Students' Sense of Belonging at Full-Time Islamic Schools in the United States
A Phenomenological Study

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Sense of belonging is a critical aspect of human development that has been identified as an important ingredient for school success. Yet the construct has not been explored in relation to the experiences of Muslim students in full-time Islamic schools. To fill this gap, the authors conducted a qualitative study using phenomenology to understand alumni's sense of belonging at U.S. Islamic schools. After describing the methodology, three superordinate themes are discussed: the importance of teachers, the creation of a school community, and the minority experience in Islamic school. The range of experiences that cultivated and hindered belonging are also explored in the findings. To conclude, five recommendations grounded in research and Islamic sources are provided to educators to help develop students' sense of belonging at Islamic schools: (a) emulate the Prophetic character, (b) create a caring classroom, (c) foster strong student–teacher relationships, (d) intentionally welcome and orient new students, and (e) pursue antiracism and inclusion.

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Introduction

Sense of belonging is a critical component of healthy human development (Maslow, 1943). Recently, educational researchers have examined how sense of belonging at school impacts students in multifaceted ways (Allen et al., 2018). Yet there are no known studies exploring this construct for students in full-time Islamic schools in the United States. The goals of Islamic schools include the academic, social-emotional, and spiritual development of students. Therefore, understanding if and how they cultivate a sense of belonging is important. This article attempts to fill this gap in the literature by presenting findings from a qualitative study with 37 Islamic school alumni, centering their voices and experiences through a phenomenological analysis.

We begin by providing an overview of full-time Islamic schools in the United States and then review pertinent literature about sense of belonging. Following this, we describe our methodology. In our findings, we explore three major themes, the importance of teachers, creating school community, and being a minority in Islamic School, and discuss how the findings affirm prior research while simultaneously offering new insights into students' experiences in Islamic schools. We conclude with five recommendations for educators grounded in academic research and primary Islamic sources to assist them in developing students' sense of belonging at Islamic schools. These recommendations include (a) Emulate the Prophetic character, (b) Create a caring classroom, (c) Foster strong student-teacher relationships, (d) Intentionally welcome and orient new students, and (e) Pursue antiracism and inclusion.

Islamic Schools in the United States

Full-time Islamic schools in the United States arose in the 1930s as alternatives to public education in a societal context that espoused blatant racism and discrimination against African Americans (Memon, 2020; Muhammad, 2020). The first Islamic schools, called the University of Islam, were established in 1932 by the founding leaders of the Nation of Islam, Elijah and Clara Muhammad. At the time, public schools perpetuated White supremacy and racism through the curriculum, school culture, and inequitable treatment of African American students (Muhammad, 2020). After the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, his son Warith Deen Mohammed succeeded him, leading the Nation of Islam into orthodox Islam. He renamed the schools the Clara Muhammad Schools in honor

of his mother's commitment to education (Muhammad, 2020). Another major historical development occurred in the late 1970s after a change in U.S. immigration policy allowed a wave of highly skilled Muslim workers and students pursuing advanced degrees to immigrate to the United States. As they settled into the country and started families, some helped establish full-time Islamic schools to preserve their children's faith and cultural identities (Memon, 2020). This was done within the backdrop of public schools that claimed to separate church and state, but instead often integrated practices and celebrations from other faiths, namely Christianity (Imam, 2009).

Today, there are approximately 300 full-time Islamic schools that serve an estimated 50,000 students across the country (Islamic Schools League of America [ISLA], 2021). As El-Atwani (2015) contends, "Islamic schools have become an educational option for Muslim students who share the same religion, but also reflect complex diversity" (p. 148). The diversity within Islamic schools reflects the diversity of Muslims in America, which includes African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian Muslims—sometimes grouped together and referred to as indigenous Muslims—and immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries of origin and their first- and second-generation descendants (El-Atwani, 2015; Memon, 2020). Different historical, socioeconomic, and ideological factors have sometimes caused friction among different groups of Muslims in America and impacted the composition of boards, staff, and students at Islamic schools (Memon, 2020; El-Atwani, 2015). As private institutions, US Islamic schools rely heavily on student tuition and donations, which affects their financial sustainability. Increasingly, the schools are obtaining accreditation from national bodies, providing an external level of quality assurance (ISLA, 2021). They are also led by principals with advanced degrees (Brifkani et al., 2021) and are committed to fostering Muslim identity and whole child development (Brifkani, 2021).

Sen Se of Bel ong Ing

Sense of belonging may be best known for its central position in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which categorizes human needs in the following order: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow claimed that when these needs are unmet, maladjustment and even severe psychopathology may emerge (Maslow, 1943). More recently, belonging has been explored within the context of schools.

