Georgia State University
Digital Archive @ GSU

Psychology Honors Theses | Department of Psychology

5-6-2012

Islamic Parochial Education in the United States: A Study of Two Atlanta-Area Schools

Sacha M. St-Onge Ahmad
Georgia State University, ahmadsacha@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/psych_hontheses

Recommended Citation
St-Onge Ahmad, Sacha M., "Islamic Parochial Education in the United States: A Study of Two Atlanta-Area Schools" (2012). *Psychology Honors Theses.* Paper 13.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Psychology at Digital Archive @ GSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Archive @ GSU. For more information, please contact digitalarchive@gsu.edu.

ISLAMIC PAROCHIAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES:

A STUDY OF TWO ATLANTA-AREA SCHOOLS

by

SACHA MARIE ST-ONGE AHMAD

Under the Direction of Dr. Abbas Barzegar

ABSTRACT

Through a comparative study of two Atlanta full-time Muslim parochial schools, this study examines Muslim approaches to Islamic education by analyzing school leaders' secular and religious goals, their main obstacles and concerns, and what they believe the best practices are. The study explores leaders' visions of socialization and community development by juxtaposing findings from two schools. In order to answer the aforementioned questions, this study 1) assesses national trends in K-12 Islamic parochial schools across the United States through related research, 2) engages Muslim leaders from both institutions through semi-formal interviews, and 3) supplements findings through an extended period of participant observation.

INDEX WORDS: Islamic school, Socialization, Tarbiyah, Atlanta,
Parochial education, American Muslim identity

ISLAMIC PAROCHIAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES:

A STUDY OF TWO ATLANTA-AREA SCHOOLS

by

SACHA MARIE ST-ONGE AHMAD

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

Copyright by
Sacha Marie St-Onge Ahmad
2012

ISLAMIC PAROCHIAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES:

A STUDY OF TWO ATLANTA-AREA SCHOOLS

by

SACHA MARIE ST-ONGE AHMAD

Honors Thesis Director: Dr. Abbas Barzegar
Honors College Director: Dr. Larry Burman

Electronic Version Approved:

GSU Honors Program
Georgia State University
May 2012

DEDICATION

For my mother, my mother, my mother, and then my father.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my deepest gratitude for the guidance and support of those who made this thesis possible.

I am forever indebted to my thesis advisor, Dr. Abbas Barzegar, for his endless patience, wisdom, and passion in directing this research, without whose counsel my rudimentary understanding of Islamic education would have remained stagnant.

The idea for this project grew out of a series of discussions with my academic mentor, Greg Chisholm, whose passion for helping others succeed is without parallel. I am grateful for the assistance he provided me in beginning my research.

I would like to thank the school leaders at Dar-Un-Noor Academy and Mohammed Schools for participating in this study. May Allah (SWT) reward them for their contributions to the Muslim community.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Sandra L. Dwyer for continuing to instruct me long after it was her duty to do so, Dr. Janice B. Fournillier for advancing my interview skills, and Haniyyah Taufique for proofreading the final script.

May all those who contributed to this project reap the reward each time someone learns from it. Ameen.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION		iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		v
CHAPTER		
1	INTRODUCTION	1
	The American Muslim Community: A Brief Profile	2
	Tarbiyah: Islamic Socialization	4
	Islamic Educational Models in the United States	7
	Parochial Schools in the United States: A Profile	9
	Method	11
2	IMMIGRANT MUSLIM COMMUNITY	
	Immigrant Muslim History	13
	Dar-Un-Noor Academy	14
	Tarbiyah: Islamic Socialization	17
3	AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY	
	African American Muslim History	26
	Mohammed Schools	30
	Tarbiyah: Islamic Socialization	32
4	CONCLUSION	38
REFERENCES		41
APPENDIX		44

1. Introduction

Islamic schools in North America have become a central institution in which Muslim communities, both African American and immigrant, aim to instill religious values in their children. Perhaps the most effective way to describe the aim of Islamic education is by using the traditional Islamic concept of *tarbiyah,* derived from the root word *raba*, which means to raise or to nurture (Hussain, 2004). Given the diversity of the Muslim community in the United States, there are competing visions of what the *tarbiyah* of Muslim children in America should entail. The greatest concern, however, seems to be the socialization and establishment of an *Islamic identity* that will both inoculate the youth from negative irreligious influences and serve as a foundation for them to lead righteous, devout lives. Muslim leaders are often obligated to define the parameters of Islamic practice in America and while a recent study shows that mosque representatives believe that the *Qur'an* (95%) and the example of the Prophet Muhammad, or *sunnah* (90%), are foundationally important teaching sources, how these beliefs relate to Islamic educational practices remains unclear (Bagby, Perl, & Froehle, 2001). Thus, understanding how Muslim community leaders and stakeholders incorporate Islam into their pedagogical institutions remains a critical issue and the central focus of this study.

Some of the questions facing scholars researching the development of the American Muslim community include: how have religious texts, namely the *Qur'an* and *sunnah*, been drawn upon to guide the education of children? How have modern Muslim scholars defined religious curriculum? What do Muslim leaders believe is the best approach to teaching Islamic values and compatibility in a Muslim-centered environment based in a secular society?

Through a comparative study of two Atlanta full-time Muslim parochial schools, this study examines Muslim approaches to Islamic education by analyzing school leaders' secular and

religious goals, their main obstacles and concerns and what they believe the best practices are. It also explores how Islamic education fits into leaders' visions of socialization and community development and how these visions are applied to the educational institutions. The study juxtaposes findings from Dar-Un-Noor Academy (DNA), a K-8 Islamic school that predominantly serves the immigrant Muslim community with Mohammed Schools, a K-12 Islamic school that serves the African American Muslim community. In order to answer the aforementioned questions, this study 1) assesses national trends in K-12 Islamic parochial schools throughout the United States through related research, 2) engages Muslim leaders from both institutions through semi-formal interviews, and 3) supplements these findings through an extended period of participant observation. This study does not, however, examine the effectiveness of leaders' methods of accomplishing their goals, nor does it comment on which visions or school structures are more beneficial.

The American Muslim Community: A Brief Profile

In order to comprehend what community members seek to accomplish by establishing religious institutions, it is important to understand where they come from and what their values are. In 2007, the Pew Research Center published a study on American Muslims called "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream" to better publicize the demographics of the Muslim community and their perceptions of life in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2007). Data was collected through telephone interviews with 1,050 Muslim Americans over the age of 18. Their findings help explain the worldview through which Muslims navigate their identities in a secular society.

According to the study, of the estimated 2.35 million Muslim Americans, 65% are first generation immigrants, 7% are second generation, and 28% have been in the United States for

three generations or more. Of the 35% of non-immigrant Muslim Americans, 20% are African American; 37% of foreign-born Muslims are from the Middle East and North Africa, 27% from the Subcontinent, and 8% came from Europe. Over half of Muslim immigrants came for educational and economic opportunities while 20% were fleeing conflict or persecution in their home countries. In terms of sectarian identity, 50% of all American Muslims are *Sunni*, 22% do not identify with a particular school of Islamic thought (*madhab)*, and 16% are *Shia*. Similarly, the report found that 48% of native-born African Americans identify as *Sunni*, 34% as non-affiliated Muslim, and 15% as either *Shia*, with Nation of Islam, or other. In terms of education and socioeconomic status, Muslim Americans are comparable to the rest of Americans; 24% of Muslim Americans have a college degree or higher and 53% percent have a high school diploma or lower; 44% of the participants reported an annual household income of $50,000 or higher while 33% said theirs was $30,000 or lower.

The importance Muslims give to Islam varies by age group and is comparable with Christian attitudes towards their own faith; 72% of American Muslims say religion is very important and 61% say they pray daily. Over 91% of the population believes in the oneness of God, the Day of Judgment, and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).[1] According to the report, Muslims under the age of 30 have a stronger sense of Muslim identity than their older counterparts. They are more likely to visit the mosque once a week and feel that there is conflict between being a devout Muslim and modern life.

The Pew Report also found that a majority of the Muslim American population accepts multiple interpretations of the *Qur'an* and prophetic sayings (*sunnah*) and believe that immigrants should try to adapt to American culture; 60% says, "there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of Islam," while one-third says, "there is only one true way to interpret

[1] Peace and blessings be upon him

the teachings of Islam" (2007, pg. 23); 43% of the respondents are in favor of assimilation, 26% disagree, and 16% believe that both identities should be cultivated and maintained.

As can be deduced from the survey results, the American Muslim population is vastly diverse in terms of religious attitudes, socioeconomic status, countries of origin, and attitudes towards acculturating to American society. This diversity, as will be seen, is reflected in the findings of the present study and is predictive of different aims in Islamic education between communities.

