Educational Choices of Muslim Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to acquaint researchers and readers with the actual nature of Muslim students' educational choices and examine their various types using research literature pertinent to religious and secular educational institutions attended by Muslim students. The findings emerging from the study showed that most Muslim parents choose to place their children in non-Islamic schools, with a significant number of parents enrolling their children in weekend and after-school programs to supplement their Islamic education. A small minority of parents opt for full-time Islamic schools while an unidentified proportion choose non-traditional forms of education such as Quranic schools and homeschooling. Some Muslim parents send their children back to their countries of origin for schooling purposes.

Keywords: *American Muslims, Educational Choice, Islamic schools, Quranic schools*

1. INTRODUCTION

The American Muslim population has increased rapidly in the last few decades to an estimated 2.4 million according to Pew Research Center (2007) or 7 million (2.2% of the total US population) as reported by Bagby (2012b); the latter estimate has been endorsed by major US Muslim organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America and the Council of American Islamic Relations. This substantial population increase was due primarily to new waves of immigration from Muslim countries, high birth rates in Muslim families, and conversion of many Americans into Islam. Providing children with educational opportunities in the US school system in order to be successful citizens has been considered a priority by most Muslim parents.

As more Muslim students are being enrolled in American schools and the numbers of Islamic schools are growing in size, it has become important to explore the types of schooling choices available to them and the estimated enrollments in each type. This research was conducted to acquaint researchers and readers with the actual nature of Muslim students' educational choices and to close the knowledge gap in this field.

The goals of this study were to find out the educational choices available for Muslim students, to determine estimates of students enrolled in these educational programs, and to examine the factors that influence parents' decisions to choose these options. This study is, however, not a treatise on school choice per se and so it has none of the controversy to which much of the

literature is occupied. Hence, this study is limited to school choices in relation to Islamic and non-Islamic options available to parents, and within the non-Islamic option, the study looks at parents' choices between public and private schools, and only within the public school option does the issue of school choice appear to be of relevance to the topic under study.

Although this study aimed to provide a comprehensive description of this topic, there were some unavoidable limitations that need to be taken into account. First, the literature did not present exact figures on Muslim students in US schools. The numbers cited in the study were only estimates from research sources. Second, the list of educational options available to Muslim students was not inclusive and only reflected what was reported by literature and author's previous research and professional experience. Finally, the study only provided a general description of educational options available to Muslim students. More specific investigation of these options will need to be conducted in future studies.

The author taught in public and Islamic schools in the Midwest and was the principal of a full-time K-12 Islamic school in the South. He also conducted research on the contributions of these educational institutions to the common good of the American society. In addition, he conducted observations of Quranic schools and taught in a large Islamic weekend school. The author's experience with these various types of education was an additional resource for this review of the educational choices of Muslim students.

2. NON-ISLAMIC CHOICES

The educational non-Islamic landscape is filled with public and private schooling choices that cater to the needs of Muslim students. These choices include schools that are public, charter, Catholic, or non-sectarian.

2.1 Public Schools
Muslim students attending public schools benefit from a free education that aims to develop their sense of citizenship and provide them with the skills and means to achieve social status. This provision represents some of the ten goals of US public education that Goodlad (1984) identified as sufficiently frequent to suggest a unified national agreement. However, the secular nature of public schools has made some Muslim parents concerned about the impact of public education on their children's faith and attitudes. They believe that public schools assimilate many Muslim students into unorthodox customs and un-Islamic ways of thinking (Layman, 1993; Omran, 1997; Merry, 2005).

However, public schools are required by state laws to educate students in a secular environment in order to protect them from being indoctrinated in any religion (Moes, n.d.). Furthermore, public schools can guarantee the rights of students to verbally express their faith, to engage in prayer during the school day, and to participate in before- or after-school religious events. Teachers and school administrators are prohibited from encouraging or participating with students in such activities (Freedom Forum, 2007). In addition to these guarantees, public

schools have become more responsive to dress and dietary requirements of Muslim students and usually exempt them from activities that are inconsistent with Islamic teachings.

In choosing the public schools for their children, Muslim parents have to deal with the issue of school choice, which means giving parents the opportunity to choose the school their child will attend. Most Muslim parents must follow the school districts' processes that assign students to public schools according to where they live. In some states, parents have some choice through intra-district programs that allow them to select schools in the district where they live, and through inter-district programs that allow them to send their children to public schools outside their resident districts (Abdulkadiroğlu & Sönmez, 2003).

The U.S. Census Bureau data for year 2011 showed that 50 million American students had attended public and private educational institutions serving students from kindergarten to high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The Census Bureau does not collect data based on religious affiliations and therefore it is impossible to glean the number of Muslim students from its database. Even the numbers based on racial backgrounds can be misleading because respondents who claim Arab or sub-continental Indian origins, for example, could be non-Muslim.

