

# The Role of Islamic Schools Between Muslim Immigrant Families'/Students' Perceptions and Institutional Realities

Mohamed A. Nur-Awaleh and Reda Mohammed

*The study expands our understanding of the educational role of Islamic schools in the United States. It investigated the types of challenges facing Islamic schools in America and the resulting policies that schools adopt in response to these challenges. To that end,*

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MOHAMED A. NUR-AWALEH is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations at Illinois State University, where he served as the point person for the doctoral program in higher recruitment and advisement of doctoral students (2009–2017) and developed the only course on comparative higher education administration at Illinois State University. He has published extensively on topics such as comparative higher education administration, Somali higher education, African governance of higher education, transformative leadership, immigrant education, social foundations/multicultural education, the role technology in higher education, and Islamic education. His publications include books, book chapters, and peer-reviewed articles, and he has presented widely at national and international conferences. His awards include Outstanding College of Education Researcher of the Year as well as the Outstanding Faculty Award, Office of Diversity & Advocacy; Outstanding Faculty Diversity Community Award, College of Education; and Manahan Excellence Teaching Award, Department of Educational Administration & Foundations, Illinois State University.

REDA MOHAMMED is a PhD candidate in English studies with a specialization in linguistics and TESOL at Illinois State University. Much of her research focuses on issues pertaining to maintenance of Arabic as a heritage language in immigrant contexts, family language policy, linguistic variation and language ideology, identity performance across languages/genres, and the analysis of Arabic and English morphosyntactic structures. She has published on Arabic heritage language development/maintenance and is the coauthor of articles on reversing folk notions of linguistic and cultural diversity and American students' perceptions on grammar learning. She has diverse experience teaching EFL classes in Egypt and Arabic classes in U.S. universities. In 2008, as a former Fulbright Scholar, she taught Arabic at Chapman University, in California. In 2015, she taught Arabic at the University of Wyoming. Currently, she teaches English linguistics, grammar, and composition at Illinois State University.

*the study interviewed the principals of two Islamic schools located in Illinois to discuss their schools' practices, policies, and challenges. Additionally, we interviewed five Muslim immigrant families and their children who attend these schools to further explore their challenges as well as motivations, benefits derived, and the values they place on these schools. We start by describing the immigration trajectory of Muslims in the United States and the historical establishment of Islamic schools and their status in the United States. We conclude by discussing the role of these schools in the educational development of Muslim students.*

**Keywords:** Muslims, perceptions, policies, religion, schools

## Introduction: Muslim and Islamic Schools in the United States

Muslim Americans are heterogeneous. Their heterogeneity stems from them having not only different ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and languages but also from the nature of their affiliation with the Islamic religion. Research shows that Muslim Americans include those who were born as Muslims in other countries and came to the United States as slaves, immigrants, students, traders, and more recently refugees, U.S.-born Muslims, and converts (Timani, 2006; Jones 2008; Moll, 2009; Clauss et al., 2013). Timani (2006) states that the presence of Muslims in the United States dates to the “sixteenth century when Muslims were brought as slaves from Africa” (p. 2). This initial presence was followed by different waves of immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and other parts of Africa for different reasons and under various pressures (Timani, 2006). Hence, Muslim Americans constitute a dynamic group that constantly admits new members, whether as converts, U.S.-born, or even refugees, among others. Another unique feature of Muslim Americans is tied to their religious practice and religiosity level.

Some researchers argue that Muslim Americans differ even in their practices, religiosity level, and in their understanding and interpretation of Islam (Shakeel, 2018). Others posit that while Muslim Americans constitute a diverse and heterogeneous group, “they were and are *Muslims* who adhere to the tenets of Islam, a religion based on the *Qurán*” (Clauss et al., 2013, p. 2). Therefore, Islam is a unifying feature for that group. Despite the variations in researchers' descriptions of Muslim Americans, it is worth noting that the differences that characterize Muslim Americans may inform their decisions and motivations regarding the types of education that they want to provide to their children. Hence, this study

explores Muslim parents' motivations for choosing Islamic schooling and their justifications for their selection. It also considers the perceptions of Muslim students regarding their parents' educational-type selection and the benefits they receive by attending such schools. Then, it examines the challenges that parents report regarding Islamic schooling and relates these views to the reports of the principals from two Islamic schools in the state of Illinois.