***Tarbiyah*: Islamic Socialization**

There appears to be two distinct forms of *tarbiyah*: 1) to establish ritualistic Islamic practices in daily life, and 2) to impart a philosophical understanding of Islam. The first form is characterized by honoring traditions such as *Qur'anic* memorization, knowledge and emulation of the Prophet (PBUH)'s practices, Arabic literacy, gender segregation, knowledge of basic Islamic law (*fiqh*), and other prescribed conventions. The latter form considers the importance of compatibility and competency in society at large from an Islamic perspective by applying *Qur'anic* principles to global and secular contexts, and expanding interpretations of holy texts to incorporate contemporary social issues. In their book entitled *Crisis in Muslim Education,* Syed Ashraf and Syed Husain (1979) describe the interaction between these two forms:

> [Islamic education] trains the sensibility of pupils in such a manner that in their…approach to all kinds of knowledge they are governed by the deeply felt ethical values of Islam. They are trained and mentally so disciplined that they want to acquire knowledge not merely to satisfy an intellectual curiosity or just for material worldly benefit but to grow up as rational, righteous beings and to bring about the spiritual, moral and physical welfare of their families, their people and mankind. Their attitude derives from a deep faith in God and a wholehearted acceptance of a God-given moral code (as cited in Halstead, 2004, pg. 1).

The attitude towards perceiving Islam as a means for social righteousness towards all of mankind (second form) is cultivated through "a wholehearted acceptance" of practicing Islam as

prescribed by divine law (first form). Leaders achieve these goals through various methods, most common of which are: 1) adding an Islamic perspective to secular knowledge, 2) creating an Islamic space, and 3) through informal curriculum.

According to the literature, many Islamic schools approach values-based education through a process often referred to as *Islamization*, which is the method of incorporating Islamic concepts, symbols, and values throughout the educational environment. A well-known definition of the term by Suleman Dangor (2005), author of *Islamization of disciplines: Towards an indigenous educational system*, is: "Islamic disciplines in the curriculum, providing an Islamic perspective on issues in the syllabi and locating, where possible, secularized disciplines within the Islamic *Weltanschauung* (worldview)." (p. 519)

Scholars agree that Islamic education should promote the recognition that "all knowledge comes from Him [God] and therefore *Qur'anic* and prophetic teachings (*hadith*) should be an inherent piece of every discipline" (Hashim, 2010, p. 176). This most commonly entails connecting a verse from the *Qur'an* or a *hadith* to a seemingly secular lesson.

Teachers in Islamic schools have found creative routes to incorporate Islamic knowledge in the government curriculum as Dr. Inga Niehaus, Research Director of the Georg Eckert Institute in Germany, found in her research with Islamic school leaders in Britain and the Netherlands (Niehaus, 2009). One interviewee, a high school English teacher, said she teaches Islam in her class by either assigning works written by Muslim authors or discussing stories like *Romeo and Juliet* from an Islamic perspective. In a similar fashion, the biology teacher Niehaus interviewed chronicles the stages of pregnancy for her students using pictures and verses from the *Qur'an* that describe fetal development. In chapter 96, verse two of the *Qur'an* we are told we are made from a "clinging substance" (*alaq*), or a clot of congealed blood. This particular

connection between the *Qur'an* and science is a regular motif in Muslim discourse. Niehaus also observed an art class where students learned to design carpets and calligraphy in order to promote awareness of Islamic heritage.

While some leaders like Dr. Amjad Hussain, professor of religious and Islamic studies at the University of Wales, feel that the process of Islamizing the curriculum is not practiced enough, others believe it is unnecessary (2004). A school principal in Niehaus' study said, "We do not need to Islamize the sciences since all knowledge comes from Allah" (Niehaus, 2009, p. 118). Similar sentiments have taken root amongst some American Muslim leaders, as will be seen in the case of Imam Sami.[2]

Complimentary to *Islamizing* knowledge, some scholars believe, is creating an Islamic space, or ethos, in which students are exposed to the daily practices that govern Muslim life. These include praying together, eating *halal* food, celebrating Muslim holidays (*Eid*), instituting dress codes, and observing the Islamic calendar, among other practices. An environment which fosters the recognition of a Creator in all aspects of life is required for students to flourish as Muslims, according to Hussain (2004).

Many scholars believe that an additional purpose Islamic schools serve is to protect Muslim children from the influence of secular culture that is often seen to promote values that contradict traditional Islamic beliefs. Parents of Muslim children are concerned with sex education programs, violence, and coeducational socializing in American schools, as are so many members of conservative Christian and Jewish communities. Muslim parents site these aspects of public schooling as the main reasons for sending their children to Islamic school (Leonard, 2003). For the most part, Islamic institutions are able to establish an atmosphere void of these influences. Richard Wormser (1994), author of *American Islam: Growing up Muslim in*

[2] The names of participants in the current study have been changed to protect their identities.

America, interviewed 165 Islamic school attendees who reported feeling secure in their religious beliefs and did not face issues with pregnancy, diseases, or substance abuse. While there is research to suggest that discipline problems such as drug use and dating have plagued some Islamic schools, it seems to not be the norm (Syed, 2001). Regardless of the outcome, the goal remains to provide a safe learning environment for Muslim children.

The informal curriculum is best defined by the subliminal messages students receive about proper Islamic etiquette and belief. Hussain (2004) believes that Islamic education aims to promote balanced growth in the spiritual and moral realms of individual development, leading to heightened religious commitment in all aspects of life. Communication of these messages is most commonly accomplished through community ties, extra-curricular activities, teacher-pupil relationships, school management structures, and Friday sermon topics (Halstead & Taylor, 1996).

Islamic Educational Models in the United States

Various models of Islamic education exist for Muslims who cannot attend full-time private Islamic school, but each is limited by time. Scholars agree that Islamic education's largest ambitions are best accomplished by being in perpetual contact with Muslim-centered environments. This section quickly reviews different alternatives to full-time Muslim parochial schools.

In her chapter, "'Guide Us to the Straight Way": A Look at the Makers of "Religiously Literate" Young Muslim Americans," Nadia Inji Khan describes programs such as Al-Maghrib and the American Learning Institute for Muslims (ALIM) for college-aged students that last from anywhere between two weekends to two months (2009). ALIM provides a forum for identity formation through literacy in Islamic sciences and Muslim character, a goal that full-

time Islamic schools may accomplish over the span of many years. Models such as this one experiment with mixing conventional Muslim conservative practices of gender segregation with typically shared space for opposite genders. For example, ALIM professors segregate students during class but force them to sit with the opposite gender during lunch. These forums provide a safe but temporary Muslim American "utopia" for the socialization of Muslim identity in college. The drawback to this model, Khan argues, is its high cost, excluding people of low socioeconomic backgrounds from participating altogether. However, although these are temporary programs, the hope is that the attendee is left with enough religious zeal until the next course.

A less formal avenue is the *halaqah*, or study group, generally designed for audiences above the middle school age. People gather at a set time and location to discuss various topics in Islam. Selection of the topics is generally open to the group's members, unless otherwise specified. This model requires a significant amount of concentration and is less appealing to younger audiences. Adults, both men and women, find it difficult to be available at each meeting time and sometimes describe it as never-ending, indicating that for this age group, perhaps a quick dose of Islam is preferred over a prolonged commitment to learning about it.

Islamic Sunday schools are geared towards students between 4-18 years of age. They are typically run by volunteers of the affiliated mosque and are a magnet for untrained yet willing teachers. The target population for this model consists of families who cannot afford a full-time Islamic education and parents who believe in the importance of instilling Arabic and *Qur'an* literacy in their children. In just three hours per week, some parents expect their children to experience the environment and information that is found in full-time Islamic schools; this puts enormous pressure on Sunday school teachers who often resort to dogmatic rhetoric and rote

memorization as a means to meet parents' expectations (Khan, 2009). Sunday school veterans are known to have many misconceptions, or "mental cobwebs" as Khan describes it, as a result of this unfavorable learning environment and find it difficult to replace them with correct information (2009).

Homeschooling is another alternative for educated and able parents. Uneducated immigrant families, however, do not have this alternative. This form of schooling raises concerns about adequate education, socialization, and preparation for the "real world" for both non-religious and religious homeschoolers.

For some, the very last option is public school. A recent review of the literature by Niyozov and Pluim (2009) on Muslim students' education revealed that many conservative Muslim parents make this judgment based on the assumption that public school teachers and policy makers ignore the issue of Islamophobia, neglect to include Islamic cultural heritage in history lessons, have low expectations for Muslim students, and are largely unaware of and inconsiderate towards Islamic culture. By not being in public school, Muslim children do not have to cope with uninformed teachers and students who, with their taunting and Islamophobic beliefs, make having a safe and positive learning environment near impossible (Zine, 2009).

