telling stories or us asking questions. And because he is younger and could relate to us a little bit more; we would ask about his life. You know it sounds silly but I felt it was the most beneficial part of high school. The non-curricular stuff (laughs).”

In contrast, Aicha's opinions about the value of her teachers' non-curricular comments varied according to the nature of the comments. Aicha's

experiences revealed that she possessed an overwhelming disdain for teachers whose non-curricular comments conflicted with her moral and/or ethical values. For example, Aicha expressed great frustration with one teacher who repeatedly shared detailed and, what she regarded as, inappropriate information about his personal life:

“I remember in Grade 12 our English teacher he was a really good English teacher but he would talk about his wife all time; like he would always insult her all the time. (He would say) ‘She is like this; she is like that; she is so useless. The only reason I am still married to her is because I like her dog.’ And he loved her dog like he would talk about her dog all day long. He loved this little dog but he hated her apparently. And one day she actually came to class and we actually were like oh my gosh and she was like the sweetest lady and we were like why on earth are you married to him. I just remember I was like why are you talking about her; can we just get on with it. But that is maybe that is just me. A lot of people seem to like it.”

Aicha revealed that, when in high school, she valued teachers who were capable of achieving a balance between being funny and approachable and maintaining respect amongst students. Upon relaying her experiences with teachers, Aicha expressed trepidation towards those teachers that acted as though they were the students’ friends or peers. The following quotation elucidates these thoughts:

“Yes, I had him (math teacher) in Grades 11 and 12 and the man could teach. He had an amazing personality; he cracked jokes often. He was known to always wear cowboy boots; that was Mr. S’s thing. He always wore cowboy boots; he was like an old dignified man with snow white hair and he had this funny accent that I can’t place. He had this funny way of talking; it was comical but at the same time he was strict. He could be funny, he could crack jokes but you don’t mess with Mr. S like he had this way of maintaining his respect, which I think teachers should do that more in Grade 11 and 12 or in general. That is one thing that I had with the Canadian system I just think that you lose all respect for teachers. Like they (students) treat them (teachers) like friends.”

Addressing student inquiries. Aicha spoke negatively about teachers that failed to adequately address her curricular inquiries. She expressed feeling an overwhelming discontent and distrust towards teachers who did not express a willingness to address questions that challenged the curriculum. Aicha’s experiences with teachers that were unable to adequately respond to her inquiries also deterred her from posing any subsequent questions. The following excerpt highlights the internal turmoil experienced by Aicha as a result of her teachers’ ambivalence towards her inquiries:

“I remember Grade 11 obviously I questioned evolution because it was contrary to my religious beliefs. I was just upset because I kept talking about it and the teacher just kept shutting me down. She didn’t want to answer my question and I was very upset about that. I was like yes but

what about this and she just didn't want to even talk about it. And I think I still am upset about it and she never talked about it. Basically I was made to feel like that was just a dumb question. Although all I wanted to do was talk about it.”

One-on-one discussions. All three participants appreciated teachers that took the time to speak with them individually outside of class about curricular and non-curricular issues. These teachers' ongoing attempts to foster interpersonal relationships with students were perceived as a valuable trait. In addition, it was the interest taken by these teachers in the participants' personal identities (e.g., cultural background) that was regarded in great esteem.

Iman's joyfully recounted experiences with her Grade 12 English teacher were characterized by her teacher taking to speak with her one-on-one outside of class time, during which he inquired about curricular and non-curricular related issues. Specifically, it was this teacher's in-depth knowledge of and concern for Iman's scholastic needs (e.g., identified her academic strengths and weaknesses), his willingness to discuss non-curricular related issues (e.g., plans for university) and his interest in her identity (e.g., culture) that helped create such agreeable experiences. The following excerpt outlines one of these experiences as well as highlights the positive impact Iman's discussions with this teacher had on her overall morale as a high school student:

“My grade 12 professor he, he really worked with you; he really wanted you to find out what you wanted to do with life. And he was like ‘I know you are young but you should really focus on these aspects’ and he would

point out what our weak points were and what our strong points were. And like I, I want to be told what my weak points are, like it's constructive criticism and he like never shied away from telling you what it is you should do and gave you really good advice. We had awesome one-on-one life talks. Like we definitely had a talk about religion and he was just like 'so as a Muslim woman where do you see yourself going' and things like that so he was really open-minded and I really liked that about him. He was bitter towards, because everyone in grade 12 IB was like 'I am going to go in to med' and he was like 'yeah of course you are' (laughs). He was kind of like 'you guys should branch out; it's not just med.' Like he understands it is a prestigious faculty and it's what all your parents want you to be and whatnot but whenever anyone said they wanted to go in to med he kind of just snickered and he was like yeah come find me in 10 years and tell me. Yeah he was like you are probably going to end up doing something complete opposite from med like nothing even to do with sciences. Um, so yeah we definitely had that talk."

Issues of diversity in school. Each participant was asked to explore their experiences with diversity related issues in high school. To ensure consistency in the interpretation of the term diversity across interviews, I provided each participant with the following definition: diversity represents ethnic, religious and/or cultural uniqueness amongst individuals. Despite the inherent distinctiveness of the participants' experiences with diversity, the subsequent sections outline common issues that were discussed across participants.

Accommodating and recognizing diversity. Schools that actively sought innovative and authentic ways to incorporate diversity into the curriculum and overall school culture created a favourable educational environment. The participants praised schools that made an effort to recognize the diversity present in their school communities and that adapted their educational practices to support this diversity. In addition, all three participants mentioned that they felt a greater sense of acceptance in schools where diversity was recognized by its school staff.

Schools that actively integrated aspects of student diversity into the greater school community created an educational environment where the participants felt a sense of belonging and security. In the following quotation, Aicha explains the positive impact her school's recognition of diversity had on her overall high school experience:

“The fact that they are incorporating aspects of your culture gave an acceptance of your culture. So they set up a cricket team in our high school and everybody who was on the cricket team was a newer immigrant but they set that up so that was good. There was an acknowledgement that the school is predominantly Indian and there was a big Punjabi culture and you would have the teachers talking and making jokes like ‘Make sure we have butter chicken at the athletic council meeting.’ But there was always butter chicken at the (meetings) and like so it was kind of like a known fact that made it a lot easier for us. Looking back it was good they did that.”

Both Iman and Aicha recounted at least one experience in which they praised their schools' attempts to accommodate the diverse needs of its student population. More specifically, it was by allowing students to express aspects of their cultural and/or religious identities that schools helped foster an agreeable educational environment for the participants. The subsequent excerpt highlights Iman's positive perception of her school's attempt to accommodate its Muslim students:

“Seeing as my school population was like 2000 kids, there was the fair share of Muslim people there; so we did have Friday prayer. We initiated it yeah. I didn't initiate it but the guys did initiate it. I think it was the year that I started; it was neat. And there was maybe like a handful of girls that went and um and my non-Muslim friend my best friend she came with me sometimes to sit in and listen; because I was like I don't want to go by myself (laughs).”

All three participants indicated an appreciation for attempts, by their schools and/or their teachers, to integrate elements of cultural diversity into the school environment. For example, Aicha described several instances where her school made a conscious effort to incorporate elements of South Asian culture into various school events (e.g., football games and school dances). These efforts had a noticeably positive impact on Aicha's overall school experience in that they made her feel as though her culture was accepted within Canadian society. One of these experiences is explained in the following quotation:

“Our pep rally was really funny too because there were Indian songs and we had a lot of Indian dance groups; a lot of girls dance groups like at least four. Each one did like a seven minute routine; honestly it was like I’ve had enough now please stop (laughs). And the guys had their own bhangra routine so they would come up and do bhangra. It was very Punjabi; very proud of being Punjabi.”

Minimal awareness of diversity. Instances whereby a school’s staff and/or students displayed ignorance about issues of diversity caused the participants to feel frustrated, offended and disappointed. Each participant recounted, with evident disdain, at least one experience where their cultural heritage or religious beliefs were either misrepresented or entirely dismissed in school.

Iman’s surprisingly humoristic recount of her peers’ inability to locate Egypt on a map appeared to mask underlying sentiments of angst and weariness regarding their ignorance of cultural and geographical diversity. The following quotation highlights this juxtaposition of these emotions:

“Did you know like I’ve gotten this question so many times, ‘Egypt is in Africa?’ like ‘You’re African?’” and I’m like yeah I consider myself African; like it’s not like I go out and be like ‘Hey I am African’ just because I understand African; usually people think of darker skinned people. But everyone always thought I was considered Asian just because Lebanon is in Asia like Middle Eastern and I was like no it’s in Africa. To this day people don’t believe that Egypt is in Africa, which I’m not once

again pointing fingers but it is a little shocking because everyone has heard of Egypt and if you just open a map (laughs)!”

Despite her high school’s relatively diverse nature, Aicha recounted several instances wherein assumptions were made by the school staff regarding students’ ethnic and/or religious backgrounds based solely on physical appearance. Teachers’ failure to solicit information directly from students regarding their ethnic, cultural and/or religious background frequently resulted in the misrepresentation of students’ identity, which angered and frustrated Aicha. The subsequent excerpt highlights one such experience:

“Because I was Muslim, I was brown and I wore hijab, people (teachers) would assume that I was Pakistani and I remember not wanting to be classified with all the Pakistani girls. For some reason I was like no I don’t want to be classified with them I don’t know why I just never wanted to so I kind of rebelled against that. I had a lot of friends who were Pakistani but their culture was so different from mine as well. I think they were so much more traditional; in the sense that they would wear salwar kameez or their parents were very very strict. I just did not want to be (associated with that) and I don’t know why like I was Indian however I came from Zambia and I was very proud of being *Zambian*.”

