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Nurturing Young Muslim Students as Part of a Minority Group in American Society

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Abstract
Placing a religious foundation in the early generation presents challenges for Muslims, especially when religion is not part of academic curricula. Even though there have been debates on religious teaching, the significance of infusing religious values remains unquestionable in students' lives. Those who need to deepen their religious faith enroll in religious classes outside school activities. The present article sets out to examine two Muslim teachers' efforts to nurture young Muslims' identity and the challenges they encounter. In doing so, this study employs the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and identity theory as theoretical frameworks. The findings of this qualitative study add to the literature on the importance of nurturing Muslim students' identity in a non-Muslim country, the US. This is important because the ongoing hate against Islam in a post-9/11 world causes Muslim and Muslim-looking students to face religious discrimination on academic grounds. We argue that infusing Islamic values into young Muslim students serves as a strong foundation for students' spiritual development. Teachers' dedication to supporting their faith is discussed.

Keywords: *Muslim teacher, Islamic values, education, Islamophobia*

Introduction

Infusing religious values with young children presents challenges, especially for those who reside in a multicultural country where religion is not included in education. In fact, as Allana et al. (2017) argue, religion presents an essential element in the development of students at a young age. Research demonstrates how religion has become an uncommon subject to be taught at US public schools. This causes students with particular religious identities to experience a learning disconnection between home and education. In fact, education serves as a place for students to gain deeper learning experiences (Moll et al., 1992). Education should connect the students' fondness of knowledge, referred to "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" that is beneficial for everyday function and well-being (p. 133). Students with limited or no space to foster their religious identity at school need to find a caring community. The community serves as a place to thrive and build friendships with common goals.

Even though research has demonstrated the significance of infusing religion as a subject in education (Logan & Hartwick, 2019), the implementation remains questionable. In the US, specifically, religion is excluded from the school curricula, assuring that public schools should be secular spaces with no competition among parents in their children's religious upbringing (Mitchell, 2019). Mitchell (2019) further argues that the court has continuously emphasized that the constitution disallows public schools from persuading students about religion. Investing in religion seems critically necessary, particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attack that caused Muslim students who grew up in the US to face anti-Muslim sentiments. The continuous inequity faced by Muslims, immigrants especially, leads them to face multiple barriers to entrance into the US community (Tindongan, 2011). For instance, they experience bullying in the Islamophobic school environment (Merchant, 2016). Since the aftermath of 9/11, Islamophobia, which refers to prejudice toward Islam and Muslims, affects Muslims and Muslim-looking students in daily life. Theoretically, Islamophobia is a universal phenomenon that centers on the assumption of othering and power relations, which leads to

structured discrimination toward Muslims in Western society (Ganesh, Frydenlund, & Brekke, 2023; Hafez, 2018; Kozaric, 2023).

There has been continuing research that addresses Islamophobia in the US education system (Abu Khalaf et al., 2023). Early studies demonstrated that young Muslim students encountered discrimination due to their religious beliefs (Winegar, 2016). Additionally, they experienced great pressure that influenced their academic performance (Hossain, 2017). Recent studies showed that Islamophobia is "toxic" to the goals of the US education system (Mir & Sarroub, 2019). At a higher education level, Elfenbein (2021) demonstrated how a college student experienced Islamophobia in her daily life which caused deep fears in her heart. As fear is normal for humans, Elfenbein (2021) invited people to choose to be good allies to one another, even in difficult circumstances. Furthermore, Islamophobia impacts non-Muslim students such as Sikh Americans due to their religious attributes (such as wearing a turban). It is important to note that presenting Sikh groups in this study shows that oppression towards Muslims is often ethnically driven. Previous research revealed that the Sikh groups' house of worship was sabotaged due to their religious clothing (Nasser, 2015). Also, Merchant's (2016) study addressed the false impression of Muslims among non-Muslim friends. These situations cause Muslim students to experience a lack of safety in growing their faith and practicing their religious beliefs. Students who want to deepen their faith enroll in outside activities such as Sunday school.