#### Between challenges and opportunities

Despite the common misconception that Muslim immigrants are the ones that first established Islamic schools in America, research shows that it was African American converts who started these institutions. Shakeel (2018) mentions that an African American activist called Elijah Muhammad and his wife Clara Muhammad were members of a movement called the Nation of Islam and were among the first who started Islamic schools in America. Thus, "Islamic schools started in the 1930s in Detroit as a movement for Black Nationalism that included ideas from Islam, Christianity and the mythology of the founders of the Nation of Islam" (Shakeel, 2018, p. 14). These earlier schools adhered to the philosophies of the Nation of Islam movement and Islamic schools in their current shape were not established until the 1970s (Shakeel, 2018). As for the current number of Islamic schools in the United States, researchers provide different reports that range from those who exaggerate their reports to those who underestimate the actual number of Islamic schools. This is due to the lack of documentation and organizational supervision of these schools. Research shows that only a "relatively small fraction of Muslims enrolls their children" (Merry, 2005, p. 383) in Islamic schools. Similarly, Shakeel (2018) reports that a small number of Muslim Americans attend private Islamic schools and that these numbers are increasing. Schools established by the Nation of Islam are now called "Sister Clara Muhammad Schools" (Shakeel, 2018, p. 14). The purposes of these earlier schools differed drastically from those established by immigrants. The purposes of Islamic schools built by immigrants will be discussed in a later section.

Islamic schools in the U.S. context are described as "more multiethnic, containing linguistic and cultural diversity from Africa, Asia, Europe and white America (through Muslim converts), though those with a Middle Eastern heritage made up the largest share" (Hussain & Read, 2015, p. 566). The diversity of Muslim immigrants, the variations in their ethnic origins, and the relatively small numbers of their scattered communities

across different states pose challenges to the establishment of an Islamic school that serves only one ethnic background (Mohammed, 2022). For example, in a study that reviewed 81 published articles on Islamic schools, Shakeel (2018) reports that Muslims who immigrate to the United States bring with them “cultural traits and heterogeneity in the understanding of Islam” (p. 7) that then informs their decisions regarding the types of schooling they choose for their children. However, research shows that across the Muslim-immigrant communities, there is always one ethnic group that forms the majority of members that belong to a certain community. Shakeel (2018) adds that it is mostly “immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia” who dominate Islamic schools in America and “push their cultural and social values on Islamic schools, which in turn affects the children” (p. 15). Nevertheless, building Islamic schools is mostly contingent upon the number of Muslims within a specific geographic location, and it is often difficult to “find concentrations of Muslims in a certain state that require the establishment of a school” (Shakeel, 2018, p. 16). As a result, most of the Islamic and faith-based schooling would be dependent on complementary and/or weekend schools that do not operate on a full-time basis.

In their study’s interviews of administrators, teachers, and parents in two Islamic schools in North Carolina and Pennsylvania, Clauss et al. (2013) discussed the issues facing Islamic schools, their needs, as well as their importance to the Muslim community. Their study revealed that one of the most important reasons Muslim Americans value Islamic education is that they perceive these schools as essential to the “growth of Islamic identities and beliefs” (Clauss et al., 2013, p. 11) of their children. In a similar fashion, Timani (2006) argues that Muslim American children are assimilating into the American culture, and in the process, they are deviating from following the Islamic ways, where Muslim parents send their children to Islamic schools to provide them with a space that teaches “Islamic beliefs, values, and practices” (p. 5). The study of individuals’ perceptions and beliefs are essential to understanding the decisions, teaching practices, and behaviors for educational and language policy research (Vakili & Mohammed, 2020). For example, scholarship on Islamic schools shows that Muslim Americans choose Islamic education for their children for various reasons (Merry, 2007). These reasons include their interest in transferring their religious and cultural values to their children, their desire to maintain their children’s religion, bilingual, and multilingual identities, their focus on facing racism and their dissatisfaction with public

schools, and the desire to secure a safe environment for their children, among others (Mohammed, 2022; Hussain & Read, 2015; Timani, 2006; Clauss et al., 2013; Shakeel, 2018). Note that these reasons do not include academic advancement for their children, since many Islamic schools struggle to provide quality education to their students. Therefore, Muslim parents may compromise the academic achievements of their children over their focus on religious and moral development. According to Clauss et al. (2013), “The public-school system cannot offer Muslims or any other group religious and moral education” (p. 5). Since “religious instruction is only a private phenomenon” (Shakeel, 2018, p. 14), many religious groups tend to choose faith-based schools for their children as an alternative to the lack thereof in public schools. However, some parents who choose Islamic schools become dissatisfied with the schools’ performance, and instead of going to public schools they resort to homeschooling their children. Shakeel (2018) mentions that many Muslim families choose homeschooling because they “find the available Islamic schools inadequate to meet their demand for reproducing religious and moral values in their children” (p. 16). Such mismatch between families’ expectations and schools’ performances is one of many challenges that Islamic schools suffer from.

Research on Islamic schools reveals that they have many challenges, some of which are within the school itself, such as inexperienced administrators and poor teaching practices, and others have to do with outside reasons such as lack of funding as well as islamophobia and discrimination. Some of these challenges are mentioned in Clauss et al. (2013) as lack of “financial support, state certification for teachers, enrollment and retention issues, and acceptance by the Muslim community itself” (p. 4). The literature shows that one of the most frequently reported challenges facing Islamic schools in the United States has to do with lack of government funding. This crucial issue entails other issues that affect the quality of education offered at these schools, among other consequences. As Shakeel (2018) puts it, “The scarcity of finances not only affects science labs and libraries, but also the school’s ability to hire and retain quality teachers” (p. 19). Since most of Islamic schools’ funding comes from tuition fees, investigating how schools deal with issues of lack of funding is essential to understanding their role in the educational development of Muslim children. It is also important for considering other funding sources that might help the schools better their services.