Parochial Schools in the United States: A Profile

Extensive research on Islamic education in the United States is lacking. The first study conducted in 1989 by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) assessed the status and needs of Islamic schools in the United States in order to promote dialogue between Muslim communities and their schools (ISNA, 1991). According to ISNA, by the 1991-1992 school year, there were more than 80 Islamic schools in North America. Researchers were able to survey 49 of them and provided the following comments and suggestions based on their findings: 1)

administrators should initiate inter-school dialogue, 2) schools should develop more sustainable financial plans, and 3) there is a need for formally defined curriculum guidelines.

The next major survey of Islamic schools would not be initiated until 2004, conducted by Karen Keyworth (2006), Director of Education at Islamic Schools League of America, ISLA.[3] The study aimed to help answer questions regarding the nature of Islamic schools in America and their current stages of growth, specifically to create profiles of full-time Islamic schools, determine trends, and identify areas of concern.

Data from 235 schools revealed that 10% of schools all (academic and Arabic/Islamic Studies/*Qur'an*) teachers are certified, in 36% all academic teachers are certified, and a total of 49% of Arabic/Islamic Studies/*Qur'an* teachers are not certified (Keyworth, 2006). A total of 49% of the schools said they hire non-Muslim teachers, 23% said they did not but were considering it, and 28% said they only hire Muslim teachers; 45% of the schools are completely independent from any association with a local mosque or community center, 29% say there is a connection but acts autonomously and 21% are governed by a mosque. The average school is ten years or younger and has less than 100 students.

According to Keyworth, while Islamic schools have increased in number, they strive to maintain quality and professionalism. Stakeholders continue to cope with financial restraints that prevent independence from mosques, the ability to hire certified and experienced teachers, and offer elective classes. Coping with such difficulties is likely to hinder school leaders' development and implementation of their goals. Keyworth's (2006) conclusions include: parental involvement is a strength of any school that has it; that the barrier to professionalizing the

[3] *isla* means "reform" in Arabic

teaching of Arabic and Islamic studies is the willingness of the community; that schools should strive for independence from an external governing structure (like a mosque); and that schools who include non-Muslim teachers should educate them about Islam before allowing them to teach.

A continuing concern for community stakeholders and educators is the level of professionalism at which Islamic schools operate. Hamed Ghazali (2000), the principal of the Islamic School of Greater Kansas City, has defined three stages of development: 1) the challenge stage in which the school faces financial difficulties and lack of certified teachers; 2) the stability stage in which curriculum standardizes and teacher quality improves, yet the school still has financial difficulty; and 3) the professional stage characterized by competitive salaries, good attendance, a nurse's office, science labs, and a complete physical education program.

According to Keyworth, most schools begin as a branch of a mosque and thus are initially financially dependent, but and some seeking autonomy once they have achieved financial stability (2006). She found that 45% of the schools were completely independent from a local mosque or community center, 29% were connected in some capacity but acted autonomously, and 21% were governed by a mosque. According to Keyworth, governing structures in which schools act independently of affiliated mosques can benefit from avoiding conflict of interest issues and overlapping financial liabilities (2006).

Method

Upon receiving approval to conduct my research from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Georgia State University (GSU), I identified key leaders at each school that were responsible for overlooking the Islamic Studies curriculum to interview. Each candidate was invited to be a formal participant in the study, provided a copy of the interview questions and

informed consent form, and briefed on the purpose of the study.[4] Interviews were conducted individually, recorded on a laptop, and lasted approximately 60 minutes. In addition, I collected print materials such as school brochures, application forms, meeting minutes, and pamphlets from the main offices. To compensate the schools for their participation, I volunteered for three hours a week at each school for four months.

This extended period of participant and ethnographic observation allowed me to supplement leaders' insight with actual school practices. The transcribed interviews were then interpreted through discourse analysis in order to understand how leaders' teaching methods specifically address the Muslim youth's need for guidance.

[4] See Appendix for qualitative interview schedule.

2. Immigrant Muslim Community

Immigrant Muslim History

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Muslim immigrants from around the world began entering the United States in low, sparse numbers. They were part of the general ethnic immigration occurring at the time arriving from the Ottoman Empire, East Africa, Central Asia, British India, and Southeast Asia. Most were looking for business opportunities, driven from their homelands by poor economic or political conditions, and intended to return (Ahmed, 1991). However a majority was unskilled and/or illiterate and could only find jobs making minimum wage as day laborers, factory workers, and peddlers. The realization that economic prosperity was not in the near future made facing an unaccommodating, predominantly Caucasian society extra difficult. Neither their religion (non-Christian) nor their customs were looked favorably upon. Many second-generation immigrants quickly recognized that assimilating was the most viable option and did so either through marriage with non-Muslims or through academia and the corporate world (Smith, 1999). Their parents, worried that their religious and cultural values would be forgotten entirely, began building the first Islamic institutions in the United States to preserve their original identities; they made mosques for praying the Friday prayer (*Jum'ah*) and teaching children *Qur'anic* and Arabic literacy (Nyang, 1999). Regardless, immigrant children continued to reject the lifestyle of their parents (Smith, 1999).

The composition of Muslim immigrants in the United States changed dramatically with the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which allowed immigrants from non-European countries into the United States and favored skilled workers. Professionals and students came to the United States in large numbers; in the 31 years after the Act, 2.78 million people came from Muslim countries (Curtis IV, 2009). Immigrants came to reunite with family

members, take advantage of scholarships and other incentives designed for Middle Eastern students as a result of the Cold War, or as political refugees (Nyang, 1999).

It was these individuals who took the initiative to create a space in American society for Muslims. Initially, they began establishing mosques and community centers in order to encourage and preserve their children's Muslim identities. The 1970s saw the building of many additional mosques, Muslim graveyards, and some of the first Islamic schools. While these were efforts to encourage religious practices, Muslims then began founding social and political advocacy groups such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) in 1982 and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in 1994. Their function was to act as watchdogs and monitor the treatment and protect the rights of Muslims in the public sphere (Nyang, 1999). This trend of institution building to further Muslim immigrants' goals for promoting religious and cultural values continues today.

Dar-Un-Noor Academy

In 1984, a group of Arab and South Asian immigrants from mostly professional backgrounds in the Atlanta-area established a weekend school for Muslim children called Dar-Un-Noor Academy (DNA). They sought to provide an Islamic environment for their children by pooling money together to purchase a mobile home that would serve as the school. From these humble beginnings, DNA has grown considerably. It is now a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) and Global Accreditation Center (GAC) accredited, full-time, K-8 school. Together with its affiliate mosque Al-Farooq Masjid of Atlanta and its towering minaret, visible along the Downtown Atlanta

skyline, the school is a central destination for an estimated 75,000[5] members of the Atlanta Muslim community to interact.

With over 250 students and 40 staff and faculty members, DNA is very culturally and ethnically diverse.[6] Students come from over 33 countries with 41% identifying as Asian/South Asian, 34% as African American or African, 20% as Caucasian/Middle Eastern, and 4% as biracial or other; 34% of the faculty identify as Caucasian (including Middle Eastern countries), 17% as Asian, 44% as African American, and 5% as bi-racial.

The Al-Farooq Masjid administrative structure is divided in two major sections; the Board of Trustees governs all financial decisions for the mosque and for the school. The nine-member Board of Education, composed of three members from the Board of Trustees and six parents and stakeholders, develops the strategy and makes all non-financial decisions for the school. According to Keyworth, Islamic schools that begin under the governance of a mosque are likely to develop at a quicker pace than financially independent ones initially. However, once the school is established, lack of autonomy from the mosque typically stunts the school's natural growth.

In terms of development, DNA can be said to fall within Hamed Ghazali's second and third stage of development that are characterized by stability and professionalism. While the school recently received accreditation from SACS CASI and GAC for the first time, students at DNA have been outperforming other private schools on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) by as much as 14% according to the school brochure.[7] DNA administrators boast that such accomplishments are an indication of increasing teacher quality.

---

[5] Estimate from the Al-Farooq Masjid website.
[6] The statistical data presented here was extracted from school brochures, pamphlets, and the school website.
[7] No further information on this statistic was available.

The school is proud of its solid group of teachers with considerable experience, low teacher turnover rates, and a teacher-student ratio of 1:11. As of the 2010-2011 academic year, the faculty has an average of 9.1 years of teaching experience ranging from one to 30 years; 39% of the faculty has a B.A. in education and 5% has an M.A. in education; 34% has bachelor's and/or master's degrees in other subject areas and 21% only has high school diplomas. A total of 21% of the faculty is composed of certified teachers. The school actively encourages its faculty members who have not already obtained Georgia teaching certification to do so as soon as possible. Sometimes DNA facilitates this process by providing monetary assistance, allowing them to work part-time, or offering other incentives.