The current study contributes to the body of literature by examining teachers' dedication to instilling religious foundations for early generations in Sunday school. Scholars argue that the impact of nurturing young Muslims' spirituality leads to the creation of civilization and religious tolerance (Djupe & Calfano, 2013; Schein, 2013). Including spiritual aspects in children's lives provides positive impacts on their development (Zhang, 2012). Teachers outside of public school support their students' faith to grow in multiple ways. This raises a question; How do Muslim teachers nurture their young Muslim students in an American society and what challenges do they encounter? We conclude by offering

implications for teachers who are grappling with philosophical and practical ways of caring for their Muslim students.

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was employed to examine efforts in nurturing young Muslim students. The EYFS was initiated from the Every Child Matters agenda (Department for Education and Skills, 2004) and the Childcare Act (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). This framework centered on the notion of providing relevant support to students so they could reach their fullest potential (Tickell, 2011). According to Roberts-Holmes (2012), EYFS emphasizes play-based and developmentally relevant learning materials that combine the ideas of education and care. The goal of this framework is for students to receive an increase of beneficial support for their development. Relevant to this study, young Muslim students who wanted to deepen their faith received guidance from Muslim teachers. Teachers created a meaningful learning atmosphere that impacted students' spiritual lives. One of the EYFS principles highlights the idea that a student is a unique, strong and capable individual as a result of positive relationships (Roberts-Holmes, 2012). Teachers viewed young Muslim students as competent people who strengthened their Islamic faith through intimacy with their Muslim teachers and friends in an Islamic community.

Additionally, identity theory was employed to unpack the foundational reasons that contribute to self-identity as a Muslim. The theory focuses the analysis on the significance of teachers' roles in the upbringing of young Muslims who grow up in an American society. According to this theory, Muslim identity is shaped by people's understanding according to shared meanings.

> Derived from the symbolic interactionist frame, identity theory shares assumptions or premises of interactionism thought in general, that human action and interaction are critically shaped by interpretations or definitions of the situations of action and interaction, and that interpretations and definitions are based upon shared meanings developing out of interactions with others. (Stryker, 2007, p. 1088)

Being defined as a Muslim is influenced by how people believe in a shared community as Muslims. In line with Stryker's view, Gee (2000) explains several types of identity based on how and by whom it is acknowledged. In this study, being a Muslim is an instance of how someone is recognized through affinity-identity (i.e., experiences). Students identified as Muslims as they were involved in an Islamic community such as Sunday school for their spiritual growth. Moreover, they gained learning experiences of Islamic knowledge that contributed to shaping who they were. They learned and practiced Islamic values to reinforce their Muslim identity in a spiritual place with support from dedicated teachers. Teaching and infusing Islamic values to young children strengthen students' identity as Muslims because "... society shapes self, and self shapes social behavior" (Stryker, 2007, p. 1089). Teachers' commitment to caring for their young Muslim students in Sunday school contributes to preparing them for a multicultural world. Thus, the current research focuses on teachers' efforts in nurturing young Muslim identity.

Method

This qualitative study (Merriam, 2002) took place in the kindergarten classroom at Kautsar Mosque (a pseudonym). To expand the information on the Sunday school, we gathered data about the social, historical and philosophical information from multiple resources that included websites and teachers' explanations (Bloommaert & Jie, 2010). The information gathered from those elements enriched the analysis. The programs addressed Islamic Studies (i.e., *akhlaq, fiqh, aqeedah, dua, hadeeth and salah*), Qur'anic Studies, Qur'anic reading, and other

engaging activities that provide a foundational knowledge of Islam. Specifically, topics covered include Allah (SWT), the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad (SAW), Past Prophets, Pillars of Islam, Islamic values in life including respect, cleanliness and forgiveness, and the day of Judgment. These programs were designed by the Sunday school committee to equip pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade students with authentic Islamic education.

Participants and Recruitment

There were two participants in this study, Mrs Sarah and Mrs Megan. Pseudonyms were used to secure the anonymity of the research participants. They taught more than thirty kindergarten students for each meeting, which ran from 1.30 pm to 4.30 pm. There were two teacher assistants who were in the classroom, providing help and guidance when it was needed. During our observations, teachers taught various subjects in each meeting that included Islamic Studies, the Qur'an and Arabic reading and writing. Our observations focused on teaching Islamic Studies and Qur'anic Studies because the topics discussed (e.g., the history of Islam) signified efforts in nurturing Muslim students. Additionally, the present study required their participation because their presence as Muslims contributed to the analysis.