### criticism against Islamic Schooling in the united States

There are many negative public perceptions regarding the presence of Islamic schools in the United States. On the one hand, some argue that Islamic schools encourage segregation, operate under foreign agendas that threaten the safety of U.S. society, and produce extremists who despise America and threaten its unity and security (Timani, 2006; Shakeel, 2018; Merry, 2005). For example, Timani (2006) posits that Islamic schools might have been established to preserve Islam but at the same time they “contribute to the social division and alienation of Muslim children from the rest of society” (p. 20). Such division and alienation assume that Islamic schools train students to become more versed into Islam and give up their loyalty to the American society. Nevertheless, there is no empirical evidence that tests the validity of such claims. While Timani (2006) focuses more on issues of “de-Americanizing Muslim children” (p. 20), Merry (2005) approaches Muslim immigrants as divided into two groups. One group favors Islamic education for their children and the other perceives it as a way that hinders their integration into U.S. society. Merry (2005) combined published research with interviews with parents, administrators, teachers, and Muslim and non-Muslim researchers at Islamic schools in the Midwest with the goal of investigating the reasons that motivate the parents to choose Islamic education for their children. Merry reports that “many Muslim parents are eager to shield their children from certain materialist and secular influences by placing them in a comprehensive religious environment in order to foster a highly specific moral orientation” (2005, p. 377). There might be other reasons for Muslim Americans’ enrollment in Islamic schools, and more studies are needed to better our understanding of these communities. Our study contributes to current research on Islamic schools in the United States context by examining the perceptions and practices of Islamic schools and their students in another part of the Midwest, which is the state of Illinois.

On the other hand, other researchers provide counter arguments that Islamic schools create more tolerant Muslims. For example, in a study that used interviews and observation data from three private Islamic schools—one located in the U.S. state of North Carolina and the others in Oxfordshire and Lancashire, England—Hussain and Read (2015) found that “contrary to popular perceptions, the findings suggest that Islamic schools can facilitate the participation of Muslims in mainstream institutions by equipping them with the cultural capital needed to navigate in non-Muslim arenas” (p. 556). Similarly, Clauss et al. report that Islamic

schools allow students to develop a “desire to be both rooted in their faith traditions as well as have opportunities to dialogue with persons of other faith traditions” (2013, p. 11). By means of comparing Muslim Americans to other immigrant groups in the United States, Hussain and Read (2015) state that Muslim Americans “are typically described as high achievers” (p. 560). And by comparing Muslims in America to those residing in Europe, Merry (2005) adds that Muslims in America are more financially stable than those living in Europe. These educational and financial features of Muslim Americans situate them as contributors to the American society.

### Research Question and Significance of the Study

Overall, current scholarship on Islamic schools is growing, and more empirical research is needed to understand the challenges as well as the affordances of Islamic education in America. This study adds to existing literature on Islamic schools, first, by examining the perceptions of two Islamic schools’ principals regarding the challenges their schools face and the ways in which they try to better their performances; and second, by interviewing the parents and children of five Muslim families with the goal of understanding their perceptions regarding their experiences of sending their children to Islamic schools as well as the experiences of their children attending Islamic schools. These interviews were meant to help get an overall understanding of two Muslim communities in Illinois that are not representative of all Muslim communities in the United States. Nevertheless, it helps in expanding our understanding of the role of Islamic schools in the educational development of Muslim American children in the U.S. context. The study asks three questions:

- What are Muslim American parents’ perceptions regarding the value/role of Islamic schools in their children’s education?
- What are Muslim American children’s perceptions regarding their educational experience in the Islamic schools under study?
- What are two Islamic schools’ principals’ reports regarding their schools’ challenges, practices, and policies?

### Methodology

For this study we used case study methodology because it permitted us to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the participants’ perceptions regarding the role of Islamic schools in their educational