However most characteristics of Ghazali's third stage of development are yet to be realized by DNA. For example, while the school has recently hired a security guard and built a media center with 18 computers, its library only takes up one quarter of the media center and is not yet functional. With no librarian and under 150 books, students are unable to check materials out and rely upon public libraries for supplementary materials. Although DNA has a full-time certified physical education teacher, students attend P.E. class in the schoolyard because there is no gymnasium or comparable structure. Plans to build one have been approved by the city but construction has been halted due to a lack of funds. Financial constraints are also preventing the school from implementing gender segregation in middle school classes and from hiring a nurse. Br. Ali, the vice president, describes the struggle school administrators face in raising tuition to further the school's growth. He says,

> You see, we serve the Muslim community. And this community that we serve is first generation of immigrants. They don't make a lot of money. They barely make it. If we increase the tuition, you might not have even half of the students that we have. Not because they don't want to pay, because they simply can't afford to pay. Even with what we are charging right now, not everybody's paying. We try our best to sponsor some

> children by collecting *zakat* (charity). I guarantee you there are a lot of people who want to come to Dar-Un-Noor who cannot afford to come.

School leaders envision a higher quality of education for their students with access to basic resources such as a proper library and a science lab, but due to the fact that it serves a largely low-income community, the administration is forced to make difficult decisions. Furthermore, Br. Ali says,

> The weaknesses of the school are overall resources, a) the library, b) science lab, c) lack of unified curriculum…But again, everything depends on funds. And if we can get funds *inshAllah* (God willing) we'll try our best to improve.

For the time being, the mosque and school boards have decided to invest in enhancing the mosque and school buildings' exterior.

***Tarbiyah*: Islamic Socialization**

In the school brochure, many references are made to what seems to be the school's marker of success: student academic and career achievement. Throughout the pamphlet are indications of this; it says that students should "be equipped to excel in their careers," they "generally score in the top ten percentile on all the standardized tests such as ITBS," and that "many [graduates] are in leadership positions in their high schools and colleges." In another section, it says that DNA "offers outstanding academic instruction," that it has received "the highest accreditations from SACS, CASI as well as GAC," and that part of the vision is for students to "strive for academic excellence."

Br. Ali demonstrated this same vision of student success in both secular and religious subjects. In his view, the greatest strength of the school is that it offers a wide variety of academic courses and that this is reflected by students' accomplishments after they graduate from DNA. He says, "[They] need to overall be a good citizen and be productive when they

grow up rather than be dependent on the society." Reflecting on former students who have received scholarships to top universities, he says,

> I have seen students get scholarships from high school because of the foundation they got here. They got scholarships to top schools in the country, including Vanderbilt University. One girl…[got] $60,000/year scholarship to Vanderbilt University. One boy got $100,000 scholarship to Boston University.

Clearly, to Br. Ali, a successful student is one who is on the path to economic independence and scholastic success in academia. However he also praises the stellar Islamic studies curriculum at DNA for incorporating multiple perspectives in each lesson. He says,

> And for Islamic Studies, the majority of our teachers are highly qualified in teaching Islamic Studies and Arabic…And what they learning here is very advanced. It's very significant compared to even Islamic countries. I went to high school in Saudi Arabia as well as college. So I know what I learned in one of the top schools in Saudi Arabia. If I were to compare what I learned there compared to what we teach here, I can see that at Dar-Un-Noor, it's a little bit more advanced. And there's a reason for that. The books that we're using are designed for western Muslims. And so the way the author structured the books is that, I can say it's very advanced, because most of the books that they teach in the Saudi Arabia curriculum, it's more at the intermediate level in high school. For example, some things that we are teaching here at Dar-Un-Noor, like *ahadith* (Prophetic sayings) and *dua'a* (supplications) and Islamic history, science in Islam, and the scholars of Islam, Al-Razi, Al-Khawarizmi, Ibn Battuta, is not even taught in high school in Saudi Arabia. It's taught at the college level.

For Br. Ali, the Islamic studies curriculum is advanced because it incorporates both basic Islamic knowledge (perhaps *fiqh*) as well as historical and theological aspects of religion into the curriculum.

The goal of Islamic education at DNA is slightly different for Sr. Noorah, co-founder and principal of the school. She wants students to be proud of their identities as Muslims, to know that,

> Islam is a peaceful religion, to respect all human beings, [That there is] no discrimination in Islam and they cannot be judgmental, cannot have hate in their hearts. And [they must] be honest and truthful, and follow the Prophet Muhammad *sallalaahu alayhi wasallam* (peace and blessings be upon him).

Her concern is that "everyone misunderstands us" as a result of the negative portrayal of Islam in the media.

In what seems like an effort to prepare students to deal with their perception of American society as Islamophobic, school leaders are arranging talks for middle school students on topics such as *jihad*, dating, the treatment of women, friendships with non-Muslims, and the biography of Prophet Muhammad (*seerah*), selected partly in response to student requests. I was invited to speak to middle school girls on these issues while interviewing Sr. Noorah, an example of how she is constantly looking for ways to expand the students' educational nourishment. Her search for college aged Muslims to engage students at DNA in conversation on these topics is reflective of her concern to broaden the parameters of the environment.

Sr. Noorah also feels that it is important for students to know how Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) acted. Espousing a conventional Muslim outlook, she believes that his behavior and exemplary character should be emulated. Muslim leaders like Sr. Noorah often draw parallels between his struggle to introduce Islam to a hostile community and modern day Muslims' struggle in dealing with misconceptions of Islam. She also believes it is important to introduce the concept that "there are good Muslims and bad Muslims," in order to avoid an overemphasis on identity politics, condoning inter-religious dialogue and condemning negative Muslim practices. She says, "part of our religion says to respect all the prophets; we respect Jesus as the prophet of Christians," suggesting that the Islamic perspective on people of different faiths, and that discrimination is unlawful, are important ones to highlight in socializing Muslim children.

In their goal to raise socially competent citizens, leaders at DNA appear to draw a line between their perception of what is appropriate to acculturate to and what values students should be shielded from in American society. Issues like atheism, lax sexual morals, and secular

approaches to gender roles that are part of mainstream American pop-culture and are not congruous with an Islamic worldview are largely ignored. Br. Ali believes that students already "get exposed to this [American society] outside of the school. It's not part of the curriculum." However DNA leaders do not take an anti-Western approach either; in fact, they often encourage the development of American citizenship. Students learn about American history and represent American presidents on History Day. They go on fieldtrips to the CNN Center and the Coca Cola Factory and recently began participating in district-level Spelling Bee competitions.

While some perceived negative influences are ignored, others are being addressed at the school for the first time this year. In addition to the *Studies in Islam* textbook series published in Dubai by Maulvi Abdul Aziz,[8] DNA is now employing *WeekendLearning Series: Islamic Studies* by Mansur Ahmad and Husain Nuri (2008) published in Columbus, Ohio. *Studies in Islam* covers general topics relating to Islam that Muslims worldwide study, such as Islamic history, stories of the prophets, and the Prophet's biography. *WeekendLearning Series* covers a wide range of sensitive issues, most of which are specifically tailored towards living as a Muslim in American society. In the books aimed at middle and high school children, chapter headings include: Racism in Islam, Trials in Life: Everybody Will Experience Them, Peer Pressure, Dating: How Islam Looks at the Issue, Adam and Eve in the Garden, and The Bible and the *Qur'an*. The themes addressed in *WeekendLearning Series* reflect DNA administrators' progressive thinking about Islam. There is a shift from an emphasis solely on Islamic history and *Qur'anic* memorization towards increasing students' knowledge so they can defend themselves from perceived negative external influences.

[8] The year of publication is unavailable; the series appears to be out of print but is available for purchase online.

The religious curriculum at DNA is restricted to three classes: Arabic, *Qur'an* and Islamic Studies. Arabic and *Qur'an* are taught daily from Monday through Thursday and Islamic Studies is taught once a week on Fridays for 45 minutes. Every homeroom teacher gives his or her class a "Question of the Day" on Islamic knowledge. The questions are prepared by the vice principal and at the end of the school year, students are tested on the material they learned from the questions as well as from Islamic Studies class. First, second, and third place scorers on the "Islamic Quiz" receive monetary awards. Lessons and questions focus mostly on Islamic history. Each grade attends assembly once a day for approximately 20 minutes in which middle school students offer the afternoon prayer (*Dhuhr*) at the mosque and both middle and elementary school students are versed in Prophetic sayings (*ahadith*) and supplications (*dua'a*).