2.2 Private Schools
Literature on Catholic and non-sectarian schools shows that Muslim parents choose to place their children in these schools because of academic programs and extracurricular activities, displeasure with public schools, small class size, and better discipline (Ewert, 2013; Beldsoe and Sow, 2011; Hammer, 2011). In addition, Muslim students feel at home at Catholic schools because of shared Abrahamic traditions and an emphasis on modest dress. Muslim parents believe that Catholic schools provide their children with a good education in a conservative environment. Thus, a Catholic school has the same goal as an Islamic school, which is to provide an environment that is both American and immune from influences that work against Islam and Catholicism (Hasan, 2000).

Muslim parents' favorable views of catholic schools are supported by evidence from the findings of a major study of Catholic schools by Bryk and his colleagues (1993) who attributed these schools' successes to equitable curriculum, communal organization, school-site autonomy, and inspirational ideology. Despite their strong emphasis on religious education, Catholic schools accommodate the interests of Muslim students by exempting them from Christian activities and providing suitable alternatives. For example, in a Catholic high school that the author visited, Muslim students were learning about world religions from a secular and comparative perspective.

Muslim parents' preference for Catholic or other private schools also depends on their financial abilities as these schools' tuition can average $3,700 for elementary and $9,600 in secondary (National Catholic Educational Association, 2013) while fees of non-sectarian private schools can be more expensive and range from $16,000 for elementary to $27,000 for secondary (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). As a result, only affluent Muslim families can afford to enroll their children in these schools. However, the number of Muslim students in

Catholic and other non-Islamic private schools is not known but the number of American students in these schools for year 2010 was estimated at 4.7 million according to Ewert (2013).

3. ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

Islamic education has developed into different models depending on diverse educational philosophies and the needs of Muslim communities, which resulted in a variety of institutions that range from weekend to modern full-time schools. In between, there exist a number of educational experiences that reflect Muslim educators' different approaches to educational priorities and their beliefs about Islamic education. Research findings by Muhammad (1992), Layman (1993), and Azmi (2001) indicated clear differences between staff perceptions of Islamic and Western views of education, and different approaches to Islamic education that have engendered a certain degree of friction between institution organizers. The findings also suggested an ideological battle taking place among American Muslims between the orthodox approach that calls for separating culture and the essence of Islam and the liberal trend that stresses cultural manifestations over the Islamic teachings.

3.1 Modern Islamic Schools

With the first waves of Muslim immigration to the US in the1960s, there grew a need to provide Muslim children in public schools with an instruction in Islamic teachings after school hours and on weekends. However, these programs were deemed insufficient to impart a strong Islamic education and protect Muslim youth from negative influences. Hence Muslim communities across the country set out to establish full-time schools in the early 1980s to educate their children according to Islamic teachings and state academic requirements. The main reasons for setting up these schools were religious, academic, and cultural according to Omran (1997), Layman (1993), and Merry (2005). Parents' negative views about public schools were an important factor behind the full-time school movement.

Islamic education represents the core aspect of the mission of Islamic schools. Secular subjects and citizenship activities assist in the assimilation of students into society and in adapting them to the American way of life without jeopardizing their Islamic beliefs and practices. However, Islamic schools are very diverse in terms of their ethnic backgrounds and the quality of their programs and facilities. Some schools are staffed by certified teachers and fully accredited while others are not.

In Layman (1993), the directory of the Islamic Society of North America listed 87 schools in 1992. This number rose to 219 in 2005 according to the Islamic Foundation of North America [IFNA]. In his survey of American mosques, Bagby (2012a) put the number at 138 full-time schools that were affiliated with mosques. The Private School Universe Survey undertaken by Broughman, Swaim, & Hryczaniuk (2011) identified 232 schools as Islamic while Keyworth (2008) provided a very close number of 235 schools. These statistics show a significant growth in the number of Islamic schools over two decades, especially middle and high schools. Bagby's estimate of 25,000 students in mosque-affiliated schools is not significantly different from NCES and Keyworth (2008) figures of 30,000 and 32,000 respectively. But taking into consideration the estimated Muslim population of seven million, the number of students in these schools represents only a tiny fraction compared to Muslim students in public schools.

The figures presented by IFNA and Islamic Schools League of America (2013) suggested that California, New York, Texas, and New Jersey were leading other states in the number of Islamic Schools. The numbers also suggested that more schools are located in the most populated states, and that states bordering the Atlantic seaboard have more schools than states alongside the Pacific.

3.2 Weekend Schools and After-School Programs

The Islamic weekend schools' movement began in the 1960s and is considered as the precursor of full-time Islamic schools. The programs in the weekend school where the author was teaching constituted of Quran memorization and recitation, in addition to learning about Islam and Arabic language. Teachers were mainly volunteers who taught classes based on age groups or grade levels. Due to large numbers of students, lessons were offered in English on Sundays and in Arabic on Saturdays depending on linguistic and ethnic backgrounds of students.

In his comprehensive study of US mosques, Bagby (2012a) found that weekend schools for children were the most frequent type of educational activity in mosques and that 76% of US mosques offered weekend schools for children. The average attendance at weekend schools was 107 children as compared to 50 a decade ago and the median attendance was 73 compared to 50 (Bagby, Perl, & Froehle, 2001). An overwhelming number of Muslim leaders felt that weekend school was the top priority for their mosques.

