

Balancing Islamic Education and Liberal Secular Norms in the Canadian Context

by

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Bachelor of Arts, United Arab Emirates University, 2014

A Project Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in Leadership Studies

Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies

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University of Victoria

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### Abstract

Canadian Muslim schools, like many other minority organizations, attempt to find a harmony between maintaining the essential principles of Islam and offering students the important abilities required to understand and accommodate any pressures that may emerge between their religious norms and national norms. The aim of this project is to understand the nature of Islamic education in Canada with a focus on how one Islam-based school teaches Islamic values in a secular society. This qualitative research adopts an instrumental case study design to analyze documents in order to understand the nature of Islamic education as found at Al-Zahra Islamic school, as well as some challenges, within the context of Canada's multicultural society. The study recommends some strategies that will help Canadian Islamic schools find a balance between protecting students' Islamic identity and maintaining their national identity.

## Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction .....	5
Overview .....	5
Research problem and Purpose .....	6
Significance of the Study .....	7
Research Questions .....	7
Definition of Terms.....	7
Chapter Two: Literature Review .....	8
The Importance and Development of Education in Islam .....	9
Philosophical Perspectives of Islamic Education .....	11
Historical Background and Overview of Canada’s Multicultural System.....	13
Kymlicka’s Liberal Multiculturalism Theory of Minority Rights .....	15
Chapter Three: Design and Methodology .....	19
Overall Approach and Rationale.....	19
The Role and Orientation of the Researcher .....	20
Site Selection .....	21
Data Collection Methods .....	22
Data Analysis Procedures .....	24
Ethical Considerations .....	25
Procedures to Address Trustworthiness and Credibility.....	25
Limitations and Delimitations.....	26
Chapter four: Findings .....	27
Islamic Studies Curriculum at Al-Zahra Islamic School .....	27
Principles and manners of Islam at Al-Zahra school .....	27

Islamic identity at Al-Zahra school.....	29
Difficulties Facing Islam-based Schools in Canada .....	30
Internal challenges .....	31
External challenges .....	33
Chapter five: Discussion and Conclusions .....	37
Recommendations.....	39
Recommendations for the Islamic schools .....	39
Recommendations for the public schools .....	43
Recommendations for future researchers.....	44
Conclusion .....	45
References.....	47

## Chapter One: Introduction

### Overview

Numerous Western societies have been thinking about the position of Islam and its images in a multicultural context (Ali & Bagley, 2015). Researchers discuss the tensions between the major principles of a liberal society and the needs of minorities. Diverse Islam-based schools react to the tension between the need to maintain and advance Islamic perspectives and values, and the pressure to fit in with the secular, multicultural standards and values of the prevailing society (Ramadan, 2009). There are a few studies published about Muslim schools in Canada, or in North America in general. Among the studies that do exist, few recognize the complexity of providing Islamic education in a multicultural society. This study is an attempt to unravel this complexity.

This study investigates the way Islam-based schools (k-8) in Canada offer Islamic education in a secular and multicultural Canadian setting. It intends to further expand a comprehension of how these schools react to the tension between the desire to safeguard and advance Islamic perspective and qualities from one viewpoint, and the pressure to relate to the standards and values of the prevailing society on the other. To address these goals, the research takes a qualitative methodological approach through analyzing policy documents for Al-Zahra school (pseudo name) in British Columbia, Canada. I used a pseudo name because some of the documents I collected from the school are not published publicly. I chose this school because it is the oldest and the best-regarded Muslim school in British Columbia, therefore it is ideal in allowing me to explore the themes regarding the nature of Islamic education in Canada.

Qualitative research is conducted to explore a problem or an issue related to a group or population, especially when little research has been done on the field (Creswell, 2014). The

qualitative research method fits well with the purpose of this study, because I intend to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of delivering Islamic education in a multicultural society

This study is structured in the following way. Chapter one introduces the background of the study, its purpose, significance and the research questions. Chapter two contains a literature review and theoretical framework. Chapter three provides a summary of my methodology discussion of my approach. Chapter four provides the findings into how Al-Zahra school offers an Islamic approach within a multicultural society, as well as some of the difficulties that face Islamic schools in Canada. Chapter five provides a discussion of the findings, which includes a summary of the findings, and recommendations for current practices and future research.

### **Research Problem and Purpose**

The problem that I want to address in this research is to examine the way Islam-based education schools in Canada endeavor to give a meaningful Islamic learning experience in a national setting which is secular and multicultural. This qualitative study aims to achieve three objectives. First, the purpose is to understand the meaning of Islamic education in Canada, while revealing insights into Al-Zahra school's way to deal with Islamic education as a strategy, teaching method, and educational programs. Islamic education is a comprehensive system that aims to educate both the heart and the mind in order to link human consciousness to God by fostering an understanding of the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* (Ramadan, 2009). Second, it explores how Islamic schools promote Islamic values within the Canadian multicultural system. Third, it identifies the difficulties facing Islamic schools in Canada by looking at the studies that have been done on Islam-based schools in Canada. Data are collected through various kinds of documents, including literature review, policy documents, textbooks, school newsletter, Students and Parents Handbook, and information from the school's website

### **Significance of the study**

The importance of this study lies in its endeavor to define what Islamic education means to those practicing Islam in a Canadian context. It reveals insight into how Islam-based schools in Canada react to different inside and outside tensions. Further, the study is a contribution to the progressing general talk about religious-based schools with regard to Canada's secular society. In terms of the educational value, policymakers and school leaders may consider this as a meaningful research since not many studies looked at Islamic education in Canada. This study provides implications to help Islam-based schools in Canada balance Islamic norms with national norms in order to enable their students to adequately integrate into a bigger and more diverse society. Thus, this study can add to rich future strategy formulation and decision-making.

### **Research questions**

The central questions for the research are as follows:

- What are the nature and goals of the Islamic curriculum at Al-Zahra school?
- What are the difficulties facing Islam- based school in Canada's secular society?

### **Definitions of Terms**

Here are brief definitions of some key terms to explain the foundation of the study.

- *Qur'an*: Translated as recitation. To Muslims, it is the word of God and his final Book revealed to Prophet Mohammed through the angel Gabriel to guide mankind.
- *Sunnah*: The "path" or "example" of the Prophet Muhammad, i.e., what the Prophet did, said, or agreed to during his life. He is considered by Muslims to be a role model.
- *Ummah*: A group of people. It refers to the body of the global Muslim community.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Canada has been viewed as a migrants' nation, where immigrants come looking for a stable life (Kymlicka, 2006). Zine (2007) points out that some Muslim immigrants face challenges in Canada because of contrasts in social standards, for example, drinking alcohol and dating. Furthermore, Merry (2005) demonstrates that numerous Muslim students in public schools confront further social difficulties including issues related to sexual orientation, religious dress (e.g., headscarf), sanctioned food (halal), and prayer accommodations. Islamic schools in Canada are built up to offer a supportive learning environment for the students and to maintain their identity, culture and social norms. However, some researchers (Merry, 2005; Zine, 2007) believe that Muslim schools are always blamed for detaching their students from the dominant society, and therefore making it difficult for the students to integrate with the society.

The literature review gives a basic examination of the way Islamic schools (k-12) run in Canada's multicultural society. In this chapter, I deliberately investigate the foundation and perspectives of Islamic education. Further consideration is given to the role the Islamic teaching plays in preserving the faith, identity and culture of Muslim students in Western societies. Additionally, the literature review defines and analyzes Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism theory of minority rights as one of the leading liberal multicultural theories in Canada. I chose Kymlicka's theory since it is the most powerful liberal multicultural theory in Canada, that has greatly affected Canada's multicultural framework and its application in various government departments and public sectors, including the education sector (Omar, 2011). By investigating the difficulties in offering Islamic education in Canada's multicultural society, I tried to fill in some gaps that may emerge from the study.