Goodenow (1993) defines belonging at school as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). Other terminology used in the research includes school connectedness, which is defined as students' belief that adults and peers in the school care about them as individuals, in addition to their learning (CDC, 2009). St-Amand et al. (2017) identify four major defining attributes of sense of belonging among students, including (a) positive emotions, (b) positive relations with peers and teachers, (c) interest and effort to be meaningfully involved in a group during or after school, and (d) ability to adapt to changing circumstances as needed.

Sense of belonging is particularly important for students in middle and high school. Goodenow (1993) asserts, "For early and mid-adolescents in particular, the need to belong and to have a legitimate and valued membership in a setting may take precedence over virtually all other concerns" (p. 88). It is correlated with multiple positive benefits and serves as a protective factor against risk behaviors. A report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2009) included research that demonstrated school connectedness to be "the strongest protective factor for both boys and girls to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury (e.g., drinking and driving, not wearing seat belts)" (p. 5). Sense of belonging has also been found to have a positive impact on student motivation and academic performance (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004).

Many factors cultivate or impact a sense of belonging in students. Wehlage (1989) asserts that reciprocal positive relationships with peers and staff are important to helping students develop school membership. In their meta-analysis of research on school belonging, Allen et al. (2018) found that "the strongest factor impacting school belonging was teacher support" (p. 25). Goodenow's (1993) research with the *Psychological Sense of School Membership* (PSSM) questionnaire found that girls and people from the ethnic or racial majority group at school report higher school membership. Factors that have been found to lower school membership include being a newcomer in an established group, "having a strikingly different background and set of personal characteristics than others in the school" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 88), and a harsh and punitive school environment (CDC, 2009).

The corpus of literature on sense of belonging illustrates its significance beyond student academic success; rather, it is an essential component of one's academic, social, and emotional well-being with immediate and

long-term benefits (Allen et al., 2018). Furthermore, extant research identifies particular factors that contribute to sense of belonging, such as positive teacher and peer relationships, and those that impede it, such as being a newcomer or ethnic minority in school. Yet studies highlighting Muslim students' voices and experiences in full-time Islamic schools are missing in this literature. Because of the diverse composition of the student body, including male and female students of varying racial, ethnic, sectarian, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds, U.S. Islamic schools provide a particularly interesting context in which to study sense of belonging, contributing further to the literature on this important topic.

methodol ogy

The authors engaged in a qualitative study utilizing semistructured focus group interviews with alumni of full-time Islamic schools addressing three major areas of inquiry: sense of belonging, Muslim identity, and sense of purpose in life. Phenomenology was chosen as a methodology because of its emphasis on understanding participants' lived experiences and the interactive and interpretive role of researchers (Creswell, 1998; Love et al., 2020). The goal was to offer a deeper understanding of what contributes to or hinders a sense of belonging in Islamic schools, centering students' perspectives, voices, and experiences otherwise missing in the literature.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for focus group interviews with individuals 18 and older. Purposeful snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) was used to recruit participants who were Muslim, attended a full-time secondary Islamic school in the United States, and graduated from high school in the past ten years. A total of 37 participants, 14 males and 23 females, participated in this study. They were of Asian, African American, Black, White, Middle Eastern, Turkish, and mixed racial/ethnic backgrounds and had attended full-time Islamic schools located in various regions across the country. Some participants were students in college pursuing majors in mental health, civil engineering, and teaching, while others were already working as lawyers, software engineers, computer forensic analysts, government diplomats, dentists, and doctors. Some memorized the entire Quran and others pursued minors in Islam at colleges or seminaries since graduating.

A research focus group interview is facilitated by a moderator to understand participants' ideas and experiences about a specific topic or phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Group dynamics often help activate personal

recollection and reflection (Love et al., 2020). In this study, eight 90-minute interviews including three to eight participants were hosted on the videoconferencing platform Zoom, during February and March 2021. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to preserve anonymity. To facilitate rapport, participants kept their cameras on and participated in ice breakers. Three researchers participated in the focus groups, and each introduced themselves and their background in Islamic schooling; two moderated the interview and another managed consent and demographic intake forms and recorded field notes. Interview questions were communicated verbally and typed in the chat, and probing questions were used to dig deeper into participants' experiences and to conduct member checks. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and files were securely stored online.

To begin, participants were asked to describe what a sense of belonging meant to them. Next, they discussed, "How would you describe your sense of belonging at your Islamic school?" Two follow-up prompts focused on key areas identified in the literature, namely teacher and peer interactions: "Can you share examples of interactions with teachers and how they cultivated or hindered a sense of belonging?" and, "Talk about your interactions with peers and how they may have cultivated or hindered a sense of belonging for you."