development. According to Yin (2009), the case study method is appropriate to “understand a real-life phenomenon” (p. 18). Furthermore, Stake (1995) and Yin (2009) have shown that a case study is an empirical inquiry that involves in-depth examinations of a person, group, community, program, or an issue. As Stake (1995) puts it, a case study is “a well bounded, specific, complex, and functioning thing which means a person or a program” (p. 25). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that a case study must have an action criterion that will facilitate action on the part of readers. Therefore, this qualitative study combined aspects of convenience and purposeful sampling. Hence, a convenience sample of five families, five children, and two Islamic schools’ principals from two Islamic schools located in the state of Illinois were identified to participate in this study. The method of selecting parents and their children involved a purposeful sampling technique. The schools are full-time K-12, and the children were 11–14 years of age at the time of the interviews. The parents come from five Muslim countries: Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia. Both schools are adjacent to the mosques in their Illinois towns. As for the first school, it is in a town that has a big Muslim community where Muslim Arabic-speaking families are the majority of such a community and a smaller number comes from Africa and Asia. The second school is in a town where Arabic-speaking Muslims are a minority; most of the Muslim community come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh; and a small percentage of the Muslims have Arab origins. All the participating families are from Arabic-speaking countries. Of the two principals, one is a female Arab Muslim immigrant, the other a male Indian Muslim immigrant. The parents’ interviews asked about the reasons parents enrolled their children in Islamic schools and their perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of Islamic schooling. The children’s interviews asked about their experiences attending Islamic schools. The principals’ interviews asked about the challenges, practices, and policies that their schools implement for developing the educational experiences of the Muslim students. The interviews were conducted at times and locations that best suited the work schedules of the participants. The interviews were transcribed and the themes pertaining to perceptions, practices, policies, and motivations were identified. A sample selection of interview excerpts will be used in the analysis and discussion section to further illustrate these themes.



## Results and Discussion

### Results From Principals' Interviews: Lack of Funding and Its consequences

Most research on Islamic schools reports that lack of governmental funding to Islamic schools is one of the most pressing challenges that these institutions face (Senzai, 2009; Merry & Driessen, 2005). However, rarely does the research mention the ways such lack of funds affects the schools or the schools' ways of addressing it. Therefore, in the case of the two schools that we studied, we asked the principals to explain the issues caused by lack of funding as well as other challenges that their schools might face. The first school's principal provides insights regarding the issue of difficulty of admitting students with disabilities.

Funding has always been an ongoing issue for our school. It has caused many problems but one of the most difficult ones was our inability to build a school that is accessible to everyone, especially those with special needs. Because we do not have enough funds, we cannot admit students with disabilities or those who need certain types of physical and educational accommodations. A few years ago, we had one family who had three children and one of them was a special needs child and we could not admit them. The parents were not happy as they wanted to put all their children in one school. It was a sad experience that I cannot get out of my head but there was nothing we could do. The sad thing is that we had to post on our school website that we cannot admit this type of population. (Ms. Shawki, principal 1, March 2021)

This comment sheds light on a very important issue that is not discussed in published research on Islamic schools. It is the issue of lack of accommodation and accessibility. This issue is a direct result of lack of funding that the Islamic schools are suffering from. The principal's statement reveals that Islamic schools under study are built for those who are physically fit and those that deviate from such fit descriptions are disqualified. In this way, families with special needs children who would like their children to enroll in such schools would struggle between their desired goals for developing certain aspects of their children's identities and other forms of education. While the school could have admitted the other two children, the parents wanted their children to stick together and decided on a different route than Islamic education that would be accessible to all three of their children. This is conveyed via the use of phrases such as "were not happy" and "put all their children in one school." The unhappy feelings were expressed not only by the parents but also by the principal, who felt "sad" and could not get over her school's inability to admit that family's child. The feeling of dissatisfaction is revealed through her use of the phrase "cannot get out

of my head,” which suggests that this issue is something that she is still trying to solve but does not have the means that would enable her to do so. Moreover, due to their current lack of funds they had to announce on their website that they cannot admit students with special needs, which means a lower rate of admission as well. The announcement of this policy was a direct result of a lack of funding that made it impossible for the school to be accessible to all variations, physicals and otherwise. The consequences stemming from the decision are not limited to lowering the admission rates for the school.

Lack of accessible facilities and resources at one of the two Islamic schools under study was not the only issue resulting from lack of funding. The second Islamic school’s principal reported that because of a lack of financial resources, the school could not afford its own bus for the transportation of students. He describes how such an issue affected the enrollment and retention rate at the school:

We have many issues due to lack of funding. What can I say? It is difficult for us to have fully equipped labs and a good library. We receive many complaints from teachers regarding lack of resources, but we are doing our best and we cannot do it alone. We don’t even have a bus that transports students and because of that, many out-of-town parents could not keep up with commuting back and forth to drop and pick up their children and this has affected our retention and enrollment rates greatly. (Mr. Adnan, principal 2, March 2021)

We understand that a lack of funding has affected Islamic schools in many ways. One of these issues has to do with the availability of libraries and labs that respond to the needs of the schools’ populations. While these two issues were reported in literature on Islamic schools, the issue of the absence of a school bus system was not addressed. The second principal’s report shows that there is a strong correlation between retention and enrollment rates and the availability and lack of a bus system for the schools. Most of the public schools have a bus system that helps students commute, but its absence from Islamic schools hinders students’ access to the type of education that they value/desire. The principal’s phrase “we cannot do it alone” suggests that for Islamic schools to be able to do a better job and become better equipped to admit all types of students as well as ease the burden of commuting to and from their premises, government and state funding is needed. Such funding may also help decrease the public’s mistrust in Islamic education, since the government/state would have more participation and observation to the types of curricula and teaching practices used within such schools. Moreover, the lack of

funding is not only affecting the students but also the teachers, who cannot fulfill what they were hired to do. Such a result is conveyed via the use of the phrase “many complaints from teachers,” which suggests the issue may negatively impact teacher performance. This takes us to the next consequence of a lack of funding, which is the poor performance of teachers as well as their limited qualifications. This comment below from the first school’s principal discusses such an issue:

Our funding sources come from the tuition fees as well as a small contribution from the mosque, but these resources alone are not sufficient to make ends meet. Most of our teachers are either volunteer parents or underpaid hires. And for us to hire highly qualified teachers, it costs more money which we do not have. We try to make up for this issue by helping our teachers attend teacher training courses, but our hands are tied, and it is difficult to train them and ensure sufficient resources are available to serve the other needs of our students. (Ms. Shawki, principal 1, March 2021)

This comment shows that the consequences of funding scarcity are impacting Islamic schools tremendously. This excerpt details such issues and describes how they affect teachers’ hiring as well as training pursuits. From this report we understand that many teachers at Islamic schools are “underpaid hires” and “parent volunteers” who may not be adequately trained in teaching. For Islamic schools to help those teachers continue their work and better their performance, they use tuition money to fund some training programs for them. This situation cannot continue, since schools need the money to attend to other shortcomings. In addition, a lack of funding prevents these schools from hiring qualified teachers, since their financial means are limited. We also get insights into the sources of funds that these schools use to operate, which are dependent on tuition fees and money from the mosque’s donations. This suggests that Muslim parents choose Islamic schooling for which they need to pay, and with such payment they must have expectations that might not be met because of the lack of financial resources that the schools suffer from. The scarcity of funds, in turn, may impact the retention and enrollment rates at the Islamic schools. This is revealed in this report from the second principal:

Our school’s administration discussed a few options to solve the lack of funds for our institution. Our first decision was to increase the tuition fees. When we started with this option, our enrollment rate dropped significantly, and we lost 30% of our students. This was a very hard consequence but what else can we do? Parents contribute as much as they can, but we cannot ask them for more unless we provide them with newer and better services. We need government funds to improve and continue offering our services to our students. (Mr. Adnan, principal 2, March 2021)

Mr. Adnan discusses one of the policies that one of the two Islamic schools we studied resorted to in attempting to overcome issues of funds scarcity. The suggested first solution was a tuition increase. He mentions that their first move, to raise the school's tuition, was not received well from the Muslim families and led to a decline in the enrollment and retention rates. As a direct result of their decision, the school lost 30% of its full student capacity. This decrease meant more financial loss to the school. It also implies lower future enrollments. The other solution that the principal discussed was getting government funds, which is difficult given the nature of the educational system in the United States, which separates religion from academics and hence hinders the use of taxpayers' money to serve Islamic or any religious institutions.

Overall, the results from our interviews with the principals reveal that Islamic schools are struggling on many levels, most of which are connected to scarcity of financial resources and lack of government funding. More attention should be paid to faith-based and other complementary and full-time schools, Islamic and otherwise. The religious-based nature of these schools means that they close a gap in the public schooling system, and for that they deserve support. The gap is informed by public schools' inability to accommodate the linguistic and religious diversity of immigrant and minority groups. Therefore, the presence of other types of schooling is important and essential for developing the various identities of diverse Americans. It is important for American society and its diverse groups to be better informed regarding the challenges and goals of Muslim students and other minority and immigrant groups. Studies show that some American students who are training as teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students are not well informed regarding cultural and linguistic diversity, and hence more educational programs that increase their awareness of and tolerance to linguistically and culturally diverse students are needed (Mohammed & Vakili, 2021). Therefore, highlighting the issues and challenges faced by the Muslim group under study is crucial to increasing such awareness of linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity in the U.S. context. We add that based on our results, many Americans need to become better informed regarding religious diversity and the educational needs and challenges of religiously diverse groups. This awareness will help the members of society to work together on integrating all types of variations, linguistic, cultural, religious, and otherwise, into their united society.

### Parental Perceptions and Motivations Regarding Islamic Schools

We queried the participating families regarding their motivations for choosing Islamic schooling for their children and the challenges they face at the Islamic schools. The results from the interviews show their challenges mostly align with what was reported from the two principals we interviewed. However, the parents' motivations vary from maintaining their home languages to transmitting their religious and cultural values to their children.