The participants were visibly distraught when recounting experiences with peers that had had minimal knowledge of and/or misconstrued perceptions about Islam. Upon discussing one such experience, Aicha blamed the school and the curriculum for not adequately addressing these issues so as to ensure that students

would not possess stereotypes upon completing their secondary education. In the following quotation, Aicha recollects one such encounter that she had with a peer:

“I remember in grade 12 there was a girl and she was Ukrainian and at the end (of the year) we had this random conversation about the Prophet Muhammad and we were talking about something and then she said ‘If you could pick any religion what would you pick?’ And I’m like ‘Well I would pick a blend between Buddhism and Islam because they are both so peaceful.’ And she was like ‘Really? But they are nothing alike. Doesn’t Islam always say that you have to kill people!’ I swear she said something along those lines and I was like who told you that and she was like my mom told me that. And at the moment I’m thinking from grade 8 to grade 12 you’ve been with me and you’ve been around a lot of Muslims and this is still your perception of Islam because apparently Islam was never taught to you so you have no idea what it is about. And the same applies about me learning about Christianity or Judaism; so I wished we had talked about that stuff.”

Diversity in advanced program or classes. The student population in advanced IB or AP classes were, compared to regular stream classes, less diverse in nature, which resulted in minimal recognition of students’ cultural, ethnic and/or religious backgrounds. The participants that took IB or AP classes in high school reported several instances whereby they felt like visible minorities. In contrast, the regular stream classes were regarded as being more diverse in nature

and were perceived as more accommodating of the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

Iman's experience with diversity in the IB program at her school is one characterized by the homogenous nature of its student body. According to Iman, her teachers' failure to address issues of cultural and ethnic diversity perpetuated stereotypes regarding ethnic groups. The following excerpt highlights her thoughts regarding diversity in the IB program:

“I will add that in IB I felt like a minority. Just because everyone was from an Asian background. It was me, my Caucasian friend, she was half-French and half-German we were like ‘so are we the only two that aren't Asian in this class’. But with regular classes obviously it was different. But yeah there was a lot of Asians and just because of stereotypes I guess that they are smart (laughs) or they like to challenge themselves.”

Similarly, Marwa spoke extensively about the cultural and ethnic homogeneity of her IB classes. Despite mentioning that no overt instances of racism ever occurred in her IB classes, Marwa did express possessing an acute awareness of her minority status within her school's IB program. The following quotation highlights her sentiments regarding this reality:

“Like I obviously did pay attention, I mean it had nothing to do with racism but you realize when you are the minority in any place or scenario. No one made me feel like that was the biggest, thank God for that, aspect of it. But yeah, there were maybe a dozen Caucasian people um there were

a few east Indians. And um I think there were two other girls that wore hijab in IB. Two or three others. And that is it. Yeah that's it.”

High schools with a diverse population. High schools regarded, by the participants, as having a diverse student and teacher population created learning environments where the women felt a sense of safety, acceptance and inclusion. The visible presence of other individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, either students or school staff, had a positive impact on the participants' overall comfort with and pride in expressing aspects of their cultural identity.

Participants that attended schools with a diverse demographic makeup conveyed more positive educational experiences than those whose schools were more homogenous in nature. For example, Aicha credited the enjoyable nature of her Canadian educational experience as being due, in large part, to her school's location (i.e., situated in a predominately Indo-Canadian neighbourhood) and population (i.e., had many students of Indo-Canadian descent). In the following quotation Aicha explains the positive impact the diverse nature of her school's student population had on her overall educational experience: “After hearing from other friends now, who went to schools where they were predominately white people, yes, I think that I was lucky my race never made me stand apart.”

Participants that attended schools wherein students came from a mixture of cultural and religious backgrounds reported experiencing and witnessing fewer instances of bullying against students often perceived as being primary targets for bullying (e.g., minorities or new immigrants). The following excerpt highlights

the extent to which Aicha attributed the fact that she had never experiencing bullying in high school to her school's diverse population:

“I am very glad that it was a predominately Indian school because there was never any bullying per-se and there couldn't be. I mean you couldn't bully a kid for being brown and we had a lot of new brown kids come in. There was obviously a difference like there were the kids that were Indo-Canadian and there were the new immigrants and there was a clear difference between them but I can't remember an instance of bullying.”

High schools with a homogenous population. Participants that attended schools with what they described as being homogenous student populations had markedly less positive experiences than those that attended schools with a diverse student body. In general, the participants that attended such schools described feeling isolated and alone. They also expressed feeling trapped in a phase of their life that was neither pleasant nor representative of the world that awaited them after graduation.

High schools with minimal demographic diversity caused the three participants to feel uneasy and unwelcome in the respective learning environments. Described as being the antithesis of diversity, Marwa's high school experience was perceived as a mere passing phase; one that needed to be endured until she could escape into the real-world, which was envisioned as being more diverse. The subsequent quotation highlights these sentiments: “High school was seen as a passing period to get to the better times. I mean I just remember always

looking forward to university because people would say that there is so much more diversity there.”

In addition, high schools with minimal diversity impeded the participants’ from socializing with individuals from similar cultural and/or religious backgrounds. Marwa attributed her inability to make Muslim friends during high school to the homogenous nature of the IB program, which inherently prevented any such relationships from being formed. For example, Marwa explains her thoughts regarding this issue in the following quotation:

“I didn’t have Muslim friends at the time. I wasn’t like drawn to school and if I had questions I would just ignore them. It would just be like go to school, get through this, start university and then maybe I can start living (laughs).”

Extracurricular activities. For the three women, extracurricular activities represented an integral component of their high school experiences. Despite being voluntary in nature, participation in extracurricular activities was regarded as an indispensable component of their high school communities. Although described in a very positive manner, participation in extra-curricular activities was impeded, for two of the women, by a lack of academic and social supports received from teachers and school staff.

An essential service. Student participation in extra-curricular activities was described as being an essential service for ensuring the proper functioning of a school community. Aicha, upon explaining her involvement with her school’s fine arts committee, noted that the work she did, although not overtly visible to

all, was necessary to ensure that the school's major activities (e.g., sports games and dances) could take place. The following excerpt highlights these ideas:

“So fine arts council basically we mainly did banners for all the events in schools so if there was a pep rally or a dance we were the ones that threw up the banner and painted the giant banner so we did that stuff. Yeah so no one actually knew that we existed but it was really important and you were the person that was there.”

Valuable work. Despite the negative effect it had on participants' academic performance, engagement in extracurricular activities was regarded in high esteem by the women. Throughout her interview, Iman conveyed an extraordinary commitment to her extracurricular responsibilities, regardless of the impact they had on her academics, which highlights her profound value for this work. For example, she explained that:

“I was non-stop, just so active. I'd go home really late at night and I did realize my grades dropped a little bit but it was worth it (laughs) like ultimately I did get into university which was my goal in high school obviously (laughs). But I did notice a drop in grades especially around Christmas time because I had my diplomas in January.”

Supports received from school personnel. The extent to which the women participated in extracurricular activities was affected by the supports received from school personnel. When discussing their experiences with participation in extracurricular activities, the participants articulated an overwhelming sense of appreciation for school staff that supported them in their endeavours.

Despite a lack of academic support received from her one regular class teacher, regarding her extensive participation in extracurricular activities, Iman praised her IB teachers' provision of fair yet essential educational supports and accommodations. The subsequent quotation highlights an experience relayed by Iman about this issue:

“Yeah, I couldn't be more thankful for my profs; my IB ones at least. Because I took one class regular and the teacher was not sympathetic whatsoever. But all the other profs they were just like, especially my math, I think that is why I liked math so much. He was always making, like it is not like he was making exceptions, but he was like ‘I understand you have a lot on your plate and I understand what it is that you are doing for the school’ and blah blah blah and so if you ever need a quiz like postponed. And I was so grateful and I never took advantage of it, I only used it once I remember um but yeah my IB profs were really understanding alhamdulillah.”

Peer interactions. All three participants spoke candidly about their experiences with and perceptions of peers, friendships and social relationships. Overall, the participants conveyed the belief that their ability to make friends in high school was correlated with the diversity present in their classes. The participants' experiences with forming friendships in advanced classes were markedly different from those experienced in regular classes. In addition, all three participants commented on the relatively low levels of interaction between students of different cultures.

Making friends. Schools, academic programs (i.e., IB) and/or advanced classes that were regarded as lacking in diversity were portrayed as fostering social environments that impeded a practicing Muslim woman from making friends. Marwa recounted several instances whereby she struggled, as a newly practicing Muslim, to establish friendships with students in her IB class. The following quotation highlights Marwa's painful reminiscence of these struggles:

“I definitely did not have an easy time making friends at my second high school. I am sure that had partially to do with the fact; that was when I started wearing hijab and being more practicing. I, in myself, like in my own mind I felt isolated regardless of whether or not everybody else was.”

Interestingly, in discussing her experiences with making friends in junior high school, a time in which she described herself as a non-practicing Muslim, Marwa attributed the ease with which she formed bonds with her peers to the invisibility of her religious identity. The subsequent excerpt explains her thoughts regarding this issue:

“I actually did not know anybody at my junior high school. I didn't know many people and I pretty much started from scratch in terms of making friends and it really really wasn't bad like I was surprised at how quickly I met a group of people that I just clicked with. Again I wasn't I wouldn't say that I really practicing as a Muslim at that time so it was before I wore hijab and I kind of didn't like I think I prayed sometimes.”