The data on sense of belonging was analyzed by this article's coauthor Seema Imam using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Love et al., 2020; Palmer et al., 2010). Multiple readings of the transcripts allowed her to become immersed in the data. Documents referred to as participant portraits were created to uncover the lived experiences of each individual and across the eight groups by capturing participants' demographics, quotes, and stories. Transcripts were color-coded to identify emerging themes. Researcher interpretation was required to identify similar phenomena being discussed by different participants, in which case synonyms were carefully selected. Quotes were included in the participant portraits and highlighted in transcripts to create an audit trail ensuring findings were embedded in the data. Sticky notes were used to identify emerging themes and focus group dynamics. A scatter plot was created with moveable sticky notes and placed on manila folders and clustered, helping the researcher identify superordinate themes. Hard copies of the transcript allowed the first author to manually identify, sort and enumerate when a particular topic was broached, by whom, and how often, both at the participant and

focus group level. This process helped answer the research questions and explore the significance of participants' stories that described their sense of belonging at Islamic school.

fInd Ing S And dIScu SSIon

The findings from this study affirm prior research about sense of belonging and provide vivid insight into how profoundly a sense of belonging, or lack thereof, impacts students. Overwhelmingly, many participants attributed a strong sense of belonging at their Islamic school to their shared identity as Muslims and its associated values, morals, and lifestyle. Furthermore, their sense of belonging often resulted in a strong support network, sense of confidence in their Muslim identity inside and out of school, and life-long relationships with teachers and peers. Powerfully, the impact of belonging at school carried with them into adulthood. Yet not all participants had this experience. Goodenow (1993) notes, "Unfortunately, even in generally supportive schools some individual students may feel socially marginal or excluded, for any number of reasons such as poor social skills or stigmatized status as a special education or ethnic minority student" (p. 81). Indeed, participants in this study who were newcomers to the school, of minority ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, and racial backgrounds, and females often felt barriers to belonging at their Islamic school.

In the following sections, we focus on three superordinate themes that emerged from the data analysis: importance of teachers, creating school community, and being a minority in Islamic schools. Subthemes capture the range of experiences participants shared and are identified within each superordinate theme to provide insight into factors that both cultivated or hindered their sense of belonging at school. The embedded discussion highlights how the study's findings complement and extend upon extant research in the field.

ImPor tAnce of t eAcher S

Many participants identified teachers as an important and critical factor to their sense of belonging, validating prior research that stresses the impact of reciprocal positive relationships on students' school membership, in particular relationships with teachers (CDC, 2009; Wehlage, 1989). Allen et al. (2018) state,

> Students who believe that they have positive relationships with their teachers and
> that their teachers are caring, empathetic and fair and help resolve personal prob-
> lems, are more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging than those students who
> perceive a negative relationship with teachers. (p. 25)

In this study, participants described strong relationships with teachers who
cared about them, took time to know them personally, engaged in worship
together, and guided them in personal and spiritual matters.

teacher r elationships

One participant, Eman, attended an Islamic school until eighth
grade and alluded to many factors regarding teacher relationships that
were echoed by other participants. "I felt very . . . loved and comfortable
with faculty. They felt like aunts and uncles and family to me." Zubeida
identified how their language facilitated this feeling. "[W]e would call
each other 'sister' and 'brother' to the teachers and within our classmate
. . . so it felt like family." Also, she felt that praying alongside teachers
brought them closer. "[W]e would pray side by side with teachers . . .
we would see our teachers praying next to us as a community. So, it felt
like family."

Teacher relationships were often developed through interactions that
extended beyond the instructional periods. Eman explained,

> During lunch, I didn't want to hang out with the rest of the kids in class . . . so a lot
> of times I would actually have lunch with teachers. . . . I would go into their rooms
> at lunchtime. . . . We would talk for like an hour. They would be like . . . how are
> you feeling today? How's your family?

Eman's teachers were welcoming and went beyond their roles as classroom
instructors to get to know her personally. Eman said, "I felt like . . . fac-
ulty really cared about me in Islamic school and that was very powerful
for me growing up. I felt like I had a whole support system . . . this whole
network of people that we could reach out to." She felt bad for those who
did not have this network "because they don't have the same community
outreach and connections that we did. So I felt like we started off with a
much stronger base." Another student, Mohammed, felt these relation-
ships were long-lasting, attesting that "even when they [students] have left
Islamic school and they still need a place to go just to talk, they can still
go to that teacher."