Secular subject teachers passively abstain from including religious perspectives in their lessons. One elementary school teacher said she did not think it was her duty to reinforce Islamic etiquette, such as beginning tasks by saying *Bismillah* (in the name of Allah) or reminding students that God is always watching, in the classroom. She relies on the Islamic Studies teachers to shape such behaviors. In middle school, students were arriving late to class because they were being released late from their previous class. With pressure to prepare students for standardized tests, teachers struggle with teaching full lessons as it is; the added factor of students coming late leaves little room for teachers to incorporate Islamic perspectives.

However the efforts to teach students proper Islamic etiquette are reinforced by the Muslim-centered environment inherent in an Islamic institution, an environment characterized by the regular presence of rituals and practices. The main entrance of DNA dons a sign indicating that persons wishing to enter must observe the Islamic dress code.[9] Passages from the *Qur'an*, sayings of the Prophet, pictures of Mecca, Medina, and other famous Islamic locations decorate

[9] Exceptions to this are non-Muslim female janitors; they are not required to follow this rule.

the hallway and classroom walls. Students are taught to greet their peers and teachers with the full Islamic greeting, *Assalamu Alaykum wa Rahmatullai wa Barakaatuhu*. Elementary school Arabic teachers use coloring sheets to teach the alphabet which often include images of Islamic symbols such as mosques and rosaries (*tasbeeh*). Beginning in elementary school, girls are encouraged to wear the scarf even before the age when it is compulsory. In middle school, male and female students sit on opposite sides of the classroom. Using these symbols and Islamic practices are part of the school's informal curriculum that serve to create an Islamic ethos, or environment, that compliment the leaders' efforts to instill confidence and pride in the students at DNA.

In fact, the architecture of the school and the mosque itself is symbolic of Islamic art and history, aspects of the ethos that associate Islam with a grandeur. Al-Farooq Masjid, which shares a parking lot with the school, is reminiscent of the Great Mosque of Cordoba on the outside. Students use rooms in the mosque, some which are named after the Prophet's companions, regularly for extracurricular activities, fundraising events, and to pray in congregation. The school building was designed to be an Islamic school. Its main entrance is arched and each corner of the building has a fixture similar to those found on mosque minarets. Additionally, students can make ablution (*wudu*) at school in a room built specifically for that purpose. The students are in constant contact with a physical environment, the mosque and the school, that was consciously styled to reflect their history and built specifically for their utility. In accordance with Sr. Noorah's goal for students to be proud of their identities, these surroundings create a sense of belonging to a community in which the students feel welcome, making it unnecessary for them to associate or identify with other irreligious sub-cultures.

Not only is the Islamic environment important to nurture children, but the space also becomes a safe haven for all Muslims in Atlanta, regardless of their ethnic background. Br. Ali comments that many of the women that teach at the school are drawn to it, despite the low salary, because it allows them to avoid uncomfortable situations in non-Muslim workplaces. He says this is why teachers come and stay,

> [Because of] the Islamic environment, the safety. It's a very small community and everybody knows everybody. When I interview the teachers I ask them that question. [I say] "You could go out and make more money, why did you decide to come to Dar-Un-Noor?" Then they tell me it's the Islamic environment, they like having the *masjid* next door where they can pray *Salat-ul-Dhuhr* and *Salat-ul-Jumuah*. They are also serving their community, so overall it's the environment that matters to them. The women can freely wear *hijab* and not worry about being discriminated against.

Even with the need for a better salary, many Muslim women are choosing the more comfortable environment in a Muslim community over higher pay elsewhere.

Serving a tightly knit religious community can sometimes impede the level of professionalism a school seeks to operate at. A consistent theme throughout the interview with Sr. Noorah was the lack of respect some parents have for "the system," by which she means the extent to which teachers can accommodate students' specific issues. It appears as though the bond that is created between members of the community can compound the efforts of teachers to enforce school rules. According to Sr. Noorah, teachers' biggest complaints are,

> Parents…We always send reminders to the parents about the system in place. We always support the teacher. Meet with the teachers if you have a problem…Some parents, part of community members, they wish they could put rules in DNA and make favoritism to their children.

Teachers are frustrated with students during class time as well, finding that some children feel they are above school rules and regulations because of their family's relationship to key figures in the administration. The immensity of this issue is so great that the Parent Teacher Organization page on the school's website clearly says, "Important Note: PTO members must

respect the DNA hierarchy. Therefore, PTO members/officers must submit all communications to the principal for approval" (Dar-Un-Noor Academy, n.d.). While this aspect of being a community-based institution constitutes the school's greatest weakness for Sr. Noorah, the multicultural nature of the community at DNA is one of its greatest strengths.

The overwhelming ethnic diversity at DNA allows students to think of Islam in Pan-Islamic terms as a result of being exposed to Muslims with different traditions and practices. This puts teachers at the school in a unique position where they are faced with conflicting ideas of how religion should be practiced. Br. Ali appears to have found a way to handle these differences in the classroom, he comments,

> They've been exposed to all six authentic books, such as Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sunan Abu Dawud, Jami al-Tirmidhi, Sunan ibn Majah, and Sunan al-Sughra. They've been exposed to the four schools of thought, *Shafi'i*, *Hanbali*, *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, and the differences of opinion as far as Islamic jurisprudence is concerned. The differences between the schools of thought are not major differences. It's just the differences of opinion. It's not like "*salat* (prayer) does not exist" and "*salat* does exist." They don't get confused because people get confused when you try to force them what to do, when you try to influence their opinion is when people get confused and try to refuse. But if you just tell them this is this, and that is that, you choose. Because in America, people came from all over the world. Some peoples' background is *Hanafi*, some people are *Shafi'i*, some people come with the idea of *Malik*. So if I tell all of them, "you have to do this," then it looks like I am biased towards a certain scholar, so I don't do that. For 15 years I've been here and I've never heard any complaints [about this method from parents]."

However Br. Ali is only responsible for Islamic Studies classes and finds the need to strengthen and make cohesive the entire religious education program at DNA. He is concerned with the "lack of a unified Islamic studies curriculum," by which he is referring to all aspects of the formal religious education: Arabic, *Qur'an*, and Islamic Studies classes. If school leaders have not defined a methodological approach to accommodating different *madhab* (schools of opinion) in the classroom, teachers may respond to student inquiries regarding Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) based on their own experiences with Islam, whatever those may be.

Tarbiyah at DNA is similar to the first form I identified in the introduction, which is characterized by establishing ritualistic Islamic practices in daily life. There seem to be two central aims of Islamic education at DNA: the first is to instill a sense of pride about being Muslim and for it to act as a coping mechanism in American secular society, and the second is to train students in daily Islamic practices. To accomplish the first goal, the school and mosque administrators have spent generously towards the buildings' infrastructure in order to establish a connection between Islam and magnificence. Additionally, the Islamic studies program is shifting from focusing on history and Arabic/*Qur'an* literacy to covering topics that are relevant to the Muslim youth today.

3. African American Muslim Community

African American Muslim History

African American Muslim history and identity is grounded in the history of slavery in the United States. Many scholars argue that the failure of Reconstruction in the late 19th and early 20th centuries drove the African American community to seek an alternate, albeit equal, space in American society in which religious, cultural, and social norms were written for and by its members (Smith, 1999). The desire for an independent identity gave birth to many new forms of black religiosity. One of the strongest manifestations of this new cultural movement was Pan-Africanism and as we will see, the history of African American Islam is deeply indebted to its overall philosophy.

The seeds of Pan-Africanism had been sown less than a decade before the Civil War began in 1861 and continued to unfold during the 20th century (Turner, 1997). The goals of this movement were ambitious: to eradicate racism and slavery in the west, to unite people of African descent around the globe, to establish fair trade between Africa and the west, and to raise African cultural awareness through the rejection of white culture and the revival of African customs. Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), considered the father of Pan-Africanism by some, believed that racial communities are "organic types of beings," (Turner, 1997, p. 54) each with a distinct purpose and characteristics. On Blyden's view, slavery had overshadowed African civilization and identity and the movement would reestablish it for all people of African descent. Recognizing that Islam had historically been economically, socially, and politically liberal towards Africans, he believed that it was a better religion for people of African descent than was Christianity.

In a similar search for African identity, a self-proclaimed prophet of Islam called Noble Drew Ali (1886-1929, formerly Timothy Drew) established the first Moorish Science Temple of America in 1913. Committed to dissociating from "black," "Negro," and "colored" labels, he argued that African Americans were of Moorish descent (Curtis, 2009), providing his followers with a scripture entitled, "The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America" (Smith, 1999). His vision was limited to the emancipation of Moorish Americans and had little to do with Old World Islam, as did his version of the *Qur'an*. It was meant instead as a tool, similar to Blyden's vision, for achieving self-determination (Curtis, 2009) and appealed mostly to uneducated, economically suffering African Americans (Smith, 1999). He propagated the idea that by consciously shedding the subordinate identity given to them by the whites and adopting a Moorish one, their community would achieve independent status in the United States.