Despite the fact that she conveyed her struggles with the establishment of meaningful friendships with humour, Marwa exhibited visible disappointment with and sadness over her lack of friends during this time of her life. For example, she mentioned the following when summarizing her experiences with making friends in high school:

“It was just in the social aspect like it would have been so nice to have a friend I knew, I could always have lunch with or just talk to but I honestly did not feel that close with anybody in (high) school.”

Perceptions of friendship. Despite emphasizing the value she places on friendship, Marwa described any form of social popularity and/or friendship as though it were a form of unnecessary distraction from one’s school work. The following excerpt highlights the extent to which Marwa attributes the academic concentration she had in high school to her lack of friends:

“Honestly the whole friends and social aspect in Grade 9 and 10 kind of distracted me from that. I know that if I maybe if I had more friends or if I was really popular in Grade 11 and 12, I probably wouldn’t have cared so much about my studies.”

Upon revisiting this issue later in the interview, Marwa appeared slightly less convinced regarding her rationale for not having many close friends in high school. The subsequent quotation suggests that Marwa’s attempt to justify her small social circle could be a form of defence against the pain she actually felt during high school: “My high school was not the greatest experience like in terms

of friends and a social life. But like I said if I had (a lot of friends), I don't know if I would have been as studious in high school.”

Relationships with peers in advanced programs and classes. The participants characterized the relationships that they formed with their peers in the IB program as being professional in nature. Marwa described her interactions with IB peers as being polite but also extremely formal; exchanges rarely extended beyond the classroom or developed into long-lasting friendships. Marwa explains this phenomenon in the following quotation:

“The people in the class, it was I have to say it was more of like a student almost professional relationship. None of us would even consider ourselves to be friends; we never hung out outside of class.”

Despite having been one of the only Muslim women in her IB classes, Iman developed close friendships with non-Muslims in the IB program. Interestingly, Iman described the friendships formed with her IB peers as being more authentic than those developed with Muslim women that were in the regular program. This suggests that for Iman, the formation of fruitful and meaningful social bonds was not dependent on or limited to a person's cultural or religious background. The following excerpt highlights Iman's thoughts regarding this issue:

“It was nice, although it was weird because I was friends with them, with the Muslim people, but it was more acquaintances almost like not friends to the extent where I would like ‘hey let's hang out after school.’ So yeah I found all of my friends were either Caucasian or Asian or from a different

background. I think it partially had to do with the IB. Because they (Muslim women in the regular programs) were all best friends.”

Sources of knowledge and learning outside of school. All three participants mentioned having sought knowledge about their cultural practices and religious beliefs from external sources. Their schools’ inability to adequately address issues of culture and religion, both in the curriculum and the socio-educational community at large, appear to have led the participants to search elsewhere (e.g., family and the Mosque) for this knowledge.

Family. The participants identified their parents and older siblings as being the most valued and trusted source of knowledge for issues of culture and religion; which were excluded from their studies in school. The participants’ experiences with their families revealed that each individual member was perceived as being responsible for the conveying of very specific, yet equally integral, types of information.

Parents as a source of cultural and religious knowledge not taught in schools was a theme that reoccurred across participants. Iman’s experience with seeking knowledge from her parents is unique in that her parents served two distinct roles; her father was perceived as the transmitter of cultural information while her mother was the source of religious knowledge. The following quotation explains her perception of these two distinct roles:

“Yeah my dad was my Egypt sources or my daily news (laughs) yeah I definitely went to my parents. Like anything Islamic, actually it’s funny, I

went to my mom for anything Muslim related and my dad for anything history related or like cultural.”

Similarly, Marwa noted that she acquired information about her faith from her parents. In the subsequent excerpt, Marwa describes how, when in high school, her parents were her only source of information about Islamic knowledge:

“That (knowledge about Islam) was honestly being acquired either through my parents or not at all. I didn’t attend halaqas or any kind of discussion groups even then um because I was newly practicing. I would say so; it was my parents if I had questions (laughs).”

One of the participant’s mother was described as possessing a unique and integral role in the transmission of cultural knowledge; the perpetuation of her mother-tongue. Iman recounted the efforts her mother took to teach her and her siblings the Arabic language with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and pride. The following excerpt highlights the reverence and respect Iman holds for the knowledge acquired from her mother:

“When we were kids my mom was really hard-core on us about Arabic; because it’s our language it’s like our mother tongue. I am so thankful for her because it is the only reason I know how to speak it and read and write. She would sit us all down together like me and my siblings and we would have like these little dictée, um spelling tests, just so she would make sure that we know how to write Arabic. My mom dedicated so many hours of her life just to teach us how to read and write in Arabic. And it is

hard like it's a complete different alphabet it's from right to left, it's just hard.”

Despite not possessing as central of a role as parents, older siblings were identified as an important source of knowledge for information about academic decisions and/or career related issues. Marwa portrayed her older sister as being an integral figure in the provision of information regarding her post-secondary inquiries. The following quotation highlights her thoughts regarding this issue:

“My sister was in university at that time so she is older than me and so if I had questions about my schooling or anything then I would go to her and she would be able to clarify most of the time.”

Religious institutions. Only one participant cited her weekly attendance at a Mosque-run Islamic school as being an important source of knowledge outside of school. Compared with the enthusiastic and detailed nature of her experiential accounts regarding high school, Iman's lacklustre description of the knowledge learned at the Islamic school, and her difficulty recollecting the specificities of these experiences, suggest that its impact was less significant. The following quotation highlights this particular point:

“I did in junior high attend an Islamic school. It was Saturday school, I think, um so yeah I had to learn about Quran, Islamic knowledge (laughs) I was one of those kids. It was at the Mosque and I so Islamic knowledge, Quran and Arabic. I was like oh my God what was the third one; I can't remember (laughs).”

Educational preferences. When asked to explore and discuss their dream high school curriculum, the participants presented a multitude of unique insights, opinions and suggestions. In general, the participants all spoke about the need for improved representation of diversity in the curriculum. In addition, there was the desire for increased diversity in the types of courses offered and the teaching methods used. The participants also expressed wanting greater opportunities for Muslims to interact through faith-based extracurricular activities and for greater recognition of Islamic culture and religious practices.

Amount of information taught. Enrolled in a regular program throughout the duration of her high school career, Aicha fervently advocated for the use of curricula that challenged students with greater amounts of work and with more complex problems. In the following quotation, Aicha explains her thoughts regarding the amount of work given in her high school as well as her ideal:

“Hmmm there was a lot that was not taught. I don’t know why I feel this way but I feel like more could have been taught I couldn’t even tell you what. More in sciences I think a lot more could have been taught to us. I think for grade 8, 9 and 10 a lot more could have been taught to us (...) so I wish yeah I wish somebody taught us a bit more and focused more or pushed the students a little harder.”

Representation of diversity in the curriculum. During our discussions about their dream curriculum, all three participants emphasized the importance of adequately and accurately representing diversity in the social sciences, history and/or religion curriculum. All three participants expressed wanting curricula that

were more representative of the diverse nature of Canadian society. It is important to note that all three participants approached this issue in a very holistic manner; they advocated for the inclusion of a wide array of cultures, geographic regions and religions in the school curriculum.

One participant argued that there needed to be improved and increased integration of accurate representations of First Nations and Aboriginal histories into schools' curricula. Aicha noted, when discussing the lack of diversity in her high-school curriculum, that there was virtually no formal discussion about Aboriginal peoples. She argued that increased analysis of this issue would help reduce negative stereotypes that exist regarding Aboriginal and First Nations people in Canada. The frustrations caused by this curricular void are conveyed quite poignantly in the following quotation:

“The other thing we never talked about is something like native stuff. We only learned it in Grade 6. We never learned about first nations later on and I kind of wished they had taught us later on; maybe it would have shaped your perception a bit. You wouldn't be brought up with the same stereotypes because I clearly remember coming to Canada and thinking that there was nothing more amazing than the aboriginal culture. I thought that they were the coolest people ever because I thought that their culture was amazing and that they were still around and that they maintained that. It was only that slowly the stereotype started seeping in because prior to that I had no exposure to them. So I kind of I wish that we had mentioned all that stuff about the Haida Gwaii and everything.”

The participants also spoke about, what they perceived as, the importance of providing overviews of or encouraging discussions about diverse religions. Iman emphasized the importance of representing and discussing, not just the three Abrahamic faiths, but religious traditions from all around the world. Iman explained how, in her opinion, knowing about the basic tenants of many different faiths would increase students' respect for diversity. Iman explains in the subsequent excerpt why she believes such adaptations could be beneficial:

“I know I am reaching for the stars, but I think we should acknowledge every other religion. Like I want to be educated! I want to know what Hinduism is like and what they follow. I would like to know. I think that would just open my perspective and would make me a lot more open minded and well-rounded person.”

Regarded as being too Eurocentric in nature, the history curriculum was identified by all three participants as requiring major adaptations; which consisted primarily of the inclusion of diverse perspective and topics. Despite expressing interest in and value for European history, the participants expressed frustration over the lack of geographical diversity in the histories studied in high school. Iman conveyed the following suggestions and insights during her attempt to conceptualize a history curriculum that was both teachable and representative of all cultures:

“For a more feasible solution, talk about all the continents; there are not a lot of continents. And talk about something that really affected that continent as a whole. Like maybe the most, the most dominant or

historical events that happened. Like obviously Europe, WWII, even Japan had to do with that, and North America so that was something big. Let's see, well right now the Somalia drought a lot of the African and Middle Eastern countries are really involved in that. Or oh no in like, well less recent, but all the revolutions that are going on that is something huge even if they just brush up on it. Like it's almost all of north like Libya Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain; all these countries are going through massive revolutions that we should all be aware of. Like not maybe to detail."