Strong student-teacher relationships were reassuring to participants.
They knew teachers were there to look out for their best interests and could
assist with personal problems, in addition to academics. Yusra stated, "I

would always know that they were going to encourage me, whether it was tough love . . . giving me a book to read or telling me a quote from the Quran. I knew . . . they would serve as mentors for me." The strong teacher relationships described by the study participants not only helped students gain a sense of belonging at their school, but had long-lasting positive impacts for them even after they graduated. For needs from career support to spiritual advice, they had a network and an adult they could depend upon.

Judging

There were also students who discussed how teacher behaviors negatively impacted their sense of belonging, including being judged or treated unfairly by teachers and administration. Rather than serving as adults "who promote mutual respect in the classroom . . . by reducing the threat of being embarrassed or teased" (CDC, 2009, p. 7), they in fact instigated such embarrassment, in turn negatively impacting participants' sense of belonging. Noor described an incident where she and a friend were accused of trying to get physically close to male peers when they could not find seats near their female classmates. A teacher misconstrued their intentions, remarking, "Obviously you would want to do that." Another student reported that her teacher publicly speculated why she and a male student were both missing from class, insinuating rumors about an alleged romantic relationship between them. She said, "Friends turned away from me. . . . I still feel the effect today." These examples illustrated that when teachers judged students or promoted rumors, it made students feel hurt and alienated, in turn negatively affecting their sense of belonging at school.

Creating School Community

Participants often described their school community as familiar and comfortable, a space where they felt loved and cared for by their teachers, and in which they understood the shared norms and values. The elements they highlighted echoed research on school climate that fosters belonging. Such a climate is characterized by "caring and supportive interpersonal relationships; opportunities to participate in school activities and decision-making; and shared positive norms, goals, and values" (CDC, 2009, p. 7). But some participants also described being bullied or excluded as a new student at Islamic school by their peers, troubling the notion of community that many others felt.

f amiliarity and Shared Identity

When asked about his sense of belonging at Islamic school, Omar expounded,

> The phrase that comes to mind is "it fits like a glove." . . . It's a sense of normalcy that I don't think really exists, or it's not very common . . . because you're almost always, nowadays, at least, reminded that you're the other. And in the Islamic school, that wasn't the case. You weren't the other. You were just like everyone else. Obviously . . . differences still existed, but that comfortable feeling, everyone has a baseline sense of commonality that was really nurturing, in the sense that it allows you to be more expressive about everything else about yourself.

While there was diversity at Islamic school, their common Muslim identity helped students feel like they belonged and not feel othered as they did outside of their Islamic school environment.

Noor explained that at Islamic school, "the people I was around struggled with the same things . . . when it came to school or faith . . . it just made me feel comfortable. . . . I feel like that helped me accept who I was and my faith as well." Because of their shared identity and struggles, one student commented that at Islamic school "you don't have to worry about what others think." Furthermore, for some, having teachers and friends who were Muslim helped them feel comfortable and confident in public, too. "Because my core group at school, and like all my teachers and my friends were all Muslim . . . I felt comfortable and confident being Muslim there [in public] . . . I felt like I had that community behind me still."

The impact of a shared ethnic and religious identity was often noted by participants who had also experienced being a minority in public school. Mohammed transferred to public school in ninth grade. He reflected,

> You're surrounded by people who are more or less . . . from similar ethnic backgrounds and so . . . you know you're all kind of going through the same kinds of things. So, when it's Ramadan, everyone is fasting together . . . when it's time to pray, everyone goes to pray. When you leave that kind of environment and when you're in a public school–type environment, you're kind of isolated.

He concluded, "I definitely think that the same ethnic, religious background that you get in the Islamic school definitely contributes to that kind of environment where you feel like everyone understands what your situation is like."

Zubeida also contrasted her public and Islamic school experiences and identified the presence of those of the same ethnic background with shared morals and lifestyles. She said,

> Before, I was in public school and I was really looking for that community in the public school because it was majorly non-Muslims and there were no Arabs at the school, and so I was trying to look for a group that I identified with. So, when I transferred to an Islamic school, I felt like there were people who had the same morals as me, people who had the same lifestyles as me.

As a member of an ethnic majority group at school, Zubeida's sense of belonging increased, supporting Goodenow's (1993) finding that "status as a member of the majority ethnic group within the school was associated with significantly higher levels of belonging" (p. 86).

Joining Late

Participants who joined Islamic schools later in their K-12 school career often faced challenges to gaining a sense of belonging. While Laila felt a sense of belonging, she noted, "Girls were mean to them [new students] and ostracized new kids. The new students had a harder time." Kulsum reflected on her own experience of joining an Islamic school in third grade after years of homeschooling. She shared that "no one included me" and "not being included caused trauma." Kulsum further explained that it was not until she was graduating in eighth grade that she finally started to feel a sense of belonging at school.