Another self-identified messenger of Islam appeared during the Great Depression of the 1920s to a man named Elijah Muhammad (born Elijah Robert Poole). A sharecropper by trade, Muhammad was wrought with misery until in 1931 W. D. Fard appeared before him as an Arab peddler[10] and told Muhammad that his coming was foretold in the Bible. Fard taught Muhammad that social liberation for the black man lay within the acceptance of Islam. Within months, Muhammad began implementing this religious idealism as a means to help the black man forego his mental and social suppression in Chicago and spread to neighboring urban cities. Within three years of their first meeting, Fard discontinued all contact with Muhammad and was never found again. By this time, Muhammad had gained a large following and found himself at the head of present-day Nation of Islam by default.

Muhammad cultivated the Nation of Islam with a separatist agenda designed to uplift black people out of their own poverty and to give them a sense of independence. In order to

[10] Scholars continue to debate his identity and ethnic origins.

divorce the minds of the black community from an oppressed way of life, he propagated very interesting and unique anti-white philosophies and theological ideas about race. His new religion deviated from the core fundamentals of mainstream Islam; he taught that prayers could be said in English instead of Arabic. In a 1962 edition of his newspaper *Muhammad Speaks*, he included a supplication that read,

> O Allah! I seek refuge from anxiety and grief, and I seek Thy refuge from lack of strength and laziness, and I seek Thy refuge from cowardice and niggardliness, and I seek Thy refuge from being overpowered by dept [*sic*] and oppression of men (as cited in Curtis, 2009, p. 83).

Another among his ideas was that for 6,000 years, Satan (white people) had ruled the world and oppressed the righteous. Now, he said, it was lawfully the black people's turn to come to power, to leave the "slave religion" that was Christianity and accept Islam as it served their interests.

In addition to these doctrines, he introduced other practices aimed at the general empowerment of the black community. His first book was *How to Eat to Live*, and he promoted "clean living," advising his followers to wear their hair the natural way. His goal was to build a self-contained, healthy black society. The movement soon caught national attention.

After a 1959 television series on the movement called *The Hate that Hate Produced*, the Nation of Islam was deemed an extremist and racist group by mainstream news media, civil rights leaders, and other Muslims (Curtis, 2009). The Islamic Center of Washington, D.C. (funded by Arab governments), the Federation of Islamic Associations in the United States and Canada, and Jami'at al-Islam also denied the legitimacy of the movement.

A man by the name of Malcolm Little (now known as Malcolm X) was first introduced to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad while in prison in 1947. It was upon his release five years later that Malcolm X became a minister in Detroit, and moved on Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Although he continued to defend Muhammad for many years, Malcolm's rhetoric differed

from his mentor's; he became concerned with Muslims outside the movement, Muslims worldwide, and believed that black Muslims in the United States should align themselves with more mainstream Islamic thought. Muhammad finally cast Malcolm out of the Nation of Islam in 1964 for their differences of opinion. Soon after, Malcolm befriended Dr. Mahmoud Youssef Shawarbi of Egypt and others from the Middle East and sought guidance from them towards *Sunni* Islam.

While Malcolm explored a global Islam, Elijah and Clara Muhammad's seventh son, Warith Deen Muhammad (W. D. Muhammad), was in perpetual contradiction with his father over the direction in which Nation of Islam should go (Turner, 1997). Despite their differences, W. D. Muhammad inherited the leadership position as the Nation's Supreme Minister in 1975 and immediately called for a "second resurrection." He sought to abolish the separatist Black Muslim movement by retracting laws that excluded non-Blacks from subscribing to the faith, where the faith would no longer be one of separatist drives or supremist Black Muslim identity, but rather one characterized by pluralism and traditional Muslim doctrines.

He actualized his vision by promoting *Sunni* practices such as fasting during Ramadan instead of during the Advent season, changing ministers to *imams*, and temples to *masaajid* (Curtis, 2009). He redefined his father as being a Master instead of Messenger. In a symbolic gesture to align the movement with Old World Islamic traditions, W. D. Muhammad performed the holy pilgrimage (*hajj*) with a group of 300 members of the Nation of Islam.

Along with a change of labels for ministers and temples, he changed the name of the Nation of Islam first to "World Community of Al-Islam in the West," then to "American Muslim Mission," and finally to the "Muslim American Community" in the 1990s (Turner, 1997). The goal in these literal transformations remained consistent: to rid the Nation's association with

Pan-Africanism, Black particularism, and Black religiosity and to create an orthodox Islam relatable to all Muslims, particularly American Muslims.

W. D. Muhammad's enduring legacies can be seen in the many schools and mosques around the country that continue his line of thought. The Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam, the institution that I am studying in this project, is one of the flagship and premier institutions of his community around the country. Today, 48% of African American Muslims identify as *Sunni*, 34% identify as Muslim (no sect affiliation), and 15% say they identify as other, including *Shia* and Nation of Islam (Pew Research Center, 2007, p. 22).

Mohammed Schools

In the early 1980s, members of the Warith Deen Muhammad community of east Atlanta established the Sister Clara Muhammad School. They named it so in honor of Sister Clara Muhammad, wife of Elijah Muhammad, who's vision for equal educational opportunities for African American children resonates deeply within the community. Today, Sister Clara Muhammad School is a combined elementary and middle school. W. D. Mohammad High School was founded in 1989 for high school students. Together, they are known as Mohammad Schools. It is the only Islamic school from K-12th grade that serves the African American Muslim community in the United States. The school is SACS CASI accredited and has a student population of 220, 100% of which are students of color, and an overwhelming majority of which are African American.

The school is owned by the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam, which employs a body called the Consultative Committee to make and implement policy for the school. The Majlis Ash-Shura [*sic*, al-Shura] of the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam, an elected body that represents the community, selects members for the Consultative Board and appoints a director for the school. The Masjid

oversees operations of the school through the Consultative Committee, which meets twice a month to discuss issues concerning the school ranging from funding to curriculum and instruction to media and public relations.

According to Hamed Ghazali's stages of development as mentioned in the previous chapter, Mohammed Schools is between stages two and three. Low salaries remain a major concern for staff and faculty members, but because the school serves a low-income community, it is hesitant to raise tuition. Despite this hindrance, Mohammed School has 27 staff and faculty members of whom 19% have a Master's degree and 3% have a Bachelor's degree in education, 27% have a Master's degree and another 27% have a Bachelor's degree in something other than education; 19% have teaching certificates and 10% have other degrees or are currently seeking one.[11]

In addition to core subjects, Mohammed Schools also offers drama class and music class with an instructor that has an M.A. in music. The school houses the Shareef Abdur-Raheem gymnasium named after the Atlanta Hawks basketball player who contributed generously towards its construction. The school's Athletic Department is most famous for its success in high school basketball competitions, with both boys and girls teams. In fact, the girl's high school basketball team, "The Khalifas," was featured on ESPN for making it to the statewide championship tournament. The library, larger than a classroom for 30 students, has over 1,000 books, and is managed by a librarian who has a master's degree in library sciences. A juvenile justice counselor is available to all students, but the school does not have a nurse on site.

Although an overwhelming majority of the population at Mohammed Schools is African American, its vision is to be a school for all Muslims, not just for one ethnic community. This is most clearly indicated on the first page of the school admission form, which reads, "Thank you

[11] Statistical data was collected from the school website.

for your interest in Mohammed Schools. We welcome students of any race, color, cultural, ethnic and socio-economic background who demonstrate commitment to the pursuit of moral and academic excellence."[12] However to its dismay, the school has been unable to attract students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The school's main limitation for further development is financial. Parents of current and potential students have requested that classes be segregated in grades 9-12, but the school cannot bear the expense of additional teachers. Even without a fully segregated high school, it is unable to afford competitive salaries and to hire quality teachers. Leaders at the school rightly point out that a strength attached to this weakness is that the teachers and parents who are at Mohammed Schools sacrifice higher paying jobs and extra educational opportunities for their children because they are committed to the mission of the school and the community. These people, according to Imam Sami, Atlanta-Masjid community leader for 25 years, choose to be a part of the school because they feel as though they have a calling and an obligation to serve the community.

It is the sense of community that leaders define as the school's greatest strength. Parents, teachers, and students meet with each other on multiple occasions – at school, at the mosque, during conferences, at fundraisers, and at other community events. Some of the staff and faculty have been working in the school and/or the community for over two decades.