For some parents of Muslim students in public schools, weekend programs were not sufficient to provide extended opportunities to learn more about Quran and Arabic. Thus, some mosques established after school programs during the week for instruction in Islamic studies and Arabic by salaried teachers. These programs have become popular in Muslim communities because they attract Muslim students from public schools whose parents want them to receive daily instruction in Arabic and Islam while benefitting at the same time from an academic education in public schools.

3.3 Online and Home Schools

A growing number of Muslim families administer their own home-schooling programs in order to impart Islamic knowledge with some emphasis on practical application (Kuttler, 2001). These programs usually include academic subjects such as science and mathematics and some families prefer to enroll their children in weekend schools to supplement with Quran study and memorization (Bagby, 2012a). With the availability and affordability of internet and information technology, more Muslim families have combined home schooling with online education to provide their children with wider access to educational resources such as online courses, podcasts, webinars, and digital workshops on Islamic studies in addition to secular subjects needed to fulfill state requirements.

Moes (n.d.) noted that state compulsory attendance laws could hinder the Muslim parents' right to educate their children at home even if Fourteenth Amendment rights are at stake. The U.S. district court ruled in *Null v. Board of Education of County of Jackson* that parents' rights to maintain home schooling are subject to reasonable state regulations when no fundamental rights are involved. Some states require parents to submit records of parents' academic qualifications, students' attendance and grades, and use of standardized testing. Other states provide students with personal computers and curricular materials, in addition to state assessments. It is not

known how many Muslim homeschools exist, but the number of homeschoolers is growing, as are the support networks, conferences and faith-oriented curricula to support the community (Jackson, 2012). According to Ray (2011), there were an estimated two million American home-educated students in grades K to 12 during 2010.

3.4 Quranic Schools

The traditional Quranic schools, also referred to by Azmi (2001) as Madrasa-like schools, are one of the most informal educational models available to Muslim children. Bagby (2012a) indicated that the growth of such schools was directly linked with the increase in the number of mosques where many of these schools are located. The author made observations in one Quranic school in the Midwest where fifty boys from different age groups memorized the Quran under the guidance of two teachers. The program also included introductory Arabic to help in reading the holy book. Students were encouraged to memorize as many pages of the Quran per day in addition to review of prior pages with the teachers or more advanced classmates. Hours of operation extended from early morning to late afternoon with breaks for prayers, lunch, and recess. The school closed its doors on Fridays and Muslim holidays, and its daily schedule was shortened during the month of Ramadan. Students were wearing traditional Muslim clothes and adhered to strict rules of conduct.

Modern Quranic schools, on the other hand, were established to attract students from middle and high school who aspire to become *hafiz* after memorizing the Quran by heart during two or three years of full-time attendance. They also cater to the needs of Muslim youth interested to learn secular subjects such as English and mathematics, and who wanted to resume formal education in Islamic or public schools after memorizing the whole Quran (Azmi, 2001). Some of these schools include residential facilities to accommodate students from distant locations. The author visited a modern Quranic school in a Midwestern state, which was attended by over two hundred teenage boys. Unlike the traditional Quranic schools, this modern one was housed in a new building equipped with classrooms, library, and cafeteria. The students' daily schedule included congregational prayers, Quran memorization circles, subject lessons, and physical exercise.

3.5 Schools Overseas

The author's personal communications with Muslim parents who sent their children back to their countries of origin for schooling purposes suggested an emerging trend in educational choice among a minority of Muslim families. This return migration was primarily influenced by the parents' concerns about the impact of American culture on students, especially in relation to their faith and attitude. In addition, Bledsoe and Sow (2011) indicated that immigrant parents choose this option because of lower costs of living and abundant child care back home, and also to provide the necessary discipline for intransigent children away from the eyes of authorities in the country of immigration. However, the research literature suggested that despite parents' financial support, their children back home could face abuse and difficulties in their emotional, physical, and educational development, especially if they are left in the country of origin without their mothers (Battistella & Conaco, 1998; Bilefsky, 2009; Bledsoe & Sow, 2011; D'Emilio & colleagues, 2007; Reyes, 2008).

4. CONCLUSION

This review examined the various schooling choices available to Muslim students using findings from the author's field study of Islamic schools in the US and literature pertinent to religious and secular educational institutions attended by Muslim students. The findings emerging from the study showed that most Muslim parents choose to place their children in the non-Islamic category of schools that consists of public, charter, Catholic, or secular and private schools, with a significant number of parents enrolling their children in weekend and after-school programs to supplement their Islamic education. A small minority of parents opt for Islamic full-time Islamic schools while an unidentified proportion choose non-traditional forms of education such as Quranic schools and homeschooling. Some Muslim parents send their children back to their countries of origin for schooling purposes. This review demonstrated the diversity of educational choices available to Muslim parents and the roles of academic, financial, religious, cultural, and location factors in determining the schooling experience of Muslim students.

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