### **The Importance and Development of Education in Islam**

Formal education did not exist in the Arabian region until the presentation of Islam in the sixth century (Talbani, 1996). In any case, as Talbani (1996) mentions, education became important all through Arabia as a consequence of teaching Islam that motivated Muslims towards learning and seeking knowledge. In Islam knowledge is a lifelong learning (Said, 1981). Seeking knowledge is highlighted and specified in the *Qur'an* 800 times (Talbani, 1996). The Arabic word *Qur'an* is taken from the same root as the verb "read" (Said, 1981). Also, as Said (1981) reports, the first word to be uncovered to Prophet Muhammad was "Iqra" which means "read" (Said, 1981). In this manner, the *Qur'an*, and the norms of Prophet Muhammad (*Sunnah*) as the principle guide, turned into the essential sources of information, in light of the fact that at the time, the primary educational module was to teach the basic principles of Islam (Talbani, 1996)

As indicated by the research of Afsaruddin (2016) the mosque is considered by Muslims to be a basic foundation that serves as a main point of social, political, financial, and educational life. It turned into a main place of learning for Muslims in the seventh century (Afsaruddin, 2016). The mosque kept on playing an important role both in schooling and worshipping until the ninth century (Cook, 1999). As Islam spread all through Arabia, the Prophet sent instructors to various Arab tribes to teach them the principles of Islam (Afsaruddin, 2016). As indicated by some researchers (Afsaruddin, 2016; Cook, 1999) schooling for the most part occurred at the mosque, therefore during the early time of Islam, schooling predominantly centered around fundamental religious lessons. After the ninth century, the "madrasa" existed as a place to teach Islamic education. (Cook, 1999). In Arabic madrasa literally means a place of study (Omar, 2011). As indicated by Omar (2011), it existed

after the ninth century as a community place for religious teaching. Over time, the madrasa formed into a more systematic place for teaching where schools were set up (Afsaruddin, 2007). The first Islamic schools were Nizamiya and al-Muntasiriya in Iraq, al-Azhar in Egypt, and at Cordoba in Spain (Talbani, 1996). The time in which these schools were set up (between the tenth and thirteenth hundreds of years) is thought to be the golden age of the Islamic realm in numerous perspectives, particularly with respect to modern science (Cook, 1999). While the Western world was relatively backward in knowledge, the Muslim world was creating advanced thoughts regarding science and art (Cook, 1999).

Ramadan (2009) notices that after some time the openness to information, logic and critical thinking in the Muslim world had disappeared and was replaced with a form of blindly following other scholars of what Cook (1999) calls "authoritative knowledge". In this manner, the vast majority of the exploration directed after the thirteenth century didn't show signs of critical thinking or new additions to the different fields of knowledge (Cook, 1999) Also, Cook (1999) points out that European colonization worsened the situation by disregarding the indigenous social standards. The European system concentrated on disconnecting the religion and state, as opposed to the Islamic perspective which incorporates all parts of life into a whole (Omar, 2011; Cook, 1999). In this manner, it can be inferred that the absence of autonomous thinking, scientific knowledge, political instability, and outside domination are all contributing variables in the decrease of Islamic education (Cook, 1999). Therefore, Ramadan (2009) claims, Muslim schools in the West were not capable of balancing between supporting their students to maintain their Islamic recognition and keeping up these students' national identity.

The first generation of Muslims who arrived in the West were effective in starting to teach Islamic values to their youth, despite of having restricted resources (Ramadan, 2009). At

the time, Islamic teaching was frequently offered in mosques and Islamic institutions over the weekends and nights (Ramadan, 2009). The educational programs comprised of fundamental recitation of the *Qur'an*, the prophet's life and his traditions (*Sunnah*), and Islamic law (Ramadan, 2009). Over time, as indicated by Ramadan (2009) Islamic instruction evolved to set up private Islamic schools, which are as of now across the board in Europe and North America to satisfy the expanding needs of Muslims. Ramadan (2009) claims that an examination of the Islamic schools in the West reveals that it concentrates on teaching the fundamental standards of Islam, yet without deeper understanding of the materials. Also, he points out that the curriculum concentrates on shielding their students from what they believe to be a negative impact of the Western society by detaching the Muslim students from interacting with non-Muslims.

Ramadan (2009) emphasizes that the educational programs of Islamic schools in the West should be adaptable and reflective of the truth of Western social orders which are turning out to be increasingly multicultural. The implication for this study is that the current Islamic studies curriculum at Al-Zahra school needs to discover a harmony between maintaining the essential principles of Islam and offering students the important abilities required to accommodate any pressures that may emerge between their religious norms and national norms.

This section provided a general review of the significance of education in Islam and the development of schooling in Islam. The next section of this chapter investigates the perspectives of Islamic education. It particularly focuses on the nature of Islamic education.

### **Philosophical Perspectives of Islamic Education**

It is important to mention that the Islamic essential principle is that each person consists of a spirit and a body which need education as a whole (Abdullah, 1982). The idea of division

between religion and education is new for Muslims (Abdullah, 1982). Deciding on the best educational approach, whether the Islam-based methodology is superior to secular education, is generally a debated topic, particularly in the West (Halstead, 2004), as I examine later in this chapter. The Islamic perspective is that Islam is a lifestyle which derives basis from the *Qur'an* and the lessons of Prophet Muhammad that emphasize on making a unified group (*Ummah*) (Cook, 1999). Thusly, while Islam perceives different identities, it unquestionably prioritizes the Islamic identity over others (Ramadan, 2009). Maintaining the Islamic identity is a challenge, as it might conflict with the nature of the multicultural arrangements in the West that are intended to suit diverse individuals from numerous social and religious foundations (Halstead, 2004).

Ramadan (2009) emphasizes that Islamic education ought to think about the setting in which such learning happens. To achieve the objective of critical thinking, the Islamic schools should not only maintain the Islamic identity, but also motivate the interaction between the teachers, students and all members of the society (Ramadan, 2009). As per some researchers (Merry, 2005) Islamic schools in the West are the primary option of numerous guardians for helping their youngsters frame an Islamic identity. Additionally, these guardians need schools to be open to issues of modest dress, offer sanctioned (halal) food, offer prayer arrangements, and teach character (Merry, 2005). Some Muslim guardians refuse Muslim schools for many reasons, mainly because of the potentiality of detaching their students from the wider society and the fear that these schools are intolerant to non-Muslims (Merry, 2005).

Muslim schools can potentially disconnect their students from integrating with the dominant society, however, all religious schools are similarly subject to this criticism (Ramadan, 2009). With that being said, the attention is more regularly on Muslim schools due to the irrational fear of Islam (Islamophobia) in the Western culture. Conversely, defenders of public

secular schools consider religious education to be a dismissal of liberal values (Omar, 2011). They claim that religious instruction is proposed to segregate students from the society and restricts these students' chance to take part in open discussions and develop critical thinking skills. However, some researchers like Zine (2007) claims that religious schools will enhance social harmony in a multi-social society, since they permit social and religious groups to keep up their religions and cultures, while public schools are focused on teaching liberal values. An Islam-based education system that minimizes the separation of the students could be an option for many parents (Zine, 2007).

The following section focuses on the views of Canada's multicultural system.

### **Historical Background and Overview of Canada's Multicultural System**

This section generally looks at multicultural education. Banks (2008) demonstrates that multiculturalism reflects justice, and acceptance of diverse dialects, religions, and social and ethnic gatherings in a diverse society. As indicated by Nye (2007), when looking at the definition of multiculturalism, it is vital to take into account the various settings in which it is applied. This is critical since multiculturalism brings different concerns that relate to different societal settings. The term multicultural describes: "The social characteristics and problems of governance posed by any society in which different cultural communities live together and attempt to build a common life while retaining some of their original identity" (Hall, 2000, p. 209). In this setting, multiculturalism ought not be managed from a liberal political point of view. The nation should apply in it in a way that correspond to the needs of various groups in various social settings (Nye, 2007).