Tarbiyah: **Islamic Socialization**

Leaders at the school strive to inculcate a universal acceptance of all human beings, regardless of one's background and personal past experiences. The goal is for graduating students to understand that human beings have an obligation to compete towards greater good and honor, and that this applies to all people, regardless of their ethnic origin. According to

[12] Accessible at: http://mohammedschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/mohammedschoolsapplication.pdf

community leaders, being accepting of others allows students to learn from them, thus furthering the goal of developing healthy global citizens. Through interviews with school leaders, it became clear that imparting this vision is a priority not only for the school but for the community at large as well, which is consistent with W.D. Muhammad's vision for American Muslim life.

In a list of the most important values or lessons students should graduate from Mohammed Schools with, Imam Sami indicated belief in the oneness of God (*tawheed*) and in the Day of Judgment as the first two. Third on the list was a responsibility to achieve one's full potential. To Imam Sami, this means,

> To have competition towards all that is good; [to know] that we all are diverse. God has made us from different nations and tribes, from different families so that we will come and know one another. But we have to compete with one another so that our own resources, the resources around us will be revealed to us. We will see our full role and to find that God creates us dignified and honorable, and that we are to find a higher dignity by fulfilling our obligation in the world and by fulfilling our obligation to our Lord. To know the origin, but in the present reality, to work for a greater destiny.

When Imam Sami says "origin," one might assume he is referring to the history of African American slavery. However, in his recent publication on discourse and identity, Dr. Abbas Barzegar (2011) identifies this use of language as "Abrahamic-American Islamic discourse" (p. 525), suggesting that the "origin" in Imam Sami's discourse is not pointing to a racial history, but rather, encompassing the history of all of mankind. By understanding Islam in universalistic and humanistic terms, he is subjugating the racial category and narrative associated with being African American. He says,

> We start from the premise that when you have a history so horrid as the slave history and being stripped away from your continent and your identity taken, that no one can repay you except God. So that this whole experience brings us to not identify so strongly with a tribe or tradition, but to have this direct connection with God. God has been involved in our lives as a people. Really, God has been involved in everyone's lives. But we get caught up in our family and traditions that we lose track of that. So we use the narrative that the whole African American struggle was a freedom struggle, it was not only to worship God as we saw fit, but to be the human being that God had made available to us.

Imam Sami's description actually facilitates an active break from Pan-Africanism. The history of slavery is not meant to produce affiliations with other oppressed groups; instead, he talks about how God is connected to us *universally*, and to be conscious of and utilize the connection is the only way to fulfill one's role as a Muslim. Imam Sami does not contextualize his community in terms of discrimination or oppression in the past or present. That it occurred to his predecessors is a coincidental fact that should not shape the way people in his community understand their purpose today.

The fourth and fifth most important lessons were for students to be able to acknowledge the differences within the human race and consequently understand that through these differences are opportunities for self-growth. Imam Sami says,

> We have a relationship…with other human beings, with every human being, that there is one humanity, that God has made us different so that we would come to know one another and by me knowing you, I realize things about myself that I did not know…and that God has enabled us to be *khalifas* or custodians, that we are to interact with the creation and the creation interacts with us, and it has been made amenable to us, and that we are to be caretakers or those who protect and pull out the utility of creation,

When he says there is "one humanity," he is echoing W. D. Muhammad's emphasis on pluralism and universalism as opposed to Black Particularism and Black religiosity. Illustrative of school's effort to connect with other people is their multiple attempts to communicate with local immigrant Islamic schools and organize inter-school events.

His use of the term "*khalifa*," or vicegerent on Earth, is symptomatic of his goal for global citizenship and stewardship. To give students the opportunity to be these global citizens, it is required of them before they graduate to complete 100 hours of community service work. The community hosts Global Youth Service Day in which lessons on eco-friendly households, farming, and world hunger are taught. Furthermore, members of the community have established

a non-profit organization called Neighborhood Works, Inc. (NWI) to inform low-income families on home buying, risk assessment, and foreclosures. NWI has a youth development program for young adults to begin interning and gaining community service experience.

Leaders at the school have taken an active stance against teaching dogmatic practices alone. Along with *Qur'an* memorization, students take classes in Islamic philosophy, history, and contemporary issues. In his experience Imam Sami has found that possessing the ability to recite the *Qur'an* with perfection does not prepare students to battle confrontational arguments against Islam. "So we try to give them a foundation," he says. "What backfires is that you have to know that these students are not isolated from the world, and the world's influences." He wants to prepare students for circumstances in which their faith is tested with a philosophical understanding of Islam. This is accomplished by offering classes in high school on the history of Muslims in America, a world history of Muslims, contemporary issues in Islam, and comparing religions.

Leaders of the community seek not to reject *American* or *western* life, but rather to seek the best of both American and Muslim life. The guiding principal for the community in determining something's truthfulness is, "If it is true, it is Islamic." Western practices that do not contradict *Sharia* law, then, are considered Islamic as well. Regarding Islamic jurisprudence, the community takes a relaxed approach in that they find the "best" approach to matters of *fiqh*. Imam Sami says,

> [We do not] adhere to any one school of thought; we want the best of each school of thought. So we are moved from the various schools of thoughts. We don't reject any of them either, but we feel free to select from any of the schools of thought and to think beyond those four. We don't think that all Islamic knowledge is in those four schools of thought. So we consider ourselves to be freethinkers that stay within the confines of the *Qur'an*.

This treatment of Islam as a philosophy is used to guide a contemplative understanding of one's existence with a lower emphasis on ritual practice or on Islamic law. That said, the school has recently implemented a *Hifz* (*Qur'anic* memorization) program before and after school.

The school takes a preventative approach to social issues that students may face such as peer pressure, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and abstinence. Once a year middle and high school classes are cancelled for "Keep it Real Day," where students are separated into groups by gender and school (middle or high). Alumni and other young adult community members are invited to talk to students about the dangers of not keeping it real. On this platform, being real is defined as knowing and practicing what is expected of one as a Muslim, being involved with the school and community, being a leader, choosing appropriate friends, guarding one's chastity, and understanding the value of being a male and female. Alumni share cautionary tales with anecdotal evidence of why it is important to follow their advice.

While the school takes initiative to protect its students from societal ills, it also fosters participation in mainstream American culture. For example, for Spirit Week in middle and high school, students select a wide range of pre-approved themes such as "The 60s" and "(Drug) Awareness Day." Red Ribbon Week, Founders' Week, homecoming, a Senior Gala, and an annual play by drama students can all be found on the school calendar.

In an ambitious attempt to incorporate Islamic lessons throughout the curriculum, teachers at the school meticulously apply verses from the *Qur'an* and *hadith* in secular subject lessons. The goal is for,

> A student who is in math class to understand how math is connected to the *Qur'an*, to the universe, and how Allah has done this for us…and to know why it is important to know this as a social being that is one who has been developed and created by Allah. In every subject, the *Qur'an* is supposed to be infused, and it should be projected.

says Sr. Ameena, the school principal.

Members of the Consultative Board and teachers have recently begun the process of revising the Georgia Performance Standards used in the school curriculum to incorporate Islamic perspectives wherever possible. For example, the English Language Arts and Reading 9-12 Standard that requires students to read a wide variety of literature was altered so that students read at least two pieces of literature from a Muslim writer or about Muslim culture.

For leaders at Mohammed Schools, Islam offers an understanding of existence that allows them to identify as *American Muslims* who happen to be African Americans. Their concerns about raising conscious, global citizens, or *khalifas*, is reflective of a unique ideology that is unlike the secular African American or the immigrant Muslim community's perceptions of American society. Aspects of Islam that are relevant to the community's particular experiences with American society are adhered to more than others. They pay less attention to matters of *fiqh* as compared to other educational models we have seen and instead approach faith in universalistic terms so that in their view, their efforts to achieve greater good and honor can be fulfilled.

4. Conclusion

Before I began analyzing leaders' views on *tarbiyah* in Islamic schools for this study, my idea of the purpose of Muslim education was twofold. The first goal, I believed, was to prevent children from adopting a secular, purely western lifestyle. This includes protection from harmful external influences such as drug use, discrimination in public schools, and loss of identity as a Muslim. The second purpose, I thought, was for leaders of Islamic schools to encourage a way of life governed by Islamic doctrine. A school would be successful if by the time students graduated, they felt drawn to pray five times a day, fast during the month of *Ramadan*, and give charity as prescribed. As an undergraduate student, it required little effort to generate these two concrete, operational goals based on a moderate amount of experience with the Muslim community. But such a simplistic view of the tools our Muslim youth need in order to navigate a complex set of social and political circumstances does them an injustice.

As we have seen in both Dar-Un-Noor Academy and Mohammed Schools, religious and secular educational nourishment requires more than just haphazard efforts to piece together an Islamic environment. Leaders of Islamic schools have an enormous responsibility to design and successfully execute a vision for students that extends Muslim traditions and practices beyond Old World Islamic thought and incorporates American Muslim identity development. While DNA and Mohammed Schools are both in geographically similar locations, facing comparable tension with non-Muslim influences, and striving to establish viable identity, their goals for socializing Muslim children are rather distinct.