Selim, a Turkish student, identified both his late entry into the Islamic school and his minority ethnic identity as impediments to his sense of belonging. He said, "It is extremely hard to join in middle school [when] everyone had been together since kindergarten. Once I had friends, we are still friends, but it is hard not to be of the dominant ethnicity." His statement supports Goodenow's (1993) finding that being a newcomer to an established group or member of a minority ethnic group can inhibit belonging at school.

Khalid was a refugee from Syria who came to the United States when he was in seventh grade. He joined a large private Islamic school in 10th grade, which he attended until graduating. He was outspoken about the utter lack of belonging he experienced at his Islamic school. He shared, "I needed help in English, and while my English was poor, I did not feel any sense of belonging." Throughout the interview, Khalid identified many aspects that contributed to his lack of belonging, including peers who simply did not include him, much like Kulsum had spoken of, as well as compounding factors affiliated with coming to a new country as a refugee.

Zubeida, who joined as a new student in fifth grade, was able to gain a sense of belonging in her school because her teacher helped her learn school norms and practices. She explained,

> My first interaction with my teacher was that she kind of took me aside . . . she made sure I knew the *duas* [prayers] before I ate and how the procedures went, and I really appreciated that, because it was a totally different atmosphere. And each time a new student would come, the teachers would do the same thing, like tell them our little things that we do as a community so they won't feel left out, so they could feel like they belong.

However, most participants in this study who joined Islamic school in later grades did not have the same experience of being explicitly taught school norms and procedures, which hindered their sense of belonging at school.

Being A mlnor It y In ISl Amlc School

Students were often positioned as minorities in their Islamic schools if they had a different ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, or racial identity than the majority. Additionally, many female students felt further marginalized. Participants were sometimes hesitant to label their school or teachers as racist, ethnocentric, or sexist, but overwhelmingly, they noted how being a minority in Islamic school often led to feelings of exclusion and a lack of belonging.

ethnicity and l anguage

One participant stated, "Language made a difference. If you didn't speak the dominant language, you were left out." Another hesitantly agreed with this criticism. She confirmed, "I will just say that schools are not professional when they speak Arabic with some of the kids, or Urdu with some of the kids. It is not okay." When languages other than English were spoken in colloquial exchanges, it created a sense of exclusion for those of other linguistic backgrounds. Given the intersection of language, race, and ethnicity, this had compounding implications for racial and ethnic minority students at the school.

One participant commented, "There was not entirely racism, but there was preference given to some groups. I never belonged, and everything was taught through fear." Still another participant noted that her "school was Arab-centric, so others did not belong." Mahjooba described a painful experience with cyberbullying that she faced. Yet even after

bringing it to the administrators' attention, the students responsible for it were never adequately disciplined. She believed this was due to favoritism and what she termed "Arab vs. *desi* [Indo-Pakistani] racism." She stated,

> So, the administration was fully Arab. . . . Specifically, the guys on the soccer team . . . how do I say this? But they never got in trouble. Like no matter what, no matter how bad the situation was, they never got in trouble. I think they always favored the Arabs. . . . I feel like they could have done something more, but because the Arab guys were at fault, they didn't take the necessary actions to give the punishment deserved.

Unfair application of rules to the preferred ethnic community caused serious distress for Mahjooba, which was still palpable at the time of the focus group interview.

Amira observed, "In my school, there was definitely a heavy population of a certain ethnicity, and that kind of made it hard for everyone who was not that ethnicity to kind of fit in." Yet over time, she and her peers noticed a change as they became more vocal and assertive about the inequities and how they felt. She shared,

> I did see, actually, some growth in that department as the minority ethnicities became more vocal . . . about kind of having equality a little bit more and having more belonging. For those who are not part of that ethnic group, it got a lot better. But that was something I struggled with definitely in my early years leading up to high school.

Amira and other ethnic minority students in her school were able to make a noticeable change over time by speaking up and advocating for a more inclusive school environment.

r eligious Sect

Ami recalled a student who was Shia in her school who was treated differently. She said,

> We had one Shia student in my school. . . . I didn't really understand what she was doing when she was praying differently. . . . I was told, "She's doing it wrong, but that's what she does at home, and she can pray separately from you guys." It's those kinds of things where it wasn't really explained to us the differences between different types of people.

Ami went on to study Islam as a minor in college because she was so frustrated with the singular way in which Islam was presented in her Islamic school.

Hussain identified as a Shia Muslim and previously attended public schools before joining his predominantly Sunni Islamic school in ninth grade. He shared,

> When I joined my Islamic school, I was kind of like the odd one out because no one knew what a Shia was, like they didn't think it was also a Muslim as well. And so, I think the first semester of all of high school I was asked like, "Oh, do you pray?" or, "Do you read the same Quran as us?"