Courses offered. The participants expressed interest in having Islamic Knowledge classes offered as option courses in Canadian high schools. It is important to note that the participants were not advocating for a parallel Islamic curriculum, but wanted schools to add such classes to the existing list of optional courses (e.g., fashion studies or woodworking) taken in high school. For example, Iman explains her beliefs regarding the optional nature of this hypothetical Islamic Knowledge course:

"I wish I had more Islamic knowledge incorporated into my past education. And so at least make religious studies of some sort an option always available to people in high school. Not just university; they should always be able to have that knowledge."

Similarly, Marwa was saddened by not having had the opportunity, while in high school, to enroll in classes that discussed Islamic-related issues. She continued to explain that offering courses that address these issues to public high school students in Canada could help address some of the gaps that she felt were

present in the curricula. In the subsequent quotation, Marwa explains her ideas regarding the nature and organisation of such classes:

“Yeah it would be so nice to have an Islamic parallel to what happens in a normal or in a secular school. I don’t undervalue the importance of the sciences and stuff, being one of those people, but I also really realize my lackings in Islamic knowledge.”

Class size and makeup. Despite being the only participant that afforded commentary on this issue, Marwa argued fervently against placing students in small classes (i.e., under 10 students) and keeping them in the same classes throughout their high school careers. In the following quotation, Marwa explains her aversion to this particular approach:

“I don’t think I would ever make anybody have a class of six ever (laughs) yeah because you did get sick of them after so long and I was only there for two years. A lot of them were there for three years. Imagine (for three years) just like the same people. So there are times and places where that works so right now in university I am in a 4th year neuroscience class where it is 10 people and that just makes sense because that is what you need to have an interaction and dialogue. But for a lot of those classes it just became an issue of why weren’t you here the other day, you need to be here every day. Yeah I would make the classes bigger and there would be so much more opportunity for questions and dialogue.”

Opportunities for Muslim interaction. The participants reported wanting the ability to hold faith-based events/activities and/or to form religious study

groups in high school. Despite being unrelated to the curriculum, the participants expressed an overwhelming desire for Muslims, as well as other religious and/or cultural groups, to be given the opportunity to interact and socialize as mini-communities in high school.

Marwa envisioned these communal interactions in high schools as resembling the structure employed by student groups at the university level (i.e., student groups are formed in order to cater to students' diverse needs, interests and backgrounds). In the following quotation Marwa explicates the ways in which she believes increased interaction amongst Muslims could be fostered in high schools:

“In an ideal world, high school would have had a mini-MSA where I could have met other Muslims, talked about Islamic issues or questions, prayed together, and had our own events. Unfortunately high school (my second one in particular) was such a secular experience; I felt like school was just a place for academics, nothing else. Now that I've seen how in university, school can encompass a whole lifestyle, I would try to incorporate elements of that--having public outreach about Islam like a version of the dawah booth, incorporating discussions about Islam into classes so my peers would know more about it, these types of things so that being Muslim wouldn't have to feel like a part of you that stays at home whenever you come to school.”

Iman also expressed a desire for high schools to provide Muslims with the opportunity to organize or to engage in extra-curricular faith-based events, which

she believed would facilitate interaction between Muslims in the school community. In the subsequent excerpt, Iman explains these ideas: “I also wish I’d known more about the MSA’s events, because most of them are open to high school students too, so if I’d known there were weekly halaqahs or events, I definitely would have attended.”

Religious holidays. All three participants identified the need for high schools and school staff to make greater efforts to recognize the many diverse religious holidays that occur throughout the scholastic year. Iman expressed visible discontent when discussing her non-Muslim teachers’ and peers’ ignorance about Islamic holidays. The following quotation highlights the suggestions she afforded to address this issue:

“I get like Christianity is the most dominant religion but I think you should still be aware of the people who don’t celebrate Christmas. Like I’d always get ‘Merry Christmas’ and I’m like ‘Oh I don’t celebrate Christmas’ and people were like (gasp) ‘You don’t!’ And I was always surprised. I’m like ‘Yeah I thought that you knew that I was Muslim.’ Seeing as I wear hijab. And they were like ‘Yeah but it’s Christmas!’ And I was like well yeah but I could be like yeah ‘It’s Eid!’ Either try to eliminate any specific holidays like Easter or I am not pointing fingers at Christianity like even Eid. It is only because that was the only thing that was celebrated in my school. I’ve never seen it decorated for Eid or even Hanukah; I never saw any decorations for that.”

Chapter 5: Discussion

Rethinking the Research Questions

Despite my unwillingness to make generalizations across the participants' experiences, inductive thematic analyses revealed several commonalities in their experiences, which requires consideration in relation to the literature. The subsequent sections examine the relationship between this study's findings and the results of previous research with respect to the following issues: experiences with the curriculum, sources of knowledge and/or learning and experiences and means of coping with socio-cultural issues in school.

Experiences with the curriculum. One of the main aims of this study was to explore the participants' experiences with and perceptions of the high school curriculum. The relationship between the curriculum and the successes achieved by gifted minority students is well documented in the literature; previous studies have found that gifted students exhibit increased engagement and interest in school when the curriculum is elected, used and adapted according to their unique needs (e.g., Al-Lawati & Hunsaker, 2007; Borland, 2004; Hockett, 2009). In this study, the three participants were asked to recount their experiences with the school curriculum and then to assess the impact it had on their high school experiences. The following three sections outline the major themes that emerged regarding this issue and present support for these findings from the existing literature.

Bored with the regular school curriculum. Curricula employed in regular programs offered at the participants' respective schools failed, in distinct ways, to effectively meet the women's unique needs; which agrees with previous findings regarding the lack of adequate curricular supports for gifted students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Ford, 2010; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). The participants described the curricula used in regular programs as being too simplistic, repetitive and a waste of time (i.e., not applicable to real-life), which suggests that the curriculum did not meet the participants' educational needs and that efforts were not taken by educators to adapt the work accordingly. These findings support VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh's (2005) study in which they found that regular school teachers' inability to and lack of experience with modifying the curriculum for diverse gifted populations significantly reduced the academic and social efficacy of these program for gifted students. The participants' overwhelming disenchantment and frustration with regular program curricula highlights the potentially detrimental outcomes the continued use of this material with gifted Muslim women could have on their overall interest in and dedication to school. Current research supports these claims; Cleaver (2008) found that dismissing the needs of gifted learners risks them becoming frustrated, prone to disruptive behaviour and even less likely to graduate. The absence of comparable negative accounts, from the participants, regarding the curriculum used in advanced classes suggests that these curricular caveats are exclusive to regular programming. This confirms Matthews & Kitchen's (2007) findings

regarding gifted students' positive perceptions of and experiences with high ability programs within regular schools (e.g., IB).

Ethnocentric curriculum. The reported ethnocentric nature of the curriculum offered at the participants' schools, as well as their disappointment with its lack of diversity, suggest that culturally homogenous curricula did not effectively meet the socio-educational needs of these gifted Muslim women. Despite having been found to negatively affect culturally diverse gifted students' chances for success in school, curriculum that either does not represent or misrepresents diversity remains in widespread use in North American classrooms (e.g., Ford, 2010; Gay, 2002; Guo, 2011; Gunel, 2007; Howard, 2004). Although the participants advocated for greater and more accurate representation of diversity across all subjects, their concerns were centered on the curriculum used in social science, history and religion classes. They expressed wanting the integration of multiple stories, narratives and histories from diverse perspectives and peoples, which they felt would afford a more holistic representation and understanding of both historical and contemporary issues. The participants' concerns regarding the curriculum's lack of diversity is supported by previous findings, which have found that the curriculum used in Western countries often does not reflect the diverse nature of their societies (Borland, 2004). The frustration and disappointment conveyed by the participants regarding this particular issue also support Borland's (2004) study in which he found that similar curricular caveats can have detrimental effects on the academic success and motivation of gifted women from diverse backgrounds.

Ignoring Islam. The participants' desire for there to be greater recognition and more accurate representations of Islam in the curriculum suggests that Canadian high schools are not effectively accommodating gifted Muslim women's needs. This finding agrees with Shah's (2012) study in which she found that there is discontent amongst Muslim parents living in the West regarding secular schools' failure to adequately recognize their children's religious and cultural identities; which has resulted in increased numbers of Muslim children attending private religious schools. To rectify these curricular caveats, the participants offered the following suggestions: include Islamic Knowledge classes as an option course in all high schools and integrate Islamic perspectives (e.g., historical) and content (e.g., literary books) into the curriculum. The participants' salient desire for educational institutions to provide them with the opportunity to learn about Islam in high school highlights the centrality of Islam in a Muslim's life. Their value for acquiring religious knowledge is supported by previous theological interpretations of the Islamic faith, which have found that, in Islam, a believer's closeness to God is increased, in part, through learning about Islam (Freeman, 2005). The participants' desire for there to be a more evident and accurate representation of Islamic perspectives in the curriculum is also supported by Douglas & Dunn's (2003) study in which they found that Islam is not, in North American classrooms, taught as an integral component of the curriculum but is instructed as either an irrelevant component of history or a mere result of modern political conflicts.

Sources of knowledge and/or learning. Another aim of this study was to explore the most valued sources of knowledge and learning for gifted Muslim women. More specifically, I wanted to learn where and from whom this knowledge was being acquired as well as the nature of these experiences. The subsequent two sections discuss the major themes that emerged following analysis of the participants' experiences regarding this topic.