With regards to education, as indicated by Banks (2008) multiculturalism endeavors to prepare cultural communities to understand and appreciate the cultures of other ethnic communities. It further plans to minimize the stereotypes against some minority groups (Banks, 2008). The Canadian multicultural system advanced throughout the years since it was initially presented in 1971 (Esses & Gardner, 1996). The objectives of Canada's multicultural policy are to advance equality and respect between all Canadians, regardless of their religious or ethnic values (Esses & Gardner, 1996). Also, as indicated by Esses and Gardner (1996), the policy aims at helping diverse groups protect their identity and minimizing challenges to their integration with the Canadian culture by, for example helping new migrants learn one of the official languages in Canada. In 1982 the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was enacted to guarantee freedom from segregation on the premise of sex, religion and race or ethnicity (Omar, 2011). In 1988 Canada's Multicultural Act was passed (Esses & Gardner, 1996). As reported by Omar (2011), this Act further reinforced multiculturalism as a key principle for Canadian culture and gave a direction to manage the government's obligations that are identified with multiculturalism.

To sum up, Canada's multicultural approach has developed throughout the years to react to the changing needs of the diverse Canadian culture. In the 1970s, the primary attention was to perceive differences; in the 1980s to manage differences; and in the 1990s to offer productive communication and engagement. Recently, the federal policy objectives in 2009 focuses on making a society that is more integrative (Ali & Bagley, 2015). Globally, regarding immigration and multiculturalism, Canada is seen among the most tolerant nations (Omar, 2011). Omar (2011) points out to the general solidarity of Jewish and Christian groups in Canada with Muslims after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. The Christian and

Jewish in Edmonton, Alberta connected with their Muslim neighbors by going to Friday prayer at Al-Rasheed Mosque and offering their support to the Muslim group.

### **Kymlicka's Liberal Multiculturalism Theory of Minority Rights**

Many research studies on Canadian multiculturalism are led by Kymlicka's liberal multicultural theory of minority rights (Modood, 2005). The theory is based on the liberal thought of individual freedom, but does not go far with regards to community rights. The theory gives a structure to look at the difficulties that minority groups face, and opportunities for both the majority and minority groups in Canada. Placing the study within this theory could help me to build up a clearer picture of the different challenges that can affect Islamic education in Canada.

Multiculturalism in the Canadian setting is established based on the liberal theory, and that displays a challenge to some communities that don't agree with this basis for multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 2001). According to Kymlicka (2001) the primary purpose behind such incredulity is based on the grounds that multiculturalism in Canada was initially created for well-integrated European people that had few differences as far as culture and dialect with the wider society. Kymlicka (2001) points out that multiculturalism in Canada was not at first planned to integrate Canadian Muslims into the Canadian society. As indicated by Kymlicka (2001): "It is the majority language that is used in public institutions, the majority holidays that are recognized in the public calendar, and the majority history that is taught in schools" (p. 43). As per Kymlicka (2001) and Zine (2007) the liberal multicultural system mainly concentrates on issues and needs that are identified with secular ethnic groups, particularly from Europe. It often does not suit the necessities of different religious minorities that see that the liberal multicultural and public education ignore their needs (Zine, 2007).

Secular multiculturalism in Canada initially suggested dechristianization of public schools with the plan to avoid harming other religious minorities (Zaman & Memon, 2016). What surprises Canadian policymakers is that, these minorities needed not the exclusion of religions, but rather the extension of these rights to them. They needed their cultures and religions to be included in the public schools. Bramadat and Seljak (2005) clarify that the religious studies ended with the secularization, even from subjects, for example, history and society. This prompted to the misrepresentation of the Canadian history, and also to religious illiteracy. “As a result, we have children who do not understand their religion, the religions of their fellows, and are unable to understand the religious underpinnings of the world events. Children are taught to respect what they don’t understand” (Bramadat & Seljak, 2005, p. 188).

Muslim minorities feel that the liberal multicultural addresses the needs of secular ethnic groups and marginalizes their own needs (Azmi, 2001). Azmi (2001) points out that limiting the role of religion from public affairs and education, and consigning it to the private and individual domain is viewed as an example of marginalization from the Islamic point of view. Zine (2007) claims that some Muslims have huge issues with liberal multiculturalism that lead them to underestimate religious values for the sake of secular comprehensiveness. The majority of these Muslims believes that Islam is the standard, against which all other thoughts must be valued. This is in accordance with the Islamic perspective that prioritizes the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* over all other perspectives.

Kymlicka (2001) classifies minority in Canada into two categories — the Québécois Francophones, and the native people of Canada, whom he calls national minorities, and he calls whoever remains of the minority groups the "ethnic groups". Kymlicka (2001) argues that, as founding groups, French Canadians and First Nations should be given certain rights that may not

be given to other ethnic groups. Since different outsiders arrived freely, at some point after Canada had been built up, they are assumed to integrate into the dominant society. The implication of Kymlicka's theory for various cultures is that it doesn't perceive and appreciate the quality of such societies. As he gives priority to individual freedom over community's rights, his strategy may display a difficulty in preserving the cultures and religions of ethnic groups, and integrating them into the dominant society. Kymlicka's theory, as mentioned before, is based on liberal and secular foundations. The theory proposes accommodating ethnic minority groups as long as they are in concurrence with Western political standards.

Race, as opposed to religion, has been the primary variable in molding Canada's multicultural framework since 1970 (Omar, 2011). Therefore, according to Omar (2011) religion is a challenging topic to deal with in Canada since it is regularly ignored and given little attention. In this way, any accommodation for minorities, particularly, religious communities, as indicated by Kymlicka must go in line with the common liberal political standards. To this context, Modood's (2005) point of view on accommodating religious communities in accordance with ethnic and racial groups is important to this talk.

Modood (2005) argues that multiculturalism in the West has led to isolate legislative issues from religion. He proposes that complete detachment of political issues from religion prevents the advancement of a balanced multicultural framework, since it ignores the vital role of religious communities. He emphasizes that the multicultural policy should not aim at pleasing a specific group, but instead must recognize the diversity in the racial, ethnic or religious values of minority communities. Furthermore, Modood (2005) proposes advancing solid citizenship that reinforces national identity, while maintaining diversity in different aspects. According to him, viewing multiculturalism as a civic thought that can be incorporated

into a comprehensive national identity, and connecting religion to the multicultural setting in line with race and ethnicity, could help Western countries to be more inclusive of the necessities of various groups including religious communities.

In summary, this chapter looks at the nature of Islamic education in a multicultural society. The literature also points out that the spread of education in Arabia was because of the spread of Islam, whose believers were motivated to look for knowledge. The Qur'an and the norms of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) are the center systems for establishing an Islamic education. The idea of separation between religion and secular education is new in the theory of education in Islam. The Islamic logic calls for integration, which aims at raising up a balanced individual who is loyal to God, as well as equipped with a modern education for success in life.

Canada's involvement with multiculturalism has been generally positive contrasted with other Western nations. Nonetheless, the literature proposes that although, Islam-based schools benefit from the multicultural framework in Canada, they likewise confront difficulties that originate from the pressures between the Islamic logic which calls for integration and the liberal multicultural education.

Generally, the literature review presented in this chapter recommends the further examination of the way of implementing Islam-based schools with regard to Canada's multicultural framework. My intention is to explore this topic through a case study of Al-Zahra school in British Columbia, Canada. In the following chapter, I set out the methodological approach that I used to attempt and fulfill the objectives of this study.

### **Chapter Three: Design and Methodology**

#### **Overall Approach and Rationale**

Qualitative research is a solid match for this study, which intends to build up a profound comprehension of Islam-based schools in Canada. It includes the use of data, like writings, records, interviews, and observations to comprehend and explain a phenomenon using several methodologies (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Generally, qualitative research is used when it is important to investigate an issue identified with a group of people (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative research methodology fits well with the aim for this study, since I want to gain a deep understanding of Islam-based schools in a multicultural setting as found at Al-Zahra school.