We chose the Islamic school because as our children grew older, we became more concerned that they may lose Arabic and we decided to pay the price and help them learn their language at the Islamic school. However, we were not very convinced with the Islamic school because they had many problems in math and the teacher was not as good. We were not satisfied with the teachers' performance and the school was outrageously expensive. (Sewady's family, mother, Sudan, July 2019)

This comment from Sewady's family suggests that parents' selection of the Islamic school comes from their understanding of the importance of maintaining their native language. We learn about the parents' observation and awareness of the status of their children's Arabic proficiency. Research on Arabic as a heritage language in the United States argues that as children reach school age, their home languages such as Arabic become subject to attrition (Albirini, 2018). Parents' awareness of the importance of maintaining their heritage languages is evident in their use of phrases such as "grew older" and "lose Arabic," which informed their decision to enroll their children in an Islamic school. We found that most of the Arabic-speaking families shared these values and intentions. The comment reveals one of the reasons that motivated Muslim parents to choose faith-based schooling for their children, it also reveals one of the challenges that they deal with at the Islamic school which is the poor teaching quality of teachers especially those related to subjects such as mathematics. This finding is reported earlier in our interviews with two Islamic schools' principals who said that due to the lack of financial resources, it has become difficult for the school to hire high-quality teachers. It depends instead on volunteers and training programs as ways for solving such an issue. While Islamic schools might be working on solving such an issue by raising tuition fees, such a decision was not received well by parents who describe the school's tuition as "outrageously expensive." The use of the adverb of degree "outrageously" to modify the adjective "expensive" conveys a higher degree of dissatisfaction from the parents with paying

extra fees compared to the free public-school system. Furthermore, the use of the phrase “pay the price” implies that parents perceive that their endeavors to get their children the education they value is such a costly pursuit. In general, the comment from Sedawy’s family raises two important issues, one that highlights parents’ motivations for choosing Islamic schooling which is tied to preservation of the Arabic language; the second is their dissatisfaction with the schools’ teaching methods as well as high fees. These issues need to be considered by educational researchers as they think through ways of accommodating linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity in the United States.

We chose the Islamic school because it provides the safe Islamic environment that we want for our children to experience. I want to ensure that they learn and understand their Islamic background. However, at the Islamic school, teaching Arabic is not as we expected it to be, and we hope they make it suitable for our children who are Muslim Arab Americans. (Zeyad’s family, father, Palestine, April 2019)

Here the father of Zeyad’s family introduces us to another motivation for choosing Islamic schooling which is tied to the safe Islamic environment of these faith-institutions as well as the development of their children’s religious and linguistic identities. This father highlights the positive features of attending an Islamic school and describes it as “safe.” The safety that the Islamic school provides will help his children “learn and understand their Islamic background,” which reveals the parents’ keenness on developing their children’s religious identities. Moreover, it shows that the parents also want for their children to develop their Arabic competence by attending the Islamic school. Such motivation is evident in his use of the phrase “teaching Arabic is not as we expected it to be.” This phrase suggests that there was a preconceived notion regarding the Arabic that the parents expected their children to learn at the Islamic school. Such expectation is not met at the Islamic school, and this takes us to another challenge that parents deal with which is the teaching quality. In addition to the poor teaching quality provided at the school, this comment from Zeyad’s family shows that there is an issue with the Arabic curriculum that does not address the multiple identity aspects of the students. The Arabic that the school provides does not accommodate the diversity of the children as described by their parents as “Muslim Arab Americans.” These identity markers show that the parents see their children not only from the religious perspective but also acknowledge their Arab roots as well as their American identities. From Zeyad’s family’s comment above, we learn that Muslim parents decide

on Islamic schools because they perceive them as safe spaces where their children's religious and linguistic identities can be developed by learning Arabic and learning about their Islamic roots. It also shows that parents are knowledgeable of the importance of helping their children embrace and develop the different aspects of their identities. Merry (2007) writes that many Muslim students report that their "Muslim identities grow stronger as a result of Islamic schooling" (pp. 60–61). Hence, Muslim Americans do not value the development of one aspect of their children's identities over another but rather all these aspects. However, it is possible to find that their decisions and practices provide more resources for the development of one aspect over another. Nevertheless, they still hope that they and the Islamic school address their children's multiple identities in their curriculums as well as their teaching practices.

I am busy with home stuff and even while I feel responsible for teaching my children Arabic, I needed a formal school so that they can learn more formally and also reading the Quran recitation (Tajweed) has rules and I am not sure I know them one hundred percent, so I enrolled them in the school to get both Arabic and formal Quran rules. (Ghaith's family, mother, Jordan, June 2019)

In this statement, the mother of Ghaith's family describes the home duties that overwhelm her with many chores that may hinder her from teaching her children. She still feels responsible for helping her children learn their home language, but she perceives that the school provides a better place for achieving that. Her perception is informed by her preference of a formal setting such as a school where her children can develop specific skills such as reading and recitation of the Quran. She informs us of her ability to teach Arabic but assesses her teaching of Quranic rules as low and hence prefers someone who is more professional to teach her children. This perception led her family to choose the Islamic school for its perceived formality and professionalism. She hopes that her children can develop their Arabic and Quranic recitation skills by attending this school. The results from our analysis of Ghaith's family's comment reveals that Muslim Arabic-speaking parents may be capable of teaching their children Arabic as their home language, but they are not comfortable or confident enough teaching them about the religious register and its recitation rules. Moreover, it shows that the formal environment offered at the Islamic school is an additional motivating factor for choosing faith-based schooling by Muslim parents. Finally, it addresses the issue of parents' busy schedules which might not give them time to observe the educational development of their children and therefore they choose to pay the additional cost for other institutions to do that job.