Parents as a beacon of knowledge. While in high school, the participants' parents served as their primary source of theological and cultural knowledge, which highlights the integral and foundational role of the family in Islam (Anwar, 2006). The participants expressed great appreciation for the efforts taken by their families to teach them their cultural traditions (e.g., language) and religious practices (e.g., prayer). The women's reliance on their parents for the acquisition of religious knowledge agrees with previous theological interpretations of the Islam, which have found that one of the primary responsibilities of Muslim parents is the transmission of knowledge about the Islamic way of life to their children (Khan, 2003). The extent to which the participants valued the acquisition of this knowledge also reflects the centrality Islam is expected to assume in a Muslim's life (Khan, 2003).

The participants also expressed wanting the opportunity to explore their faith and spirituality at school. These findings are synonymous with previous studies that have highlighted Canadian Muslim women's desire for schools to validate their home cultures through the school curriculum (Schlein & Chan, 2010). In order to acquire a better understanding about the extent to which gifted

Muslim women expect secular schools to afford them with opportunities to learn about their religion, larger number of this population need to be surveyed regarding this issue. Furthermore, educational institutions need to consult and collaborate with the parents of gifted Muslim women regarding these issues, which will afford greater insight into the ways in which schools can support the knowledge currently being transmitted at home (Merry, 2005).

Mentor teachers. Secondary educators had a significant impact on that nature of the participants' educational experiences. All three participants appreciated teachers that made a conscious effort to learn about their unique identities/backgrounds. In addition, the participants' learning experiences in these teachers' classes were described as being of utmost educational and personal benefit. These findings are supported by Ford's (2010) study in which it was found that educators' awareness and acceptance of gifted students' cultural differences was positively correlated with their ability to create a learning environment that addressed the needs of this diverse student population. The participants' experiential accounts describing these teachers revealed the following about the nature of their relationships: they was rooted in ongoing engagement in one-on-one discussions regarding curricular and non-curricular related inquiries and they were founded on teachers' perceived interest in the women's identities and post-secondary goals/aspirations. The extent to which participants respected teachers' recognition and appreciation of their identities is supported by Lovett's (2011) study, which revealed that teachers who took the

time to learn about gifted students' socio-cultural backgrounds improved their sense of belonging and involvement in gifted programs.

In order to improve teachers' knowledge of its diverse gifted student populations, as well as to encourage their development of meaningful relationships with gifted Muslim women, increased efforts need to be taken to provide both pre- and in-service teachers with better pre- and in-service training. This suggestion agrees with previous studies that have highlighted the correlation between teachers' knowledge of diversity and their desire/ability to address issues of cultural and/or religious diversity with students (e.g., Kang & Hyatt, 2009-2010; Milner, Tenore, & Laughter, 2008).

Experiences and means of coping with socio-cultural issues in school.

Religious ignorance. The participants' experiential accounts revealed that school staff was markedly ignorant about Islam and Muslims. Describing their teachers' knowledge of Islam as either non-existent or minimal at best, all three women expressed feelings of frustration over their teachers' failure to address issues related to Islam in the curriculum. The participants' encounters with religious ignorance in schools is supported by a plethora of previous studies; all of which have reported a widespread lack of training and/or preparation for both in- and pre-service teachers regarding how to support gifted students from diverse cultural backgrounds (e.g., Esquivel & Nahari, 2000; Ford, 2010; Niyozov, 2010).

The profound desire expressed by participants for teachers and schools to recognize their religious practices (e.g., prayer) and holidays (e.g., Ramadan)

further highlights the extent to which religious ignorance in schools is having an adverse effect on gifted Muslim women's educational experiences. Previous researchers have reported similar findings; for example Gunel (2007) found that there existed significant gaps in teachers' understanding of Muslims' unique cultural practices. In order to improve gifted Muslim women's experiences in high school, efforts need to be taken by schools and university education programs to provide teachers with a comprehensive overview of issues such as Islam and Islamic history (Akiba, 2011). In addition, providing schools and educators with the fundamental research skills needed to increase their knowledge about an array of topics will increase their ability to address the needs of the increasingly diverse gifted population (Aimée Premier & Miller, 2010).

All alone in IB. The experiences conveyed by the participants that were enrolled in advanced programs or classes highlighted a lack of diversity in these classes, which suggests that there is an underrepresentation of Muslim women in gifted programs. Upon recounting their experiences in advanced programs, the participants made direct reference to the absence of other Muslims in these programs and the alienating impact this had on their socio-educational encounters. These findings are supported by several other researchers; all of which claim that culturally diverse gifted students are currently underrepresented in gifted programs throughout the Americas (e.g., Briggs, Reis, & Sullivan, 2008; Esquivel & Nahari, 2000). The lack of Muslims, notably women, in the advanced high school programs attended by the participants is worrisome in that it suggests that gifted Muslim women are not receiving the adequate academic supports to ensure

achievement of their potential. This trepidation is supported by Olszewski-Kubilius, Lee, Ngoi, and Ngoi's (2004) study, where it was found that students with gifted potential but not enrolled in advanced programming achieved at significantly lower levels than those with access to these programs. Despite not being a representative sample of the entire population of gifted Muslim women in Canada, this study's participants revealed that greater insight needs to be acquired about the representation of Muslim women in gifted programs.

Emerging Issues

In addition to the abovementioned issues, all of which were focused on answering the initial research questions, the interviews procured novel insights into a plethora of other issues. In the following paragraphs I list the most prevalent of these emerging issues and provide a brief discussion regarding their meaning and potential implications.

Rigidity of the curriculum. Despite expressing satisfaction with the amount and the nature of work provided in advanced classes, the participants criticized the rigidity of the curriculum utilized in the IB program; which they argued prevented students from giving feedback and/or input regarding its efficacy and engagement. These findings are interesting in that they suggest that gifted Muslim women value collaborative efforts when designing the curriculum, which agrees with Terry's (2008) study that found engagement in curricular development can have positive educational outcomes for gifted students.

Group work. The participants' encouraging descriptions of their experiences with group work suggest that their value of this instructional method was centered on its ability to encourage peer interactions, foster collaboration amongst students and improve the overall social cohesion of the class. These findings suggest that the participants enjoyed having opportunities to work with others in class. Despite its small and unrepresentative sample size, this study's findings regarding group work add to previous studies in which researchers shattered the previously held notion that gifted students prefer to work alone; French, Walker and Shore (2011) reported that nearly all gifted students surveyed in their study said that they enjoyed, and nearly half preferred, working in groups to working alone.

Accurate assessment. The participants were frustrated by teachers that failed to clearly delineate assignment purposes (i.e., its relationship to the material taught in-class) and/or the instructions needed to complete the work. The prevalence of this particular experience is worrisome in that it suggests that not only is there a lack of adherence to good assessment practices, which could significantly reduce the reliability of grades assigned, but also that these practices negatively affected these gifted Muslim women's educational experiences. For example, the participants independently recognized and readily complained about the use of poor assessment practices, which suggests that use of such methods with gifted student population is more readily recognized as being invalid.

The impact of diversity in schools. The participants' comments regarding diversity in school revealed that the women felt safer in schools or in

programs where the majority of students were from diverse backgrounds, which suggests that a multicultural educational milieu has a positive impact on the educational experiences of gifted Muslim women. Those participants that attended schools regarded as diverse reported less instances of bullying against students usually regarded as being a minority (e.g., Muslims, South Asians). Conversely, those participants that attended schools or programs lacking in diversity expressed feeling anxious with the cultural homogeneity of their classes. These findings are supported by Denson & Zhang's (2010) study in which they found that students' exposure to diversity in high school had a positive impact on their problem solving abilities, cooperative tendencies and appreciation and respect for diversity. Other studies have also found that schools where diversity and inclusion are present, and recognized by staff and students, as opposed to schools with minimal diversity, create learning environments wherein the bullying of minority students occurs less frequently (Murawski, Lockwood, Khalili, & Johnston, 2010).

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Key Implications

In general, the curriculum employed in both regular and advanced classes did not adequately meet the three participants' socio-educational needs and expectations. The participants' complaints regarding the curriculum employed in regular classes suggests that greater consideration needs to be given to adapting the existing curriculum to better suit their needs and/or refer potentially gifted Muslim students to advanced programs. The participants' profound frustration with the underrepresentation of diversity in the curricula used in both regular and advanced programs indicates that curricular diversity is a key factor in engaging these gifted Muslim women in the material. These findings support the need for a review of the curriculum currently used in Canadian high schools to ensure that it adequately portrays and represents a wide variety of cultural traditions and histories.

Described as their most valued and trusted source of knowledge, the participants' families functioned as indispensable sources of religious and cultural information not offered in schools. The extent to which the three participants appreciated the information acquired from their parents suggests that Muslim parents play an important role in the education of their children in Canada. In response to these findings, efforts need to be taken by schools to collaborate with the parents of gifted Muslim women, which could help educators identify areas in the curriculum where the needs of gifted Muslim women are not being addressed.

Teachers also played an integral role in shaping the participants' educational experiences. The negative impact teachers' minimal knowledge of diversity had on the participants' experiences highlights the importance of providing both pre- and in-service teachers with training on how to address the needs of gifted students from diverse backgrounds. In addition, the participants' praise for teachers that spent time learning about their cultural and religious practices suggests that the manner in which teachers react to and address diversity has an impact on the nature of gifted Muslim women's educational experiences. The fact that participants encountered very few teachers who were willing to learn about their cultures highlights the need for increased efforts to develop programs through which Canadian educators can ameliorate their interest in and appreciation for diversity.