In this project, I used a single-case study design to conduct a document data analysis to answer the research questions of this study. Yin (2009) defines a case study as: “An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context” (p. 13). It involves an investigation of an individual, population, or an issue through a bounded framework (Bell, 1999). It is regularly led in a natural setting where the researcher invests prolonged time interviewing and reviewing documents (Stake, 1995)

There are different types for a case study method (Yin, 2009). The different types of a case study method are grouped as intrinsic or instrumental (Stake, 1995). An intrinsic case study is conducted when one is interested in a case for its own particular purpose. In this way, the objective is to build a rich comprehension of the particularities of a particular case without the intention to generalize to similar cases (Yin, 2009). The instrumental case study looks at a specific case, keeping in mind the end goal to understand other cases with comparable conditions. In this way, the case is instrumentally used to achieve something else other than understanding the particularity of that case’s circumstance (Stake, 1995). A fruitful instrumental case study

ought to give a deep comprehension of both the particularities of a case and the several interactive procedures that are at work (Yin, 2009). These particularities are utilized to give a clarification on an issue in the population (Stake, 1995).

This study adopted the instrumental model, to look at Al-Zahra school, in British Columbia. The chosen school is a representative of Islam-based schools in Canada. Findings from cases like this would give insights about the general population (Stake, 1995). This investigation, thus, added to a better comprehension of Islam-based schools in Canada and other comparable social settings. Also, it gave knowledge into how Islam-based schools in Canada maintain Islamic approach in a secular setting.

### **The Role and Orientation of the Researcher**

The researcher should clearly identify his/her values, and personal interests about the research topic. That means including information about the researcher's past experiences that provides the background data which will help the readers to better understand the subject investigated, the setting, and the research site (Creswell, 2014). I am a Muslim and a graduate of an Islamic school (k-12). I obtained my first university degree from United Arab Emirates University, which is located in a Muslim country. Since I moved to Canada in 2015, I joined the British Columbia Muslim Association (BCMA) in the city of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada and became a member of the association. I consider myself a product of the Islamic education system. I spent several years studying Islam before enrolling at United Arab Emirates University. I gained a solid knowledge of general Islamic studies. Being a member in the BCMA provided me with very different experience of serving Muslims who came from all parts of the globe. Hence, my interest in the topic of Islamic education in Canada stems from my personal history, my academic commitment, and my role as an active member of the BCMA.

Carrying on a research on how Islam-based education schools address the issues of Muslim people in Canada and what could work for them is both complicated and fascinating. My personal reason for conducting this study is to gain the prerequisite background about the current matter in Muslim schools in the Canadian context, particularly in British Columbia. This background helped to understand the learning environment in such schools and to look forward to planning one of my career goals of putting an inclusive educational approach to respect differences and celebrate diversity without marginalizing any groups in Canada.

### **Site Selection**

The British Columbia Muslim Association established the school in 1983 to satisfy the educational and religious needs of the Muslim students in British Columbia (Parents & Students Handbook, 2015). Initially founded as a private Muslim elementary school, it has become a standout amongst the most respected Muslim schools in North America (Parents & Students Handbook, 2015). According to the Handbook (2015), it is serving around 500 students from Kindergarten through Grade 7 (from 6 years of age to 13 years of age) in 2014.

The work of the British Columbia Muslim Association in building up Al-Zahra school is important since it outlines how dedicated this affiliation is to Islamic education, setting up the first Muslim school in Western Canada that motivates other schools in British Columbia. Students at Al-Zahra school are all Muslims; nonetheless, they originate from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, speaking to roughly twenty unique nationalities and no less than thirty different languages (Al-Zahra School: About Us, 2013).

The school offers the formal academic program prescribed for schools in British Columbia by the Ministry of Education in BC. Around 85% of the instructional time is dedicated to the public curriculum, and 15% is given to a privately created Islamic Studies, Qur'an lessons,

Arabic dialect and prayer at the mosque (Students & Parents Handbook, 2015). The Arabic dialect is taught in the school as a second dialect recognized the Ministry of Education in British Columbia, rather than French (Al-Zahra School: About Us, 2013). The school is licensed and %50 financially supported by the Government of British Columbia as an independent school (Parents & Students Handbook, 2015). Independent schools in British Columbia are managed by the Independent Schools Act (ISA) which balances an independent school's self-rule with provisional academic requirements (Ministry of Education, 2011).

The Islamic curriculum at Al-Zahra school is not incorporated with the academic curriculum. Rather, it has a unique curriculum that focuses on a scope of religious issues identified with the beliefs and practical aspects of Islam, and numerous themes identified with Islamic behavior (Students & Parents Handbook, 2015). In such cases, the school endeavors to discover a harmony between meeting the required academic program and protecting the Islamic identity.

As the oldest and most respected Muslim school in British Columbia, choosing Al-Zahra school is ideal in permitting me to investigate the goals and difficulties of implementing Islam-based school in a multicultural society in British Columbia. Additionally, I chose this school because of accessibility and availability of information. The documents of the school provided insights about the school's history, mission and vision, as well as various instructional programs. They maintain a neatly developed website compared to other schools' websites and documents that contain only basic information about the school, its locations, and educational programs

### **Data Collection Methods**

The primary research method for this study is document data analysis and some literature reviews. As indicated by Marshal and Rossman (1999), document analysis is: “A method for

describing and interpreting the artifacts of a society or social group” (p. 117). Using this method, I collected various kinds of documents, including, Students and Parents Handbooks, information from the school website, monthly newsletters, and Islamic textbooks used at the school. The first three documents are found publicly on the school website, but e-books for the Islamic textbooks are obtained through my personal involvement with the school.

Document analysis can be performed without interfering with the setting, which is an advantage of this method. However, some documents may provide misleading or non-sufficient information that would hinder the deeper understanding of an issue. Consequently, as Bell (1999) clarifies: “The guiding principle in document analysis is that everything should be questioned. Qualities of skepticism as well as empathy need to be developed” (p. 116). This is to say that a researcher who is using this method as the main data collection method, should always review the documents carefully and critically. I invested a prolonged time looking at different documents, and framing a deeper comprehension about Al-Zahra school and its operations.

The official site of the school gives a general understanding about the school's history, mission, and different instructional projects. The Students and Parents Handbook outlines topics such as school's central goals and philosophy, admission guidelines, guardians and school correspondences, standards of good practice, dress code, and other school-related issues. Additionally, the handbook concentrates on issues like, discipline, homework rules, grading rules, and general school operations. As part of the document review, I analyze the school newsletter. The monthly newsletters share school information and updates with different stakeholders. It showcases the students' accomplishments and advances the school's values.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Qualitative data analysis can be used to generate statements about categories and themes, with the goal to reduce the gathered information to a reasonable size (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). I used Marshall and Rossman's (1999) logical techniques (the six stages) to create themes and categories for the study. The analysis of my data falls into six stages. (1) Organizing the information: I read the collected data many times to get a general understanding and do minor altering. (2) Generating categories, themes and patterns: This stage plans to: "Identify salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings together" (p. 154). After reviewing the data precisely, I identified certain themes. (3) Coding the data: After generating common themes, I coded the data with titles for better organization. (4) Testing emergent understandings: This is the opportunity to look again at the data and decide on its value and centrality. As categories are emerging, I understood the meanings and relations between the data. At this point, I was able to draw categories of related data together to filter the main themes. (5) Searching for alternative explanations: To present a reasonable argument, I rethought about the identified categories and themes to discover other conceivable clarifications. (6) Writing the findings: After investing time in various stages of data analysis, I began drafting and editing, using different writing strategies. For example, I gathered the information and the essential data from the three Islamic studies textbooks used at Al-Zahra school. At this stage, I read and re-read all units in the textbooks, and after that I recognized common patterns. All lessons that fit under a certain pattern were recognized and included into the relating pattern.