Teachers at this school invited him and his older brother to present to their classmates, allowing them to educate their peers about similarities between Shia and Sunni beliefs and practices, which positively impacted his sense of belonging at school.

race and gender

In addition to ethnicity, language, and sect, race was frequently mentioned by African American students as a salient factor that caused them to feel discriminated against and as though they did not belong. Amir, an African American male, shared that despite being born Muslim, he never felt like he belonged in any of the three Islamic schools he attended. He recalled, "[W]hen I was young, I knew I wasn't part of the Arab or desi group." Unfortunately, tension among Muslim Americans of various ethnic, racial, linguistic, and sectarian groups is not new and is rooted in historical, socioeconomic, and theological differences and lived realities (El-Atwani, 2015; Haddad & Smith, 2009; Memon, 2020). Furthermore, given the ubiquity of anti-Black racism in the United States, the broader cultural and social context in which Islamic schools are situated could be another reason why racism continues to fester in these institutions.

Most of the Black female respondents recounted incidents in which their race and sex intersected, adversely impacting their sense of belonging. Farah, who was biracial, commented that there was "so much sexism and racism. I am outspoken and did not belong at all. They called me an honorary Arab, but I don't want my identity erased for the sake of their racism. I am a Black Muslim." Farah's mother was a White teacher in the school and helped advocate for her. Farah recounted,

> She was a great advocate, but peers did not understand my views and I had to solve my own problems. I felt the Islamic studies teacher hated me and used the word *abeed* and used to make fun of me for being a feminist in Islamic school. He spoke badly about Black people and used the "N" word. He even questioned whether I believe in God or not. The boys were horrible, and even after reporting it, nothing was done about it.

Despite her mother's advocacy, Farah was subject to blatant racism from a teacher and mistreatment from male peers. In addition to the offensive use of the word *abeed,* which is a derogatory term in Arabic that literally

means "slave," and racial slurs in English from her Islamic studies teacher, her school did nothing about these egregious actions. She was marginalized further by being called a feminist, apparently in an attempt to discredit her perspectives and to cast suspicion about her authenticity as a Muslim.

Rae identified herself as a Black student and was initially hesitant to categorize her Islamic school as racist. "I would never classify my experience at my Islamic school as racist, but there were definitely some microaggressions that I definitely encountered there, like very few." For example, Rae noticed that her Islamic school never observed Black History Month. Also, she suggested that the school hold a Black Lives Matter event. "[T]hey were like, no, you don't want to talk about race." Rae also noticed that teachers harbored racist beliefs. "I had a few teachers who [would] say like really racist things. . . . [A] teacher was talking about how Arabs were the best race because the Prophet came from them and stuff like that." Rae felt that these instances were not intentional acts of racism. She explained, "[T]hey weren't actively being racist or anything like that. It was just them being, thinking . . . Pakistanis and Arabs are the only type of Muslims that matter in terms of talking about them and talking about their history." El-Atwani (2015) contends that this is common, stating, "The history of Black Muslims in the United States is ignored by most immigrant Muslims, and Black Muslims in the United States are profiled as 'converts' and as less religious" (p. 146). As the school ignored Black History Month while acknowledging Pakistani or Arab contributions, Rae felt her Blackness was not recognized, appreciated, or validated as authentically Muslim.

In a separate focus group, Ami recounted incidents she observed at school and wondered if the teachers even noticed that their behaviors and speech were rooted in racism that caused her to feel isolated.

> I had one Black teacher who undid his braids and he let his hair out, and we had another teacher say, "I'm too scared to enter the room where he is in because he looks crazy." I was like . . . his hair is just different. I don't understand what's going on. . . . But I don't think they [were] ever even aware of what they were doing when they do those things, [which] kind of made me feel like I didn't belong or I felt isolated a little bit.

At one point, she stated, "I was feeling comfortable and then someone would remind me when it is time to get married, there are not a lot of Black men here, [so] you'd have to go somewhere else to get married."