The dissatisfaction expressed by the participants with the lack of diversity in advanced classes suggests that Muslim women are underrepresented in gifted programs. Despite the small sample size, the impact of this reality on the participants' educational experiences in these programs (e.g., difficulty making friends, inability to express religious beliefs without fear of reprisal or ridicule) highlights the detrimental effects such underrepresentation can have on minority students' experiences in gifted programs. Efforts to increase awareness about these advanced programs within the Muslim community could help improve enrollment rates of Muslim women in such programs. In addition, improved preparedness for educators regarding the diverse manners in which giftedness

manifests itself amongst gifted women could increase the number of referrals made to such programs.

The numerous experiences recounted by the participants regarding both their peers' and the school staff's ignorance and misconceptions about Muslims, suggests that Islam, both as a religion and as a culture, has neither been effectively addressed in teacher education programs nor integrated into the general school curriculum. The visible distress conveyed by the participants regarding this issue highlights the potentially negative impact such cultural/religious ignorance can have on the educational experiences of gifted Muslim women. Attempts to integrate information about Islam into the school curriculum will help increase students' knowledge about this topic. However, efforts must also be taken to improve the courses currently offered to pre- and in-service teachers regarding diversity in education, in order to ensure that they are acquiring the information and tools necessary to recognize and support the diversity present in their classes.

Limitations of the research

This study's relatively small sample size limits my ability to transfer its findings to a larger population. Although not its primary aim, the transferability of this study's results could have significantly extended the scope of influence of its findings. Despite being an acceptable number for phenomenological research, the experiential account of three participants can neither serve as a reliable nor a valid basis for making claims about all gifted Muslim women in Canada. Attempts to

employ these findings as evidence for more widespread trends amongst this population will procure invalid claims; it cannot be demonstrated that the experiences of three participants are representative of the entire population from which they were sampled. Any attempt to extend or transfer this study's findings would require the analysis of a much larger and more representative sample size.

The participants' distinct demographic backgrounds reduce the transferability of this study's findings within and/or beyond the sample group. Despite all identifying as Muslim women that are gifted, the participants' educational backgrounds are unique in nature. For example, the women attended different high schools that were situated in distinct provinces, which limit my ability to compare their experiences. The provincially governed nature of education in Canada further impedes the transferability of this study's findings. In order to improve this particular limitation, a more homogenous sample group, with regards to the provincial location of schools attended, needs to be acquired.

The disparity in participants' ages, at the time of the interview, could have affected the extent to which they were able to recollect events with accuracy. Despite attempts to recruit participants between the ages of 19 and 20, the candidates that best met the participant selection criteria were between the ages of 20 and 24. Working with participants that were not the same age, and slightly older than initially anticipated, could have weakened the credibility of results; the younger participants' experiential accounts may have been more accurate than that of the older participants. In addition, the significant amount of time that had elapsed between the experience itself and the participants' description of it could

have reduced their ability to recollect important details. For example, the participants repeatedly mentioned that they were unable to remember specific curricular details from some classes. Recruiting participants that were of the same age and that were more recent high school graduates could have improved this caveat.

Despite being identified as gifted according to this study's operationalization of the term, none of the participants were identified or coded, by provincial or school board standards, as being gifted, which could have reduced the credibility of its results. The inherently variable nature of the term giftedness, as well as the diverse ways in which it is defined and perceived, could reduce the scope of this study's findings. For example, school districts or provinces that do not agree with this study's definition of giftedness could negate the applicability of its findings; based on the fact that they do not regard the three participants as gifted. In addition, those that advocate for the use of standardized assessments in the identification of gifted individuals could argue that this study's sample population was neither a reliable nor valid representation of gifted students. One might also argue that the criteria used to identify women as gifted in this study have not been subjected to tests of reliability or validity, which could have significantly reduced its ability to accurately and consistently ensure that the women selected were in fact gifted.

The participants' diverse religious backgrounds within the Islamic faith, two participants were Sunni Muslims and one was Shia, could have impacted the credibility of the findings. Despite being theologically similar in nature, Sunni and

Shia Muslims possess distinct socio-cultural beliefs and practices, which could have influenced the way in which the participants interpreted and perceived their high school experiences. Although this uniqueness contributed to the procurement of rich experiential accounts, it impedes the comparison of experiences across participants, which risks providing inaccurate conclusions about individuals from each sect. In order to rectify this limitation, future analyses could be conducted with either Sunni or Shia Muslims. The improved within group consistency would help increase the accuracy of the results and the comparisons made.

Another limitation is the distinct nature of the participants' high school programs, which impedes any accurate comparisons of the women's experiences. Of the three participants, one attended advanced programs for both junior and senior high school, whereas the second attended an advanced program for two years in senior high school. On the other hand, the third participant attended a regular program for the entirety of her junior and senior high school years. The experiences of the one participant that attended a regular high school are going to be reflective of that particular context; whereas the experiences of the participants enrolled in advanced programs will likely have been impacted by the nature of these educational environments. Comparing the experiences of individuals whose experiences were acquired in markedly distinct educational environments could procure conclusions that are an inaccurate representation of these women's experiences in each school setting.

Suggestions for Future Research

In order to expand on this study's findings regarding gifted Muslim women's curricular preferences, future research needs to examine their perceptions of curricula used in advanced and in regular high school programs respectively. Such inquiries and analyses will help researchers identify the strengths and weaknesses of both of these programs with respect to the needs of this population. Analyzing each program separately will also increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. For example, exploring gifted Muslim women's experiences with the curriculum in IB programs ensures that the unit of analysis (i.e., the curriculum) is consistent across participants. Findings will help identify which aspects of each program are supporting the needs of gifted Muslim women, which will assist educators and policy makers alike in making effective adaptations and improvements to the curriculum.

Future research also needs to address the issue of diversity, both in schools and in the curriculum, and explore the impact its presence and absence in schools has on the educational experiences of gifted Muslim students. The lack of information regarding gifted Muslim women's sentiments towards the representation of diversity in schools is worrisome in that we are not aware of the outcomes it has on their academic and professional motivation. Future research needs to examine this issue from the perspective of gifted Muslim students that are currently enrolled in high school, which will provide a more accurate representation of their experiences with diversity in schools. Long-term case studies that follow a small number of gifted Muslim girls throughout high school

could provide unique insights into the perceived effects that diversity in schools and in the curriculum has on the nature of their experiences.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, future research will need to employ diverse methodological approaches to investigate some of its major themes and findings. For example, a mixed-methods approach, which employs both quantitative surveys and qualitative structured interviews, could afford greater insight into gifted Muslim women's experiences with the curriculum. The use of a survey would facilitate the acquisition of a larger sample size, while the utilization of structured interviews would also increase the directionality of the interviews, which would improve the credibility of the findings. Therefore, results from a mixed-methods study would likely provide more detailed and reliable information regarding the nature of this population's experiences in Canadian high schools.

Despite being a minor element in this study, the insights provided by the participants regarding their ideal curriculum is a topic that requires further investigation. The participants' suggestions were quite discerning and could afford educators and policy makers alike with a better understanding of the scholastic needs of this particular group of students. Further analysis of this issue could be undertaken using qualitative methods, such as narrative inquiry, grounded theory or feminist inquiry. Use of these approaches would enable the participants to assume temporary control of curriculum generation; a process which has long excluded both women and Muslims. For example, multiple gifted Muslim women could be interviewed and asked to outline their ideal curriculum

(i.e., design the curriculum for a particular grade) or overall school structure (i.e., what they would want a high school to look like). The data acquired from these interviews could then be used to identify certain key curricular features that would best support these women's needs.

Despite the existence of numerous conceptions of giftedness, research has yet to explore or articulate a construct that has been conceptualized from the viewpoint of Canadian Muslim women. In order to increase the accuracy of the assessment procedures used to identify Muslim women as gifted, greater insights must be acquired regarding how the term itself is perceived by this group of individuals. Future research could consist of interviews with Canadian Muslim women wherein they are asked to express their definitions and thoughts regarding what giftedness is and what it means to be gifted. Additional research could also be performed with Muslim women that have been identified as gifted according to Canadian standards; these women could be asked to evaluate currently employed definitions of giftedness and gifted identification models. Once this exploratory data is gathered, additional studies could then employ the themes drawn from these analyses to conduct quantitative surveys with larger numbers of Canadian Muslim women; this would afford a more representative portrayal of what it means to be gifted for this group of individuals. From this data, preliminary constructs of the term giftedness, from the perspective of Muslim women, could then be articulated.

Concluding Reflections

This thesis writing experience has not only revealed intriguing information about my research questions but has uncovered a plethora of insights regarding the qualitative research process as a whole. Although I embarked on this phenomenological journey with little more than a desire to learn more about gifted Muslim women's educational experiences and a burgeoning interest in qualitative research, I am completing this process with a newfound passion for the topic and the methodology.

As a novice researcher, I learned about the importance of the planning phases in a research process. Carefully outlining my thesis helped ensure that my research was feasible and that it could be executed in a reasonable amount of time with trustworthiness and credibility. Well-articulated research plans also facilitated my collection and analysis of the data. Both the submission and approval processes for my ethics application were alleviated by the extensive amount of time that was spent planning.

I also learned that the possession of previous relationships and/or actual membership with a study's sample group facilitates gaining access to participants. Despite being both a woman and a Muslim, I was initially worried that no Muslim women would be interested in and/or willing to participate in my study. However, these concerns quickly dissipated as I found extensive and almost immediate willingness amongst these women either to participate in or to help find ideal participants for the research.