Document analysis is essential when leading a research about schools where the objective is to understand the nature and goals of the curriculum, textbooks and policy documents (Ali & Bagley, 2015). To sum up, qualitative research methods are utilized to shape a more profound

comprehension of the setting, the unique circumstance, and the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2014).

### **Ethical Considerations**

When a research study is conducted, ethical issues arise (Creswell, 2014). One ethical issue in my study is guaranteeing anonymity of the school name. The Islamic textbooks used at Al-Zahra school are obtained privately through my personal involvement with the school. Another important issue is to ensure that the data collected are stored in a secure place, and kept for a reasonable period after the completion of the research study (Creswell, 2014). Seiber (1998), for instance, suggested keeping the information in a secure place for five to 10 years for further revisions if necessary. For this study, I will store the information on my PC for five years. All information will be destroyed by the end of the five-year time frame as suggested by Seiber (1988), to guarantee confidentiality of data.

### **Procedures to Address Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Reliability and validity are very important in any research study. Reliability addresses the accuracy of the research methods utilized for collecting information (Lewis, 2009). Using triangulation where researchers utilize diverse methods and sources on a particular issue expands the reliability and quality of the findings. Validity addresses whether the study measures what it addressed will be measured. It focuses on the suitability of a method to the findings emerging from the use of the method. This incorporates consistent justification for the researcher's interpretation of the data and the different reasons behind the interpretation (Lewis, 2009).

In this study, I applied triangulation, through utilizing numerous sources to give validating proof to the insights generated from the findings (Creswell, 2014). I attempted to

guarantee the authenticity of the documents through a comprehensive examination of the three Islamic studies textbooks, the school mission, and other relevant documents. Looking for supporting documents, including materials published by the same individual or organization that reference same issue can give confirmation that the documents are authentic (Lewis, 2009). Furthermore, I enhanced the accuracy of the findings by using an auditor to review the project to objectively assess the project throughout the research process. To make the results more realistic and richer, I used thick descriptions to convey the findings.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitation of a single-case design is its inability to provide a generalizing conclusion (Stake, 1995). Personally, I think interviews with individuals who are involved in delivering or receiving the Islam curriculum in a secular setting, would help to obtain a deeper understanding of the issue on hand. However, with respect to the nature of this project and the timeframe, interviews were not chosen for data collection. Therefore, I consider this as a limitation in my study. In terms of the delimitations, I delimited the study to the review publicly available documents and information obtained privately through my personal involvement with the school. Additionally, the review of the school newsletter will be delimited to issues published in 2016.

This chapter addresses the research methodology used to conduct this study. It establishes that qualitative research methodology using document analysis for a case study is an appropriate methodology for this study. This chapter also presents some strategies for validating and ensuring the reliability of the data findings. It further addresses the role of the researcher and anticipated ethical issues. The following chapter focuses on data analysis.

### Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter explores the nature of an Islamic education as found at Al-Zahra Islamic school as well as some difficulties, within the context of Canada's multicultural society. The data presented in this chapter is responding to the following research questions:

- What are the nature and goals of the Islamic curriculum at Al-Zahra school?
- What are the difficulties facing Islam-based schools in Canada's secular society?

#### Islamic Studies Curriculum at Al-Zahra Islamic School

In responding to the first question, two themes were generated. The first theme focuses on teaching basic principles and manners of Islam, as well as offering a safe environment at the school to practice Islam. The second theme focuses on preserving the Islamic identity.

**Principles and manners of Islam at Al-Zahra school.** The Islamic studies curriculum at the school concentrates on teaching the fundamental standards of Islam, offering a safe space for students to practice their faith and modeling Islamic behavior (Al-Zahra School: About Us, 2013). There are three Islamic textbooks that are used at Al-Zahra school. The school Islamic textbooks show students the standards of how to worship Allah, his Prophet, and how to apply what they learn about their faith consistently in their life (Abdul-Aziz, 2011; Emerick, 2011; Philips, 2005). Furthermore, the curriculum of the textbooks emphasizes educating their students to recite du'as (supplications) for various religious occasions, for example, prior and after eating, and the five pillars of Islam. The five pillars of Islam are as per the following: to have faith in one God (Allah), to pray five times per day, to donate 2.5% of a person's annual saving towards those who are in need, to fast the month of Ramadan from sunrise to sunset (the ninth month of the Islamic calendar), and to go for pilgrimage in Mecca, Saudi Arabia for those who can afford it (Bowker, 2000). Accepting the above pillars of Islam is required upon grown-up Muslims. The

Students & Parents' Handbook (2015) supports the above perspectives that the curriculum educates the students about the five pillars of Islam. For example, all the students at Al-Zahra school get the opportunity to perform the noon prayer every school-day at the Richmond masjid (mosque) which is the oldest and biggest mosque in British Columbia. Also, before the month of Ramadan, the school encourages the students to think about those people who are less fortunate and live in hunger and poverty in many parts of the world. The school principal emphasizes the importance of the holiest month of the Islamic calendar in the handbook and says: "As we are in the holiest month of the Islamic Calendar, we . . . must aspire to be more respectful, more generous, self-disciplined and more caring about others" (Yunush, 2015, p. 1).

A careful examination of the textbooks of Islamic studies affirmed that they concentrate on subjects that are enhancing the students' Islamic belief system and manners (Abdul-Aziz, 2011; Emerick, 2011; Philips, 2005). For instance, the themes mentioned in these book talk about the significance of worshiping God from an Islamic point of view in this world and in the hereafter. The books also represent the acts of worship that Muslims ought to do in their daily life like the five pillars of Islam, which are commitments of grown-up Muslims as I mentioned earlier. Additionally, the books present themes in relation to the family structure, legal and illegal issues, for example, eating halal food and preserving the female clothing regulation (hijab). Some themes in the textbooks include respecting others, helping those in need, and the significance of staying away from negative conduct, for example, cheating, lying, and disregarding others. The school website confirms the findings of this study's literature review, that Islamic education concentrates on building up a sense of community (Ummah) that bonds together under the commands of the Qur'an and the tradition of Prophet Muhammad.

In addition, the objectives for the school are centered around preparing students for post-secondary education, cultivating good manners in light of Islamic standards, and offering a strong Islamic studies curriculum that raises up students with progressive personalities (Students and Parents' Handbook, 2015).

**Islamic identity at Al-Zahra school.** The reinforcing of Islamic identity at the school is a vital segment of the school's Islamic studies curriculum, as demonstrated by the students' achievements and activities that are reported in the school newsletters (2016). As indicated by the newsletters (2016) the school helps their students to preserve their Islamic and cultural identity in a Western culture through different events and practices. It is clear from the newsletters that protecting the Islamic identity and of students living in the West is a high need.

The Students & Parents' Handbook (2015) affirms the literature review for this study that Islamic schools like Al-Zahra school help their students preserve their identity and the culture of their (Ummah), which is the reason why many Muslim guardians send their youngsters to Islamic schools (Merry, 2010). Researchers of Islamic education propose that it is fundamental to build up schools that give an Islamic point of view on instruction for Muslim students in the West (Merry, 2010; Zine, 2007).

The mission statement goes in line with the importance of preserving the Islamic Identity, which states:

The school provides the foundation based on Islam for life-long learning and prepares students to assume their responsibilities as adults. The school is committed to developing in students the attitude, skills and knowledge that are necessary for leading positive,

satisfying lives, and becoming contributing members of the community and Canadian society at large (Students & Parents' Handbook, 2015, p. 14)

The following section presents some internal challenges facing Islam-based schools in Canada, as found at Al-Zahra school, as well as some external challenges of practicing Islam in the wider public context of Canada's multicultural.

### **Difficulties Facing Islam- based Schools in Canada**

In this section, I organize the findings into two themes that I generated and concluded from the findings. The first theme is the internal challenges facing Al-Zahra school in relation to multicultural issues. The data collected in this theme comes from policy documents. The second theme is the external challenges facing Islam-based schools from performing their faith in the public. The data collected in this theme comes from literature reviews.