It is worth noting that in this study, three female participants who identified as Black spoke of differential treatment they received due to

their race, while other participants of Arab or South Asian ethnic background also acknowledged the prevalence of racism and ethnocentrism in their schools. Zine's critical faith-centered antiracist feminism (2016) is a relevant framework for uncovering the multiple intersecting factors that may have impeded the students' sense of belonging. Zine (2016) explains that "this framework also allows for the analysis of systems of oppression based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion and ability as they intersect within the lived experiences of marginalized groups" (p. 184). Future studies exploring sense of belonging, anti-Black racism, and its intersectionality with gender and other systems of oppression deserve further investigation utilizing this framework as the primary interpretive lens.

r ec ommend At Ion S

Insights gleaned from the participants in this study substantiate and extend upon recommendations for educators from the larger body of research on sense of belonging in school. Two additional primary resources for constructing meaningful recommendations for increasing students' sense of belonging in Islamic schools include the Quran and the *sunnah*. The Quran is the Muslims' holy book, while the *sunnah* refers to the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, which are documented in books of *hadith,* or the recorded sayings and actions of the Prophet. These serve as primary sources for Muslims who seek to live in accordance with Islam and are crucial to establishing epistemologically and ontologically congruent recommendations on enhancing student belonging in Islamic schools. Therefore, the recommendations below reference both academic research on effective school-based practices for increasing belonging and examples from the Quran and sunnah. The recommendations also attempt to highlight factors that supported participants' belonging and address those that appeared to be problematic.

1. emulate the Prophetic c haracter

The Prophet Muhammad was known to have the most excellent character and mannerisms, which helped him establish positive relationships with diverse individuals. Even before receiving Prophethood at the age of 40, he was known by those within and outside of his tribe as *Al-Sadiq*, the truthful, and *Al-Ameen*, the honest. God attests to the Prophet's noble characteristics in the Quranic verse,

> Truly, O believers, a Messenger has come to you from among yourselves—one upon whom it weighs heavily that you should suffer in this life or in the life to come, who is solicitous about you and your welfare, whose very nature toward the believers is sheer kindness and mercy. (9:128)

Another verse describes the Prophet as a mercy to all humankind. "For we have sent you, O Prophet, as none other than a mercy to all the people of the world." (21:107). Further, his excellent character was described by his wife, Aisha, as a living example of the Quran (Sahih Muslim, 746), meaning an embodiment of the injunctions, values, and essence of Islam as communicated to humankind from God through the Quran. In *Principles of Islamic Pedagogy*, Ajem & Memon (2011) argue, "The Prophet Muhammad (s) provided a teaching model that has thus far been unharnessed" (p. 1), and they remind us that the Prophet proclaimed, "Verily, I have been sent as a teacher" (Sahih Muslim, 1478). A study of the Prophet's life and character provides teachers an opportunity to understand some of the qualities and dispositions that would enable them to be more effective educators, including enhancing student belonging. Some of those characteristics are further explained in the following four recommendations.

2. create a caring classroom

A caring classroom is a principle of Islamic pedagogy that Ajem and Memon (2011) describe, which they suggest is grounded in the love of God and His Messenger. "Love is manifested by teachers in the compassion, concern, and forbearance they show their students… he or she must promote a classroom culture of care never neglecting the emotional and spiritual needs of students" (Ajem & Memon, 2011, p. 34). Noddings discusses the concept of care extensively in her writing as an educational philosopher. She explains, "From the perspective of care ethics, the teacher as *carer* is interested in the expressed needs of the *cared-for*, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study" (p. 772). To understand these needs, she argues, the teacher must understand people's needs and feelings from the other's perspective (not one's own) and therefore must be an attentive listener (Noddings, 2012).

In his book *With the Heart in Mind*, about the Prophet's moral and emotional intelligence, Smith (2019) emphasizes the role of empathy and emotional investment in the Prophet's interactions with others. Smith states that "as we study the science of emotional intelligence through the lens of the prophetic model, we see that his personal interactions with

others starts with sincere empathy. . . . That emotional understanding allowed him to deeply connect with everyone that he met" (p. 67). The Prophet developed this emotional investment through active listening, for example by turning his whole body to someone when they spoke to him, and attunement to their body language (Smith, 2019). Such methods of active listening could assist teachers in being fully present with their students, in which they "listen" to both verbal and nonverbal communication, understand and internalize what is being said, and develop a genuine emotional investment in the student. Their ability to listen and empathize would allow them to understand and address students' needs through instruction and personal connection, enhance personal relationships, and establish a caring classroom that would help students feel safe, seen, heard, and included.

3. f oster Strong Student-t eacher r elationships

A key component of increasing sense of belonging for students in school includes fostering strong student-teacher relationships (Allen et al., 2018, Cervone & Cushman, 2015; St-Amand et al., 2017). Barron & Kinney (2021) state that "a supportive relationship with one or more teachers is the strongest predictor of school belonging for an individual student" (p. 27). They further suggest, "Put just as much effort into thinking about the relationships you'll establish and promote in your classroom as you expend on the content you'll teach" (p. 29). Schools can support the development of teacher-student relationships by intentionally creating opportunities for teachers to build rapport and connection with students. Based on findings from this study, some particularly effective methods for Islamic school educators may include participating in prayer with students, attending community events, and encouraging students to address their peers and teachers as "brother" and "sister."