We don't have an Islamic school in our town, so I have to drive for one hour back and forth to drop my children off at the Islamic school. We sent them here for learning Islam, their culture, history, and experience the Islamic environment. I hope they have a bus system or if we have our own Islamic school in town. This would make our life easier. (Jaweesh's family, father, Egypt, May 2019)

In Jaweesh's family's comment, we are informed about the issue of the limited number of Islamic schools in the family's town and the consequences that entail such scarcity. As a result, they decided to commute to a neighboring town to provide their children with the type of schooling they prefer. Other factors are revealed in the Egyptian father's use of statements such as "learning Islam, their culture, history, and experience the Islamic environment." These Muslim parents believe that the Islamic school's environment will enable their children to learn about their religion, culture, and history. These three reasons suggest that they want their children to understand and learn more about their religious identities, their cultural and historical roots which are tied to their parents' countries of origin and differ across the Muslim groups. The above comment also shows that the issue of lack of financial funds that Islamic schools suffer from impacts their ability to offer bus services to its attendees. Such a finding aligns with the reports from the Islamic schools' principals we discussed earlier. Therefore, Muslim parents believe that the presence of a bus system for Islamic schools would help them save time and allow their children easier access to the schools.

Our children used to attend a public school, but my children were always upset when they came home and did all their prayers together. The public school did not accommodate their prayer schedule and so we had to transfer them to the Islamic school. The Islamic school has other Muslim kids, and this helps my kids integrate and pray together. (Feisal's family, mother, Saudi Arabia, August 2019)

Here we have a glimpse into the Muslim children's previous experiences at public schools. It highlights the lack of religious accommodation at the public schools, which aligns with published scholarship on Islamic schools discussed in the introduction. The mother of Feisal's family mentioned that the lack of religious accommodation at the public schools her children first attended before being transferred to the Islamic school made them unhappy as it required doing their missed prayers combined later in the day. Such an experience forced the parents to move their children to a school that acknowledges their religious practices by allowing them to do their prayers on time. It also reveals that the presence of other Muslim students at the Islamic school has motivated parents to



enroll their children there. This is informed by the perception that their children would find people who share the same identity features and as such it would facilitate their integration as well as their religious practice. To summarize, this comment from a Saudi family addresses two inter-related issues: the first is the inability of the public-school system to allow time for diverse religious practices which is tied to the United States' policies regarding the separation of the state and religion. The second is Muslim parents' perception that the Islamic schools are spaces where their children can integrate better with people who share their faith and religious practice.

### Students' Views Regarding Islamic Schools

My parents chose the school because when we went to the public school, I ended up doing my prayer late. Here I can do my prayer on time. I also want to learn more about my religion and language, and this is the place to go. (Rania, F, 12 yrs, Feisal's family, August 2019)

Rania's report regarding the lack of religious accommodation at public schools aligns with that of her mother's the preceding excerpt. Here, we understand that Muslim children value the timely practice of their daily prayers. The child states that the decision to join the Islamic school came after her experience at the public school. Such a report suggests that the Saudi family first enrolled their children in the public school system but when the system failed in accommodating the religious identities of their children, the family sought a different route. Rania's statement also shows that she has her own internal motivations to join the Islamic school, such as developing her religious and linguistic skills. Rania's statement suggests the challenges that Muslim children face or might face at public schools. Muslim parents choose Islamic education as a space that fills the religious-accommodation gaps present at public schools. Moreover, Muslim American children are aware of the importance of maintaining and developing their linguistic and religious identities and perceive Islamic schools as spaces that make this happen.

My mum and dad want me to study Arabic and Islamic studies and I come here because I want to be a good Muslim. (Salma, 11 yrs, Ghaith's family, June 2019)

Salma informs us that her enrollment at the Islamic school was her parents' decision. Then, she adds that their decision was based on their desire for her to learn Arabic and Islamic studies. These motivations are then emphasized by her own desire to "be a good Muslim," which suggests that

she understands the Islamic school as a space that would help her achieve such goodness.

We come all the way here because my father wants me to learn more Arabic and know how to read the Quran well. At the public school we didn't learn Arabic and my family was not happy about it because when we visit Egypt, they want me to talk in Arabic to my grandparents and family, but I know more English. (Kareem, M, 14 yrs, Jaweesh's family, May 2019)

Kareem's statement conveys the types of efforts that Muslim parents and children exert in their endeavors to preserve their language and religion. This is evident in the use of "all the way here," which conveys a glimpse of the long distance that the child commutes every day to attend the Islamic school. It also shows that parents' perceptions and desires for their children to learn Arabic and Quran, which is the religious book for Muslims, informs their decisions of choosing faith-based education for their children. It also reveals that children understand their parents' desires and decisions and they also understand what the surrounding issues are that shaped these decisions. That is evident in the child's report using statements such as "my family wasn't happy." Here, the child discusses two issues, first the lack of Arabic classes in the public-school system in their town/state, and their parents' dissatisfaction with such lack which made them enroll them in the Islamic school. Second, the child is also aware of his parents' desire for him to know Arabic. That was a result of his inability to communicate with his extended family members in his parents' home country. Finally, it reveals that the child is also aware of his higher English competence compared to his Arabic competence. Overall, parents' observations of their children's linguistic and religious competence inform their decisions regarding the types of schooling they choose for their children. The statement below implies that Muslim parents consider it their responsibility to help their children develop and maintain their linguistic and religious identities.