**Internal challenges.** While the Islamic studies curriculum at AL-Zahra school teaches respect towards Muslims and non-Muslims alike, an analysis of the curriculum provides very little evidence of how the curriculum, particularly elevates such respect to non-Muslims, or gives the essential skills and information for students to respect non-Muslim beliefs and social frameworks (Abdul-Aziz, 2011; Emerick, 2011; Philips, 2005). The program appears to take a narrow approach towards developing multicultural competence, mainly focusing on the Muslim community and the issues that concern its members. Although students at the school represent a diverse Muslim group, the objective of Canada's multicultural framework is to enable students to adequately integrate into a bigger and more diverse society (Ali & Bagley, 2015). In other words, Muslim students from Islamic schools in Canada should interact with different cultural and religious groups beyond the cultures within the school context where the only religion shared by

this multicultural group is Islam. This brings up the issue of whether teaching the Islamic values and conduct is sufficient to advance multicultural competence. Multicultural competence is the ability to understand, respect, and integrate with people from different cultural and religious groups other than one's own (Kite, 2015).

The students at Al-Zahra school are all Muslims. However, engaging with people who share your faith and values is not the same as communicating with non-Muslims in a more diverse Canadian setting (Ali & Bagley, 2015). The Islamic studies curriculum at the school concentrates on promoting an Islamic behavior, advancing solidarity among Muslims everywhere throughout the world, and celebrating Islamic occasions only (Abdul-Aziz, 2011; Emerick, 2011; Philips, 2005). None of the documents from the school noted that the school teaches about non-Islamic cultures. It is clear from taking a closer look at the school's textbooks and other documents such as the school newsletters (2016) and the Students & Parents's Handbook (2015) that Al-Zahra school gives high need to maintain students' Islamic identity, offering a safe space to practice Islam as a lifestyle, and discouraging their students from attending non-Islamic celebrations, for example, Halloween, Christmas, and Valentine's Day to shield them from non-Islamic impacts.

An examination of the school documents reflects little proof of engagements with multiculturalism. The main goals of the Islamic studies curriculum at the school are to protect the Islamic character and identity of their students (Abdul-Aziz, 2011; Emerick, 2011; Philips, 2005). For instance, each of the three textbooks used at the school contains a unit called the Islamic set of principles. The lessons in this unit intend to enhance positive manners, learning that will help the students to reinforce their Islamic personality and maintain their beliefs. The followings are some examples of the subjects that are mentioned in the set of principles:

submission to guardians, respecting seniors, welcoming visitors, protecting the privileges of neighbors, genuineness and honesty with everyone, care and love for children, helping poor people, and equity to all. It is apparent from the above examination of the textbooks that there are some values that can be viewed as universal values. By extension, such values can indirectly advance students' multicultural capability. Notwithstanding, an Islamic education in a multicultural society like Canada ought to be more reflective of the reality of the Canadian multicultural society (Omar, 2011).

In a school system where the emphasis is on teaching a particular group of students about a particular belief system or culture, and the opportunity of communicating with the more diverse society is restricted, the school, especially a Muslim school, is regularly blamed for isolating their students from cooperating with the more diverse society (Ali & Bagley, 2015). The disengagement in this setting means constraining the interaction and social coordination of the Muslim students with the more diverse Canadian culture, which can be detrimental to students' participation in social and economic life

The general picture here is that Canadian Muslims, including Al-Zahraa school, agree with the Canadian multicultural society, as long as it goes in line with their religious and social desires. Notwithstanding, their disappointment with the Canadian multicultural framework starts with regards to tolerating some celebrations in Canada, for example, Halloween, Christmas or Valentine's Day that negate Islamic principles. As of now, it appears that the school is not giving the fundamental skills and information that will help their students develop the skills to engage effectively into a multicultural society. Therefore, there may be potential gaps and conflicts between Islamic education, as taught at the school and Canada's multicultural setting.

**External challenges.** Performing Islam in public presents challenges that are partially because of some external pressures from the dominant culture, and mostly because of the negative images cultivated by the media (Espiritu, 2016). Performing the five daily prayers and preserving the Islamic dress code (hijab) for female in public are some examples of these challenges (Zine, 2007).

The difficulties in practicing Islam in public are affirmed in other studies. For instance, one survey found that 73% of Canadians believe the niqab is an insult to the dignity of women (“The niqab debate”, 2015). Such perspectives about Islam are not legitimate, and contradict the qualities advanced by Canada's Charter of Rights (1984) which guarantees equality for all, regardless of their religious, social, and racial foundations.

Since 9/11, biases and generalizations about Muslims, in relation to their religious practices and beliefs, became common in North America (Khan, 2009). Khan (2009) presents some surveys which demonstrate that 37% of Canadians hold a negative perspective of Islam, and 21% of them specify the treatment of women as the reason for their perspectives. Khan (2009) explains that this is on account of those surveyed who see that Islam persecutes women, and the hijab (headscarf) is an indication of such mistreatment. The difficulties confronted by Muslim students in performing Islam in the public and keeping up their Islamic identity are shared by Muslim youth going to government funded schools in the United States and Canada (Khan, 2009). According to Khan (2009), stereotyping, discrimination, and societies that discourage Muslim qualities and convictions lead many Muslim students to experience marginalization, and a sense of otherness.

Issues like immigration, increasing numbers of Muslims in the west, and fears of terrorist attack raise concerns with security in numerous Western countries (Moens & Collacott, 2008).

The regular misrepresentation of Islam in the media highlights and sustains the general fear about the nature of the Muslim religion and lifestyle (Espiritu, 2016). Apart from the misrepresentation, Muslims, including Canadian Muslims have the duty to disassociate themselves from terrorist acts committed under the name of Islam (Zine, 2007).

Media often present negative information about Islam and Muslims, especially in relation to women's rights (Soltani, 2016). The *Globe and Mail* (April 17, 2007) demonstrates one example of these increased tensions through the Québec case in which young Muslim girls were not permitted to participate in a Taekwondo competition as they wore headscarves. According to Zine (2007) the unwillingness of some Muslims to acknowledge the liberal view does not imply that Muslims are against multiculturalism, as the Muslim group itself is very multicultural, however, they may require a sort of multiculturalism that gives sufficient space to religion. Zine (2007) claims that marginalization among Canadian Muslims have slowed their integration in the society, despite the fact that the larger number of Muslims are interested in integration. Khan (2009) argues that a balanced approach by the media would frame a positive perspective of women's rights in Islam. Spreading more positive news about Muslim female in Canada can advance a shared understanding and resilience in Canadian culture (Khan, 2009).

Recently, Islamophobia was cited as the reason behind the killings of innocent Muslim Canadians in Québec. The *Guardian* (January 31, 2017) reported that six men were killed and 19 more were critically injured while praying in a shooting at a Quebec City mosque on January 29, 2017. Over recent months, the mosque had been targeted in a series of attacks against the Muslim community (Kassam, 2017). Within just three years, the number of police-reported hate crimes against Muslims in Canada has more than doubled, from 45 in 2012 to 99 in 2014 (Paperny, 2016). Additionally, the 2016 Environics survey of Muslims in Canada found that one

in three Canadian Muslims reported experiencing discrimination due to their religion. To raise concerns about increasing Islamophobia in the world, the UN General Assembly held a conference in December, 2016 to embrace resolutions that will advance a worldwide dialogue about religious, social, and universal values. The resolution advances resilience among all individuals in the world, and aims to improve better understanding among people of various cultures and religions (“General Assembly Adopts Resolutions”, 2016).

Although the Canadian Multiculturalism Act includes religious diversity, in reality little consideration is given to religious groups in Canada, particularly those following Islam. Thus, there are conflicts between safeguarding Muslims' identity and the multicultural approach with respect to minority religious needs. Modood (2005) contends that isolating the state from religion prevents the creation of a balanced multicultural system, since it ignores the role of religious groups in any nation. He also contends that religion ought to be treated with a similar regard that is given to other factors like gender and race. This point of view of adding religion to the multicultural conversation along with gender and race, may help Western nations to be more accommodating to the needs of various groups including religious groups.