Furthermore, strong student-teacher relationships could be cultivated by teachers standing outside the classroom door to greet students, acknowledging them by name in the hallways, and including daily advisory periods in students' schedules. Cervone & Cushman (2015) found one school that utilized advisory groups to enhance a "web of structural supports" that collectively facilitated strong student-teacher relationships. They explain, "Mixed-grade advisory groups of students and a teacher met daily (usually for at least thirty minutes) and often stayed together for four years. . . . Personal discussions, team-building activities, learning and practicing social skills" were all part of the advisory period (p. 7). Importantly, it was rarely

used as a study hall to complete homework. Rather, the school structured students' schedules and built into teachers' roles a daily period that would explicitly cultivate their relationships with and among students and also help build students' social-emotional skills through the activities that took place during the period. By creating time and space in the school schedule that helps build teacher-student relationships, schools do not leave this to chance or place the burden solely on teachers' shoulders.

4. Intentionally Welcome and orient new Students

Participants in this study who joined an Islamic school in later years often struggled with developing a sense of belonging at their school. Those who quickly made a friend or had a teacher pull them aside to teach them about school norms felt more secure in their sense of belonging. Therefore, Islamic schools should consider formalizing systems to orient and welcome new students to help them develop a sense of belonging and thrive in their new setting.

Additionally, the Prophet Muhammad's example provides insight into how Islamic schools can address challenges faced by participants who enroll midyear or join the school in later grades. In the widely documented *hijrah*, or migration, of the persecuted Muslims from Mecca to their sanctuary city, Madinah, the Prophet Muhammad appointed *Ansar* (helpers) who were longtime residents of the city, to acclimate and support *Muhajirun* (travelers) until they were settled and self-sufficient. Initially, each Muhajir family lived with one Ansar family. This created an opportunity for the newcomers to develop a deeper relationship with at least one member of their new hometown. Following this example, schools could establish a buddy system for new students. The "host" students could go through training on how to acclimate new peers when they arrive. Information about norms, rules and procedures, and basic companionship at lunch, recess, and physical education class could be provided through this buddy system. Ideally, students would understand that the buddy system is actually a tradition rooted in the Prophetic example, and therefore is more than just a kind gesture but is an embodiment of their faith.

5. Pursue Antiracism and Inclusion

Another challenge that several participants experienced was racism and discrimination on the basis of being a minority in the Islamic school. This finding is deeply concerning because Islamic teachings explicitly forbid racism. The Prophet Muhammad stated in his last public sermon, "All

mankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also, a white has no superiority over black nor does a black have any superiority over a white, except by piety and good action" (Sunan al-Tirmidhi, 1163). El-Atwani (2015) describes the various layers of diversity that exist within the Islamic school system, suggesting, "Islamic schools in the United States may be the only places that bring together students of different races, classes, and nationalities to share the same religion in the same educational settings" (pp. 147—148). Given the complex history and layers of diversity, Islamic school leaders must strive to understand how these dynamics function in their schools and how they may impact students' sense of belonging.

One particular Quranic verse provides guidance on how to counter such exclusion on the premise of race or culture. "O humankind! Indeed, We have created all of you from a single male and female. Moreover, We have made you peoples and tribes, so that you may come to know one another" (Quran, 49:13). This verse reminds us that it is important for Islamic schoolteachers to get to know their students and their families and to understand their values, customs, and histories to ensure that they do not hinder their sense of belonging by neglecting to recognize and value their identities.

Another method that could support students' sense of belonging is multicultural education. El-Atwani (2015) proposes that multicultural education in Islamic schools should focus on content integration, prejudice reduction, and equity pedagogy, drawing on Banks' (1993) typology of multicultural education. Moreover, antiracism training should be considered for Islamic school staff on a regular basis to better understand conscious and unconscious racism, reflect upon one's own biases, and improve the school culture and sense of belonging for all school members, regardless of their race or ethnicity. The Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative is an organization that provides such training specifically to Muslims.

concl uSIon

We believe this study provides extraordinary insight into the experiences of Islamic school students that should be drawn upon to assist practitioners of Islamic schools in creating a sense of belonging for all their students. Further data analysis is planned to explore how students' Muslim identity and sense of purpose in life were impacted by their experiences in Islamic school. Of course, this research has limitations, including

potential self-selection bias and findings generated from a limited population. However, we are excited about the possibilities it holds in creating a window into the experiences of the very students our Islamic schools seek to develop and support.

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Notes

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