Leaders at DNA seem to have three main foci: stellar academic performance in both religious and secular studies, training in matters of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) relevant to a young person's daily life, and the cultivation of students' social competence in what they

perceive to be an Islamophobic society. The later appears to be a persisting reaction and coping mechanism to the historical marginalization of immigrant Muslim communities in the United States and to post-9/11 America. On the contrary, leaders at Mohammed Schools describe their goal as being to develop global citizens who "compete towards all that is good," to quote Imam Sami. Despite the community's history of slavery and oppression, I did not read or hear the words "racism" or "discrimination" once during my time there. Instead, they extract a lesson from the differences between races: an opportunity for self-growth. The rhetoric leaders use at Mohammed Schools is so laden with philosophical ideals that my understanding of their vision remains rudimentary. However the main distinction I wish to highlight here is DNA's emphasis on the first form of *tarbiyah* I identified in the introduction, which is to establish ritualistic Islamic practices in daily life by way of teaching the *Qur'an*, the Prophet (PBUH)'s practices, Arabic, and basic Islamic law (*fiqh*). Mohammed Schools appears to embody the ideals of the second form of *tarbiyah* I identified, which is to impart a philosophical understanding of Islam, where *Qur'anic* principles are applied to global and secular contexts, and interpretation of holy texts are expanded to incorporate contemporary social issues.

To illustrate the distinction between each community's visions more vividly, note that while both schools suffer from financial difficulties, the community at DNA invests large amounts of money towards the school and mosque's cosmetic appearance. Mohammed Schools, on the other hand, devotes its extra funds towards enhancing the school's library, gymnasium, and other resources. Other than large pictures of Elijah Muhammad and his wife that adorn the hallways, the infrastructure of both the mosque and the school is generally free of symbols from the community's ethnic and religious history. Both schools focus on building an Islamic identity and good character, however their methods of accomplishing this vary greatly.

Furthermore, both schools refrain from ascribing to one Islamic school of thought (*madhab*). Mohammed Schools makes this decision very consciously, not wanting to limit the community's practices to one form but rather to embrace the best of all forms. DNA, on the other hand, does it to avoid dictating one particular method of practicing Islam in a community of Muslims from different backgrounds. The diversity at DNA compels children to understand that Islam is part of people's lives worldwide and that there are differing approaches to practicing it. Leaders at Mohammed Schools appear to have abandoned the idea of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Islamism altogether and instead interpret their faith through an American Muslim lens.

I would like to identify some weaknesses in this study. The sample size was small due to limits I had on time and travelling. Other Islamic schools in the Atlanta area, including charter schools and other non-profit schools, merit examination to add to this description of *tarbiyah* in Islamic schools in the metro Atlanta area. Participant observation, interviewing, and discourse analysis are methods subject to personal bias, but I have tried to be as objective in my representation of the schools as possible. I began my research at DNA and continued at Mohammed Schools the following semester. The quality of my research skills improved considerably by the time I started at Mohammed Schools and this may have contributed to my understanding of *tarbiyah* at each school.

References

Ahmad, M., & Nuri, H. (2008). *WeekendLearning series: Islamic studies* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Weekend Learning Publishers.

Ahmed, G. M. (1991). Muslim organizations in the United States. In Y. Haddad (Ed.), *The Muslims of America* (pp. 11-24). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Al-Farooq Masjid of Atlanta. (n.d.). "Community." Al-Farooq Masjid of Atlanta. Retrieved February 4 2012, from http://alfarooqmasjid.org/about-us/community/

Aziz, M. A. (n.d.). *Studies in Islam*. Pakistan: Kazi Publications (Pakistan).

Bagby, I., Perl, P. M., & Froehle, B. T. (2001). *The mosque in America: A national portrait: A report from the mosque study project.* Retrieved from http://sun.cair.com/portals/0/pdf/the_mosque_in_america_a_national_portrait.pdf

Barzegar, A. (2011). Discourse, identity, and community: problems and prospects in the study of Islam in America. *Muslim World, 101*(3), 511-538.

Curtis, E. E. (2009). *Muslims in America: A short history.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Dangor, S. (2005). Islamization of Disciplines: Towards an indigenous educational system. *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, *37*(4), 519-531.

Dar-Un-Noor Academy. (n.d.). *Dar-Un-Noor Academy's Parent Teacher Organization*. Retrieved from http://darunnoor.org/Community/DarUnNoorPTO/Mission/tabid/139/Default.aspx

Ghazali, H. (2000). Islamic schools: Where are we? And where are we going. *The American Muslim*. Retrieved from www.iberr.org/islschools.htm

Halstead, J., & Taylor, M. J. (1996). *Values in Education and Education in Values*. Bristol, PA: Falmer Press.

Hashim, R. (2010). The challenge of identity, education, and citizenship for Muslims in a pluralistic society: A case study of Malaysia. In M. Merry & J. Milligan (Eds.), *Citizenship, identity, and education in Muslim communities: Essays on attachment and obligation* (pp. 167-188). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Hussain, A. (2004). Islamic Education: why is there a need for it?. *Journal Of Beliefs & Values: Studies In Religion & Education*, *25*(3), 317-323.

Husain, S. S., & Ashraf, S. A. (1979). *Crisis in Muslim education*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

ISNA (1991). *In-depth study of full-time Islamic schools in North America: Results and data analysis*. Plainfield, IN: Islamic Society of North America.

Keyworth, K. (2006). Trial by fire: Islamic schools after 9-11. In *Islamic Schools League of America* (Publications, articles, and papers). Retrieved from http://www.theisla.org/staticpages/index.php/PublicationsArticlesPapers.

Khan, N. I. (2009). "Guide us to the Straight Way": A look at the makers of "religiously literate" young Muslim Americans. In Y. Haddad, F. Senzai, & J. Smith (Eds.), *Educating the Muslims of America* (pp. 123-154). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Kirp, D. L. (2004). Life way after head start. *New York Times (1923-Current File),* pp. A32. http://ezproxy.gsu.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/92734208?accountid=11226

Leonard, K. I. (2003). *Muslims in the United States: The state of research*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Niehaus, I. (2009). Emancipation or disengagement? Islamic schools in Britain and the Netherlands. In A. A. Veinguer, G. Dietz, D. Jozsa & T. Knauth (Eds.), *Islam in education in European countries: Pedagogical concepts and empirical findings* (pp.113-129). Münster, Germany: Waxmann.

Niyozov, S., & Pluim, G. (2009). Teachers' Perspectives on the Education of Muslim Students: A Missing Voice in Muslim Education Research. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *39*(5), 637-677. doi:10.1111/j.1467-873X.2009.00463.x

Nyang, S. S. (1999). *Islam in the United States of America*. Chicago, IL: ABC International Group, Inc.

Pew Research Center. (2007). *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf

Smith, J. I. (1999). *Islam in America*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Syed, I. B. (2001). "Education of Muslim children – Challenges and opportunities." Islam for today. Retrieved January 21, 2011, from http://www.islamfortoday.com/syed07.htm

Turner, R. B. (1997). *Islam in the African-American Experience*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Wormser, R. (1994). American Islam: Growing up Muslim in America. New York: Walker and Co.

Zine, J. (2009). Safe havens or religious "ghettos"? Narratives of Islamic schooling in Ontario. In Y. Haddad, F. Senzai, & J. Smith (Eds.), *Educating the Muslims of America* (pp. 123-154). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Appendix

Qualitative Interview Schedule

1. Before I begin with my questions, can you tell me something about the Islamic studies curriculum at this school?
    a. What is the process involved in designing it?
    b. What are the resources used in this process?
2. Have you taught at other Islamic schools?
    a. If yes, what differences and/or similarities do you see between the Islamic studies curriculum here and there?
3. What do you think should be the goal of Islamic education in an Islamic school?
    a. In what ways can Muslim leaders accomplish these goals?
4. What are the five most important values/lessons a student who has graduated from this school should have?
5. What are you expecting the students who attend to gain from being here and not anywhere else?
6. What are the strengths of the school? What are its weaknesses?
7. What methods work in teaching religion? What methods do you find, in your experience, have backfired?
8. What is the dress code policy for teachers/staff/students?

9. What is the rate of teacher turnover? Why do teachers leave? Why do they stay?
10. What are common field trip destinations for students?
11. What extracurricular activities does this school offer?
12. Describe the relationship between this school and the mosque? What is the governance structure?
13. What does it mean to attend this school in this community?
14. What is the philosophy of the school?
15. Is there anything you would like to add to the conversation?