This chapter focuses on presenting the nature of Islamic education at Al-Zahra school and the challenges facing Islam-based schools in the context of Canada's multicultural setting, as found at Al-Zahra school. The Islamic education offered at the school provides students with the basic foundations of Islam at an early age in a friendly and safe environment. Additionally, the school strives to connect students to their cultural heritage and seeks to develop in students the qualities necessary to practice Islam on a daily basis.

At the same time, the school faces internal challenges related to multicultural issues. Even though students at the school are very diverse linguistically, racially, and culturally, the

school overlooked the fact that they are all Muslims. Therefore, the school would need to take into account the religious diversity and the importance of teaching students to interact with the wider society to enhance the national identity. Also, the school faces some external challenges in practicing Islam in public due to negative media presentations and wrong public perceptions. However, I think that the internal difficulties are not as challenging as the external pressures.

The next chapter focuses on general analysis and discussions of the findings. It attempts to bring all the findings together in order to recommend a better understanding of the multicultural competence among the students of Al-Zahra school.

### **Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions**

This chapter concentrates on overall analysis and examinations of the findings. The chapter uses Ramadan's model for curriculum development which is based on three key principles that can help Islamic schools in the West find a harmony between protecting students' Islamic identity and maintaining their national identity.

From the findings presented in the previous chapter, I concluded that Islamic education at Al-Zahra school disregarded a fundamental element, which is to foster acceptance of religious and cultural acceptance. This is an issue that could be questioned: What is the connection between Islamic values and Canadian values? Do Islamic schools in Canada teach students about integrating in the society? Is following Islam as a religion alone adequate to help students gain multicultural acceptance in Canada? Despite the fact that students at Al-Zahra are a diverse group in terms of their languages, cultures, nationalities, and races, they are all Muslims, and Islam is the most significant uniting component among them.

After analyzing policy documents and Islamic textbooks, I found that the school has not been successful in helping students balance between preserving their Islamic values and building their Canadian identity at the same time. This difficulty is not restricted to this school only, but it is a common challenge that other Muslim schools in the West confront as indicated by Ramadan (2016). I believe that instead of educating Muslim students to dismiss non-Islamic celebrations in Canada, it would be useful to help them perceive that different views and religious beliefs are as vital as their own. A fair-minded approach towards different cultures and religions may help them gain the essential skills for multicultural competence (Ali & Bagley, 2015).

Any religious education ought to begin with the question of what sort of learner-citizen it aims to nurture and what are the goals behind education in the 21st century (Bramadat & Seljak,

2005). Ramadan (2016) gives a valuable educational model for Islamic education that he situates around three key objectives: education of the heart, education of the mind, and education for personal growth. In regards to the education of the heart, the emphasis is on reinforcing the students' consciousness with God and additionally awaken them to be aware of their duties, not just to themselves but also to their relatives, communities, and the humankind at large. The point in the education of the mind is to expand students' comprehension of the principle messages and implications of the Qur'an, the lessons of Prophet Mohammed, and develop a knowledge of the environment and the human beings who live in it in order to find the way of faithfulness in everyday life. The third objective, education for personal growth, is to empower students to build up the important capabilities and information to be autonomous in their lives and their decisions.

Based on the findings presented in the previous chapter, Al-Zahra school seems to focus more on the education of the heart and the education of the mind. It gives little attention towards the education for personal growth. For students to achieve the goal of independent thinking, the Islamic curriculum in the West should provide a body of teaching that encourages interacting with the wider society as culturally competent students to keep an open mind to all the possibilities, similarities and differences.

Ramadan (2016) emphasizes in his model that studies of the Qur'an, conventions of the Prophet, and Islamic manners need to consider the setting in which such learning happens. His model takes into consideration the context where such model is going to be applied. Ramadan (2016) adds that: " We should add to it an in-depth knowledge of the environment, adjusted for various age groups, familiarity with the history of the country, knowledge of the institutions, study of the culture, social dynamics, and the political landscape, and so on" (para. 4).

Creating multicultural competences imply that both Islamic and public schools will take part in a productive dialogue in order to integrate together peacefully with each other and respect their differences as strengths, not something to avoid. (Banks, 2008). Such a positive two-way dialogue between Canadian Muslims and non-Muslims from an early age will bridge the gap and reduce external challenges (Omar, 2011). As Modood (2005) states, any positive change must originate from both parties, because multiculturalism is a two-way dialogue.

### **Recommendations**

Personally, I think it's a shared responsibility between the Islamic schools in Canada and the public schools to help Muslim students overcome the internal and external challenges facing the Muslim community. Simply placing the responsibility for integrating Islamic students into the society or facing Islamophobia on the shoulder of minority groups is unfair and unrealistic approach, and one that cannot bring a positive result. In the following section I provide recommendations for the Islamic schools, the public schools, as well as future researchers.

**Recommendations for the Islamic schools.** Islamic schools should have interaction opportunities with public schools. More engagement in extracurricular activities, visiting libraries and public sports fields. Taking Muslim students to Canadian public high schools after they have gained the fundamental principles of Islam at lower grades gives students a chance to blend with individuals of various religious and social groups. This is in accordance with the message of Islam, which supports its followers to collaborate with the society at large and to contribute to the well-being of such societies (Markovic & Yasmeen, 2016). In other words, Islam is not an obstacle to keep people away from being part of the mainstream Canadian society and the best human beings they possibly can be. Markovic and Yasmeen (2016) further explain that if people are true to their identities and don't compromise their beliefs, there is no problem

with being part of the society and maintaining a Canadian identity along with Islamic identity. This is a social duty, as well as an Islamic one. In this manner, when Muslims are more mindful of the spiritual message of Islam, they can smoothly integrate into the Canadian society.

Overall, I found the Islamic curriculum at Al-Zahra school to be limited to the memorization of the Qur'an, following the traditions of the prophet Mohammed and Islamic manners. I think that the school overlooks multiculturalism in Canada. The Islamic textbooks are suitable to be taught for students living in a predominately Islamic country and not in a society in which Muslims are considered a minority group. The Islamic curriculum at Al-Zahraa school ought to extend its conversation about respecting others, their rights, convictions, and communities. Since Islamic values by and large incorporate respect for others, this could give a chance to develop the idea of being a decent Muslim to incorporate values that advance good citizenship, respect beliefs in relation to religious diversity, and nurture students to be good Canadians and decent Muslims. Along these lines, this research proposes a modification of Islamic education to mirror the values of multiculturalism. Such an adjustment could be done through the following examples:

1. Extending the curricular unit of Islamic conduct as practiced at Al-Zahra school to incorporate extra units that highlight various cultures and religious groups in Canada and worldwide. These cultures could incorporate the First Nations, English, French, Chinese, Indian, indigenous people, and other cultures. Furthermore, such educational program ought to be delivered within the setting of Canada's multicultural society by trained educators who are knowledgeable and capable of helping students to develop multicultural competence.