I used to attend the weekend Quran school and when this school opened, I wanted to attend it and learn more about the Quran, Islamic studies, and the Tajweed rules. My parents also wanted me to improve my Arabic reading and writing. (Jalal, M, 13 yrs, Sedawy's family, July 2019)

Jalal's remarks suggest that some Muslim parents may compensate for the lack of religious education in the public-school system by sending their children to complementary Qur'an weekend schools. We are informed he first attended a Quran school that used to operate on the weekends. Then,

upon the establishment of an Islamic school in his area, his parents enrolled him in it. The child mentions that he was intrinsically motivated to attend the Islamic school because he wanted to learn more about his religion. This is evident in his explanation that he wanted to learn the Quran and the recitation (Tajweed) rules. Then, the child stated that his parents shared his motivation to attend the school because they wanted him to improve his Arabic skills especially those pertaining to reading and writing. Overall, the parents' and children's motivations for attending an Islamic school are here aligned, which suggests that children have high awareness of their educational goals.

I didn't decide but it is a pretty good school. My parents wanted me to be like around Muslim people and they think this is a safe place for us. (Ammar, M, 11 yrs, Zeyad's family, April 2019)

Ammar explicitly states that the decision to attend the Islamic school was not his but rather his parents'. However, he has a positive opinion of the school, which suggests that he agrees with his parents' decision. Then, the child explains his parents' reasons for choosing the Islamic school as it provides an environment where he can feel safe around people who share the same religious identifications. Such a finding was reported in the statement from the Saudi mother quoted earlier. Therefore, we conclude that according to interviews from parents and children, many Muslim parents find the Islamic schools' environments safe and beneficial for developing their children's religious and linguistic identities because these schools host students who share the same religious backgrounds with their children. While some of the children did not directly participate in their parents' decisions to join the Islamic school, their experiences at the school helped them develop a sense of acceptance of their parents' decisions.

## conclusion

In this case study, we discussed parents' and children's motivations for choosing Islamic schooling. It also addressed the challenges that parents deal with because of sending their children to these schools. The study also investigated the types of challenges facing Islamic schools in America and the resulting policies that schools adopt in response to these challenges. This study provides neither a framework nor a blueprint for all Islamic schools and our results should not be generalizable to other schools. The results from the two schools' principals revealed that the issue of funds scarcity

causes many problems at Islamic schools such as absence of transportation services to students, difficulty of affording teacher training programs, and limited access to schools for only able-bodied students. Results from parents' interviews showed that Muslim parents choose Islamic schooling because they perceive them as safe and beneficial to the preservation and development of their children's linguistic, cultural, and religious identities. The children's interviews revealed that children understand their parents' decisions and are fully aware of what the Islamic schools provide to them. To address the needs of Muslim students, especially immigrant students, we recommend that schools ought to end the one-size-fits-all approach to educating children and change their schools into learning communities that attend to the diverse needs of all students.

#### Future Research and Practical Implications

This study was delimited to a sample of five families, five children, and two Islamic schools' principals from two Islamic schools located in the state of Illinois. The limitation of this study was that it has a small sample that focused on one geographical area; therefore, the findings of the study may not be generalizable to other geographical areas. Thus, future studies should expand this study and conduct comparative studies of different schools with different immigrant students that could enhance our knowledge base with respect to how school administrators address the needs of these students. Future studies should also investigate the extent to which teachers' philosophies of education or their values are oriented toward Islamic education. Finally, future research can expand this study and investigate what other factors may contribute to the development of Islamic schools in the United States.

This study has practical implications for teachers, parents, and administrators of Islamic and public schools. For example, Islamic schools should develop policies that emphasize strong collaboration between the community and schools to establish funding mechanism that support their schools. Public schools should also allocate spaces where Muslim students' religious practices can be accommodated. Another practical implication calls for developing teacher training programs that consider finding ways of helping teachers from diverse communities/schools develop and update their teaching methods. Moreover, stakeholders and policy makers need to consider ways of helping Islamic and faith-based schools become more accessible to all types of learners and/or making public schools more accommodating of the religious, linguistic, and cultural needs of immigrant, refugee, and

minority students. Finally, the findings regarding parents' and children's motivation for attending Islamic schools have implications for other Islamic schools in North America and the Western world which can guide and inform these schools' practices and policies. One of which is increasing and improving their language courses, especially those that meet the needs of their diverse student populations.

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