The writing of the thesis was facilitated by my having written a research proposal, which provided a detailed outline from which I could expand. The writing of the results and discussion sections were the most arduous and at times frustrating tasks of the thesis. Having never conducted such analyses, I struggled to achieve a balance between providing rich and authentic descriptions of the participants' experiences while simultaneously drawing conclusions about the meaning of these experiences. I believe it was through the lengthily and ongoing editing process that I was able to ameliorate and perfect both these sections and the thesis as a whole.

I was amazed by the richness and the specificity of the participants' descriptions of their experiences, which highlights the extent to which their reflections can serve as preliminary evidence for future research about this topic. Prior to this study, I was unaware of the degree to which other Muslim women shared many of the same thoughts, perceptions and experiences that I had had. While I was unequivocally encouraged by these commonalities, the lack of research examining this issue is disheartening; it highlights the extent to which these women's voices have been ignored. This lack of research coupled with the richness of my findings demonstrates the need for increased research in this area of study, which will help ensure that the increasing Muslim population in Canada, and its virtually unrecognized population of gifted women, receive the educational supports they need to succeed in society.

Currently examined from a predominately American perspective; the issue of diversity in giftedness has minimal insights that are uniquely Canadian in

nature. Due to the inherently distinct nature of America's demographic makeup and policies towards immigration, the issues addressed in current research on diversity in giftedness can neither be generalized to Canadian audiences nor applied as supporting evidence for studies conducted in Canada. As a Muslim woman living in Canada, I worry that the lack of educational supports available for women from this community, notably those that have exceptionalities, will negatively impact their future academic and professional successes. I hope that this study encourages greater interest amongst researchers and policy makers alike in the topic of giftedness amongst Muslim women in Canada.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Participant Letter of Introduction: INTERVIEWS

“Exploring gifted Muslim women’s educational experiences at high school in Canada”

Dear University of Alberta student,

I would like to thank you for having expressed an interest in my research about the lived educational experiences of gifted Muslim girls in Canada and would now like to formally invite you to be a participant in this study. Your perspective will provide valuable insight into the curricular experiences of high-achieving Muslim women. As a second year Masters student in the Department of Educational Psychology’s Special Education program, the information obtained from this study will be utilized for the writing of my thesis.

The purpose of my research is to gain an in-depth understanding of gifted Muslim women’s experiences with high school curriculum in Canadian public schools. Currently, there is a lack of research exploring the socio-educational and curricular needs of gifted Muslim girls in Canada. Analysis of your experiences will consequentially, provide researchers and educators alike with information about gifted Muslim women’s educational needs, which could be employed to develop culturally and academically relevant curriculum.

In order to ensure that you have sufficient time to explore your experiences, one-on-one interviews will be conducted throughout the Fall 2011 semester. I anticipate the interview taking approximately 50-60 minutes to complete. You will also be given the option of requesting a second follow-up interview, which would give you the opportunity to address issues or questions that were excluded during the first interview. Due to the experiential nature of my study, you will be asked to remember and convey descriptions of distinguishing events, issues and interactions that affected your high school educational experiences. Prior to data analysis, you will be provided with transcribed copies of the interviews for review, following which you could modify or alter any information that you find inaccurate.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time until the data is analyzed. During the interviews, you are not required to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. All information and data collected through the interviews will remain confidential, meaning your name will not be used in the data or thesis, and will be stored on a password protected computer in a safe location for a total of 5 years. Access to the full interviews will be limited to the principal investigator and thesis co-supervisors, Dr. Ingrid Johnston and Dr. George Buck.

I would like to thank you in advance for taking the time to consider participating in this study. If you should have any questions or concerns regarding the nature of the

project or research you are encouraged to contact me, Shan Stafiej, by phone (780-604-4880) or by email (stafiej@ualberta.ca).

“The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Research Ethics Board 1 (REB 1) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the REB 1 c/o (780)492-2614.”

Warmest Regards,
Shan Stafiej
M.Ed. Student

Department of Educational Psychology
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
6-102, Education North
T6G 2G5

Appendix II: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM: Interviews

“Exploring gifted Muslim women’s educational experiences at high school in Canada”

- I have read and possess a copy of the participant information letter regarding the research study entitled “Exploring gifted Muslim women’s educational experiences at high school in Canada” and agree to participate.
- I am aware of the study’s purpose, methods and procedures and have had all my questions answered by the principle investigator.
- I recognize that my participation in this study will require the completion of a one-on-one interview with the principal investigator. I am aware that the interview will last approximately 50-60 minutes in length and that I will have the option of requesting a second follow-up interview.
- I understand that the interview(s) will be recorded with a digital recording device, which will be listened to by the principal investigator and thesis co-supervisors, Dr. George Buck and Dr. Ingrid Johnston.
- I have also been informed that I will have the opportunity to review the interview transcriptions and summaries prior to analysis, in the event that addition or deletions need to be made.
- I am aware that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I have the freedom to withdraw at any time without consequence until such time as the data is analyzed and that I am not obliged to answer any questions that I am not comfortable with.
- I understand that all necessary efforts to protect my confidentiality will be taken, such as use of appropriate storage, limited access of data and the use of pseudonyms.

I understand that the principal investigator intends to employ the results from these interviews as data for the writing of her master’s thesis. I have also been informed that a copy of the study’s results will be made available, following completion of the thesis, by indicating a request below

I know that I can contact the principal investigator, Shan Stafiej, by telephone at (780) 604-4880 or by email at stafiej@ualberta.ca with any questions, comments or concerns that I have regarding the study.

I have been informed that the outline for this study has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB 1) at the University of Alberta. I understand that I may contact the Chair of the REB 1 at (780) 492-2461 with any questions or concerns about my rights and the ethical conduct of research.

- Please sign this consent form as well as indicate whether you would like to receive a copy of the completed study and then return the form to Shan Stafiej.

I have read and comprehended this consent form and I agree to participate in the study.

Participant’s Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

I would like to receive a copy of the completed study _____

Email Address _____

Appendix III: Interview Guide

“Exploring gifted Muslim women’s educational experiences at high school in Canada”

Overview

Throughout this study’s semi-structured open-ended interviews, the participants will be asked to recall distinct events and share unique stories about their socio-educational and curricular experiences in high school. This interview guide’s primary purpose is to provide the interviews with a structural framework, which will increase both the consistency and rigour with which they are conducted. Due to the interviews’ semi-structured nature, this guide will act as a flexible outline for the interviews.

Demographic Information

Could you please tell me your name and how old you are?

In which country were you born?

Have you ever lived in any other country than Canada? If yes, which one(s)?

Could you explain your cultural or ethnic background?

Which languages, other than English, do you speak, read or write?

Which/what university program are/were you enrolled in? Which year of your studies?

In which province(s) did you attend high school?

High School Educational Experiences

Could you tell me a bit about your educational experiences in high school? For example:

- What school(s) did you attend?
- What were your favourite and least favourite classes?
- What types of classes and options did you enrol in?
- Were there any extracurricular activities that you participated in?
- Were there any individuals that had a significant impact on your experience and why?

What did you find most exciting and/or like best about your high school experiences and why?

What did you find least exciting and/or like least about your high school experience and why?

General High School Curriculum

Could you describe the curriculum that was used while you were in high school? For instance:

- Textbooks, assignments, activities, projects, exams, labs, science fairs, etc.
- Can you recall an instance in which you felt a particular way about a curricular item?

How were you involved in curricular decisions? How did this make you feel?

Subject-Specific Curricular Experiences and Preference

What curriculum related materials did you find most interesting and why?

What curriculum related materials did you find the least interesting and why?

Can you describe the classes in which you found the curriculum to be the most supportive of your learning and why?

Can you describe the classes in which you found the curriculum to be the least supportive of your learning and why?

Other Sources of Learning or Knowledge

In what other locations and/or places, other than school, did you frequent, while in high school, to learn about both academic and non-academic subjects?

- Can you describe a distinct instance in this/these settings that you felt supported?
- What do you think was the reason that you went to this/these places?
- Can you describe the ways in which this location helped either with your learning or with your general school life?
 - Can you describe how you felt during this instance?

Dream Curriculum

Can you describe the types of changes that you would have liked to make to the high school curriculum?

Can you provide me with a description of your “dream” or ideal curriculum?

Appendix IV: Final Coding Structure

Theme	Sub-Theme	What it IS	Example
Curricular Experiences	Group Projects	Instances where the participants described their experiences working with more than one person on a curriculum-based task.	“like the group work so I would keep that and maybe incorporate more of it and make the students interact more so even something like physics that seems kind of inaccessible to a lot of people (laughs).”
	IB Program	Incidents that describe the participants’ experiences with the curriculum in accelerated programs (i.e., IB program) within a regular high school.	“Like the profs, our profs, minimized them to let’s just say five books and maybe like we were able to choose 4 out of five. I think that there was something like that but it was fairly rigid just because in the program those were the books that were accepted in the IB world.”
	Regular Stream	Incidents that explicate the participants’ experiences with the curriculum in non-accelerated programs.	“I think for math we always had textbooks um and basically we just read through them that was what math textbooks was every year a new one just go through it”
	Language Classes	Instances where the participants described experiences that happened in their language classes (e.g., English and French) that were related to the curriculum.	“Because French class it was never the actual language that you hated it was the class so it was like man it’s French it’s time for French class now um because French class somehow ended up being that class it was never enjoyable um and I felt like you always learn the same stuff over and over (...) there was never any conversational French ever so we never spoke in it and we were never taught to speak in it”
	Issues of Diversity	Instances where the participants described their experiences with diversity (e.g., ethnic, racial, cultural	“Like they knew I was fasting or they knew so they would each like the profs or the ah my colleagues would just be like oh