2. Joining the multicultural discussion. This approach is emphasized in a verse of the Qur'an that reads: "O humankind! Without a doubt, we have made you from male and female and made you into countries and tribes so that you may know each other" (Qur'an 49:13). Knowing each other involves joining the discussion without fear. Therefore, one should be loud enough so the other can listen, but also be mindful to hear different voices (Omar, 2011).
3. Linking Islamic studies with the Canadian social studies will advance the students' integration within the Canadian society. There are some similarities and differences between Islamic values and Canadian values. I believe more focus should be placed on finding general similarities between the values taught in Islamic studies and the values that are taught in the Canadian social studies curriculum. Here are three examples
  - Justice and equality: In Islam, justice is a moral virtue and an attribute of human personality, as it is in the Western tradition (Shakir, 2016). The Quranic guidelines of justice and equality rise above considerations of race, religion, color, and faith, as Muslims are directed to be just to their friends and enemies alike, and to be just at all levels, as the Quran puts it: "O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even if it be against yourselves, your parents, and your relatives, or whether it is against the rich or the poor" (Quran 4:135). According to Canada's Multicultural Act, all Canadians, whether by birth or by choice, should enjoy equal status, are entitled to the same rights, powers and benefits and are liable to the same obligations and duties (Esses & Gardner, 1996)
  - Peace: Islam promotes making peace, being in a mutually peaceful environment, safety, being secure, finding peace, and well-being or being far

from danger (Shakir, 2016). The very first verse of the Quran reads: “In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the most Compassionate” (Quran 1:1). This verse, which is repeated in the Quran 114 times, shows the spirit and message of peace. Canada is recognized as a peaceful, welcoming and safe society (Bonikowsky, 2016). Canada is committed to increasing its support towards peace operations and supporting its mediation efforts, preventing conflicts and engaging in post-conflict reconstruction.

- Respect: Islam states that it is the responsibility of each individual to treat all creation with respect, honor and dignity (Stacey, 2014). Respect in Islam involves treating others the way we expect to be treated, regardless of their race, gender, age or religion. Similarly, Canadians understand and respect linguistic duality, ethnic and cultural diversity and respect for Aboriginal culture (Sinha, 2015). Also, all minority groups regardless of their ethnicity, religion or language should not be denied the privilege to enjoy their own culture, to maintain and practice their own religion or to speak their own language in Canada.

The examples above represent both Islamic values and Canadian values. Personally, I think the two shouldn't be mutually exclusive. It's not that by holding onto Islamic values that Canadian Muslims are letting go of their Canadian values. Rather, the two support each other in a way that by being a good Muslim, means being a good Canadian.

Integrated citizens would not hide their religion, nor would they feel subordinate to the rest of society (Markovic & Yasmeen, 2016). This will encourage Canadian Muslims to add to the prosperity of Canada rather than basically live inactively within Canada's borders. Integrated

Canadian Muslims have demonstrated that they can effectively adjust in the wider society while still upholding their religious identity. Whenever Muslims settled and wherever lived they tended to engage effectively with their adopted society, adding to both individual and community life.

**Recommendations for the public schools.** Now if the Islamic schools in BC are willing to modify their curriculum of Islamic education and follow Ramadan's model (2016), is the external environment in the Canadian mainstream society open to the success of this project? How can public schools collaborate with Islamic schools to help their students integrate in the Canadian society? To answer these questions, I provide some recommendations for the public schools in the next section

The student population in Canadian public schools originate from a wide range of languages, religious, faiths, and cultures. As Canadian society becomes more culturally diverse, these schools must offer strategies to create a safe space and to teach how to tolerate and accept individuals of various cultures. This could be done by also focusing on finding general similarities between the Islamic values and the Canadian values. For example, to handle the issue of Islamophobia for instance, Canadian public schools ought to present Islam as a religion of peace as opposed to the negative images perpetuated about Islam in the media. This approach may reduce external challenges put on Muslim students practicing Islam in public, and will support their positive engagement with the Canadian culture. In this regard, the Muslim Educational Network Training and Outreach Service (MENTORS), a non-profit association situated in Toronto, created resource kits for schools as a response of the negative reaction against the Muslims in order to move beyond racism and Islamophobia (Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014). The MENTORS is supported by the Ministry of Canadian Heritage in a joint effort with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation. Its objectives are to counter Islamophobia and related

types of oppression, for example, bigotry and xenophobia, through public education by creating resource kits to help students understand and challenge prejudice (Markovic & Yasmeen, 2016).

In regards to accommodating the religious practices of Muslim students, Muslim students in Ontario are allowed to hold weekly prayer gatherings on Fridays. For instance, Virk (2017) reports that in Ontario, the educational director of Mississauga chose to permit Muslim students in public schools to give Friday prayer sermons without an earlier screening of the sermon's content. Furthermore, he is permitting Muslim students to gather in groups for daily prayers in the schools. As far as I know, no time and safe space are offered to Muslim students at BC public schools to practice prayers. Therefore, public schools in BC should follow similar steps towards accommodating the religious practices of their students, including the Muslim students by offering a space to host the Muslim prayer sessions.

Also, government agencies, and the media ought to propose policies to confront Islamophobia and present Islam as a religion of peace and social justice, and not from the negative pictures which present Islam as a religion in light of extremism (Ali & Bagley, 2015).

**Recommendations for future researchers.** In this paper, I wanted to present an in-depth analysis of the nature of Islamic education in Canada with a focus on how one Islam-based school teaches Islamic values in a secular society. However, this research is based on a single case study. Therefore, it can't be representative of other Canadian Islamic schools. Using different data collection methods, as well as obtaining and comparing data from a larger sample of Muslim schools across Canada may reveal additional insights or difficulties in offering Islamic education in the Canadian context. Such studies turn out to be more vital in light of the fact that Canadian-Muslims are still among the least studied minorities in Canada (Omar, 2011). Also, more wide-ranging studies may reveal some insight into how Canada's multicultural

approaches could better accommodate the needs and convictions of many religious minorities who feel isolated due to their religious practices.

A follow-up study is required to analyze the degree of external challenges experienced by Muslim students. It is helpful to provide an in-depth analysis of the role of the media and worldwide incidents in negatively presenting Muslim students who practice their religion in the public. Also, future researchers can compare how the experiences of Muslim students who graduated from Muslim schools vary from the experiences of Muslim students who graduated from Canadian public schools. Moreover, it would be interesting to compare the similarities and differences between the challenges faced by faith-based schools in a multicultural society.

There is an opportunity for further research to propose an integrated Islamic school's curriculum to reflect diverse values of this society to help students become full participants who respect cultural and religious values of non-Muslim groups in Canada. For instance, Ramadan's model sets three key objectives that provide guidance towards teaching Islamic education in the West. Thus, further research can propose an application of this model in the context of Canada's multicultural society to help Muslim students identify themselves as Canadian Muslims.

### **Conclusion**

There are few studies that examine Islamic schools in Canada. Among these limited studies, few highlight the multifaceted nature of teaching Islamic studies in a Canadian setting. This research is an endeavor to add to the limited body of knowledge through the case study of Al-Zahra school. This research is significant not only because it can help Islamic schools balance Islamic values and national Canadian identity, but also because it provides strategies for public schools to understand and accept the rights and religions of minority groups.

There are some challenges that could create conflicts between Islamic education and Canada's multicultural framework. Islamic education has not been successful in helping students find a balance between preserving their Islamic values and Canadian identity at the same time. Also, negative views cultivated by the media about Islam add to such problems. Solving these challenges is not only the responsibility of Islamic schools, but also the public schools because intolerance and hatred negate the principles on which Canada was founded.

To solve these problems and meet the requirements of Canada's liberal framework, as well as teaching Islamic studies, the study used Ramadan's model, which proposes a harmony between Islamic and Canadian identity. The current educational curriculum at Al-Zahra school concentrates on maintaining students' Islamic identity while discouraging their students from attending non-Islamic celebrations. Instead, the school should help students to find connections between similar Islamic and Canadian values, as well as perceiving that different views and religious beliefs are as vital as their own. Applying Ramadan's model at Al-Zahra school will help students have a multicultural competence, in order to understand and acknowledge that non-Muslim values or convictions are as significant as their own. As a result, Muslims and non-Muslims will live together as individuals who integrate peacefully with one another in a multicultural world. Additionally, Islamic and public schools should have interaction opportunities. Such a positive two-way dialogue between Canadian Muslims and non-Muslims from an early age will bridge the gap and reduce external tensions

Becoming more accommodating and mindful of the cultural, religious and secular values in the mainstream society when confronted with challenges can encourage "new ways to re-forge human diversity into human solidarity" (Bauman, 2002, p. 61).

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