		and religious) in the curriculum.	like happy Eid or how's fasting but it was never addressed in our curriculum." The different religious holidays celebrated by."
	Assessment	Cases where participants recounted experiences with classroom assessment and evaluation methods used by teachers and/or schools.	"I remember I hated IB first in grade 10 because um it was grade 10 you had just gotten in from junior high, we don't know what studying is, our very first bio exam our prof literally said that this was a first year university, university exam, I got like 30% if I was lucky and that was pure luck and like I just didn't understand the purpose of testing us and then yeah she added the curve."
	Assignments	Experiences with classroom assignments (i.e., projects, lab reports, book reports and essays).	"I hated doing projects so that was just I despised putting so much time into just like coloring in the title in this giant piece of paper and you didn't actually learn too much."
Sources of Knowledge and learning	Family	Experiences related to the participants' family (i.e., parents, siblings or grandparents) providing them with knowledge.	"my dad is a huge history buff so I learned a lot from him but not to the extent, not at all from school actually."
	Religious Institutions	Incidents whereby the participants' described experiences where they gained knowledge through the Mosque or Islamic community.	"I did in Junior high attend an Islamic school it was Saturday school I think um so yeah I had to learn about Quran, Islamic knowledge, and it was actually at MCE (laughs) I was one of those kids. It was at MCE and I so Islamic knowledge, Quran and Arabic, I was like oh my God what was the third one."
Experiences with issues related to diversity in	Accommodating and Recognizing Diversity	Cases where the participants recounted positive experiences with issues of diversity, religion, culture and race in school and/or	"I think it was inherent because there was so many of us like there was so many I am sure that the principal and teacher fostered it in a sense that the

School		their classes.	vice principal made jokes about like school is starting on time it is not IST like it's not Indian standard time and he would just throw around brown terms.”
	Minimal awareness of diversity	Cases where the participants recounted negative experiences with issues of diversity, religion, culture and race in school.	“for me I don't think any teacher was ever like “hey Mim I know that Eid is coming up do you want to take it off” there was nothing like that, I approached them and I said something like it is a religious holiday and I won't be here and they were of course okay with it.”
	Diversity in advanced programs or classes	Instances whereby the participants' relayed experiences related specifically to issues of diversity in the IB program.	“although I will add though that IB for the first few days I felt like a minority. Just because everyone was from an Asian background. Um it was me, my Caucasian friend, she was half French and half German we were like “so are we the only two that aren't Asian in this class”.
	The impact of schools with great diversity	Experiences wherein a school's significant diversity is linked with having had a specific impact on the participant.	“After hearing from other friends now who went to schools where they were predominately white people yes, I think that I was lucky my race never made me stand apart.”
	The impact of schools with minimal diversity	Experiences wherein a school's lack of diversity is linked with having had a certain impact on the participant.	“High school seen as a passing period to get to the better times: I just remember always looking forward to university because people would say that there is so much more diversity there.”
Extra-Curricular Activities	Essential Service	Occurrences wherein the participants described their involvement in ECAs as being necessary and integral to the school community.	“So fine arts council basically we did face pants elementary schools on their sports days mainly we did banners for all the events in schools (...) so we did that stuff um yeah so no one actually new that we existed but

			it was really important and you were the person that was there.”
	Valuable Work	Experiences whereby the participants depicted their involvement in ECAs as being something they regarded of great importance.	“I was non-stop, just so active. I’d go home really late at night and I did realize my grades dropped a little bit but I think it was worth it (laughs) like ultimately I did get into university which was my goal in high school obviously (laughs) so but I did notice a drop in grades especially around Christmas time because I had my diplomas in January or midterms. Because in IB it’s full year for everything.”
	Received Supports	Instances where the participants described experiences with receiving or not receiving support for school staff for their involvement in ECAs.	“Maybe I would actually assume that the regular students were the ones more involved in school activities. Because in IB you get that extra work load. And I am not at all trying to differentiate and be like IB kids are smarter because it doesn’t have anything to do with smarter but it just has to do with are you willing to challenge yourself.”
Peer Interactions	Making Friends	Participants’ experiences with trying to make friends with the peers in their classes.	“I would say and obviously that had a lot to do with the fact that I wasn’t really concerned at the time with my religion so at the time I just felt like a regular kid in a secular school and um yeah I felt like everything but all my needs were more or less addressed at that time.”
	Perception of Friendships	Instances wherein participants described their beliefs and thoughts regarding making friends and friendships.	“it was like this high school was not the greatest experience like in terms of friends and a social life. But like I said if I had like I don’t know if I would have been as studious in high school.”
	Relationship	Instances whereby the	“the people in the class I mean

	s with Peers in IB Classes	participants recounted experiences related to personal relations they developed with peers specifically in the IB classes.	you could only, yeah like who are you going to complain to when you have a complaint about the people in the class right, so it was like yeah it was I have to say it was more of like a student almost professional relationship none of us would even consider ourselves to be friends, we never hung out outside of class yeah.”
Experiences with Teachers	One-on-One Discussions	Participants’ experiences with conversations they had on an individual basis with their teachers.	“finally my grade 12 professor he, he really worked with you in order he really wanted you to find out what you wanted to do with life. And he was like “I know you are young but you should really focus on these aspects” and he would point out what our weak points were and what our strong points were. And like I like, I want to be told what my weak points are, like it’s constructive criticism and he like never shied away from telling you what it is you should do and giving you really good, we had awesome one on one life talks.”
	Fostering interpersonal interactions	Participants’ experiences in classes where they spoke about teachers making efforts to create a climate that was socially friendly.	“and then he just he really made it feel like we were family that class like I knew everyone in that class whereas in bio class I only knew the four people who sat around me (laughs).”
	Teachers that Challenged Students	Instances wherein the participants’ described teachers that asked for work that targeted higher order thinking skills.	“his teaching style was very much open in you know he would make us do assignments that he felt would really enhance us he gave us a very I would call very a high level project where we all took a chapter of this novel that we were reading and he asks us to make these specific notes on it so each person would have their own

			chapter and he put it all together into this one really big handbook to that novel so just having that was a very useful resource in terms of analyzing the novel.”
	Personality	Participants’ thoughts regarding their teachers’ individual personalities.	“He was definitely the funny prof. um so maybe that had a thing to do and he was really young and um he always told us stories about well when he newly got married and then his first kid.”
	Addressing Student Inquiries	Participants’ experiences with teachers’ addressing or not addressing questions asked in class.	“No I don’t think I ever questioned anything that I was taught in school because you just kind of just give it I remember grade 11 obviously I questioned evolution because it was contrary to my religious beliefs I was just upset because I kept talking about it and the teacher she just kept shutting me down she didn’t want to answer my question and I was very upset.”
Curricular Preferences	Amount of Information Taught	Participants’ ideas regarding the quantity of curriculum taught in high school.	“so I wish yeah I wish somebody taught us a bit more and focused more or pushed the students a little harder.”
	Issues of Diversity	Participants’ opinions and beliefs regarding the addressing of diversity in school.	“there was a wider variety of uh books that we were able read I think.”
	Courses Offered	Personal preferences and ideas regarding the courses that are and that they would like to be offered as options.	“wish I had more Islamic knowledge incorporated into my past and at least at least make religious studies of some sort an option always available to people in high school not just university they should be able to have that knowledge.”
	Class Size	Participants’ preferences regarding class size and its	“I don’t think I would ever make anybody have a class a six

	and Makeup	composition.	ever (laughs) yeah because because it you did get sick of them after so long for like and I was only there for 2 years a lot of them were there for 3 years of just like the same people so there are times and places where that works”
Socio-Cultural and Religious Preferences	Opportunities for Muslim Interaction	The participants’ preferences regarding opportunities for interaction with other Muslims in high school.	“I also wish I’d known more about the MSA’s events, because most of them are open to high school students too, so if I’d known there were weekly halaqahs or events, I definitely would have attended.”
	Religious Holidays	Personal opinions about addressing and recognizing diverse religious holidays in schools.	“I really think schools should either adapt that rule, I think that it would be a lot harder to adapt just because um I get like Christianity is the ah most dominant religion but I think you should still be aware of the people who don’t celebrate Christmas like I’d always get “merry Christmas” and I’m like “oh I don’t celebrate Christmas” and people were like “ you don’t” and I was, I was always surprised I’m like yeah I thought that you knew that I was Muslim.”

Appendix V: Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Part #1 - Interview Conduction

1. Audio recorded interview with the first participant.
 - a. Date conducted: Sept. 15, 2011
2. Transcribed the first interview verbatim.
3. Audio recorded interview with the second participant.
 - a. Date conducted: Sept. 21, 2011
4. Audio recorded interview with the third participant.
 - a. Date conducted: Sept. 30, 2011
5. Transcribed the second and third interview verbatim.

Part #2 - Preliminary Analyses

1. Read through transcriptions of all three interview transcriptions without making any notes.
2. Read through all three interview transcriptions, making notes in the margins regarding positive themes and identifying any possible transcriptions revisions that needed to be made.
3. Read through all three interview transcriptions and highlighted quotations using different colors that corresponded to the emerging themes, interesting quotations and interesting information.

Part #3 - Secondary Analyses

1. Discussed the interview transcriptions and emerging themes with faculty co-supervisors.
2. Re-read data and previous notes; grouping quotations according to the emerging themes and sub-themes.
3. Created a preliminary thematic structure using the previous data; including quotations, citations and information for reference.
4. Revisited the raw data with the thematic structure in order to ensure it is representative of the data.
5. Made the necessary edits to the thematic structure.

(Adapted from Creswell, 2009)