Our relationship with Mrs Sarah started when we attended the annual gathering during graduate school. We had ongoing conversations that deepened our relationship. During the conversations, we shared research interests with her because she represented a Muslim in an American society. She invited us to come to her class and meet several teachers, including the assistant teachers who helped her. Meanwhile, the connection with Mrs Megan started when we greeted her during the first visit to Mrs Sarah's classroom. We explained the purposes of our presence in Mrs Sarah's class and explained our research interests. Mrs Megan agreed to participate in our study because she found the topic interesting and relevant to her.

Data Collection and Analysis

We gathered data from multiple sources that included video and audio recordings of in-class interactions, relevant documentation, and individual semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2013) (see Table. 1). In total, we observed the kindergarten classroom every Sunday afternoon for three months, which lasted for about an hour for each observation. Additionally, we took field notes to capture relevant information from both teachers. Each teaching session contained two subjects; Islamic studies and Qur'anic studies.

In early February, the individual interview with Mrs Megan occurred after the first interview with Mrs Sarah was completed. The semi-structured interview was chosen because this gave participants flexibility in responding to questions, and the implementation depended on the way the interviewee addressed the questions (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). The list of questions served as a guide (Stuckey, 2013). We let participants guide the conversation to obtain deeper responses from them, as the purpose of rich interviews was not about collecting pages of transcripts (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013). The conversation that we had during the interview was about establishing relationships and trust between researchers and participants. There was a moment when teachers asked personal questions about our education, family and feelings. In response to this, Mrs Megan also shared her family's story, such as about her daughter (9Feb20FN). We appreciated their positive response to our interview invitation. The individual interview with both teachers lasted around one hour for each participant. We audiotaped and transcribed the interview. Moreover, follow-up interviews were added when they were needed.

Table 1. *List of Data Sources*

Data Collected	Number of Items
Individual interview with Mrs Sarah	2 audios
Individual interview with Mrs Megan	1 audio
Transcript from individual interview	20 pages
Video of classroom observations	2 videos
Audio recording of in-class interactions	5 audios
Photos of classroom documentation	83 photos
Field notes	24 pages, single spaced
Map of daily seating	3 maps

The analysis for the present study was an iterative process to examine how teachers nurture Muslim identity in young children in their teaching. Multiple data were gathered to enrich the analysis. For the purpose of the current study, we focused on transcript interviews, field notes, and photos of classroom documentation. Moreover, the thematic analysis process included identifying, analyzing and reporting themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To obtain significant analysis, we followed Saldaña's (2021) coding cycle. The process started with reading all data collected and filtering quotes that addressed the teaching of Islam. For the transcript interviews, we re-read them line-by-line and highlighted words to obtain relevant codes. Charmaz (2014) states that coding guided researchers to examine several elements of data in detail. This phase allowed us to focus on coding which led to finding themes (Charmaz, 1995). The next process was examining and categorizing them. From various codes that emerged, we found sub-codes to define themes. Other relevant data, such as observations and classroom documentation were incorporated to enrich the analysis. The last cycle of coding included revisiting the transcript and other documentation,

ensuring that the information on each code and theme was aligned with the teachers' explanations. The themes in this final phase emerged to answer research questions.

Our position in the current study was as observers. As non-Muslim researchers, Mrs Sarah and Mrs Megan explained in detail specific Islamic terminologies that helped us understand their explanation. Their responses were added with relevant examples. To obtain significant data, we did a member check with teachers during the in-person observations and scheduled meetings. During the meetings, we sat together to scrutinize teachers' answers. Mrs Sarah, especially, clarified her responses and showed the correct spellings of several Islamic terminologies. This process was helpful to examine the accuracy of data (Koelsch, 2013) obtained from the two teachers. Additionally, clarifying their answers was part of ensuring the trustworthiness of conducting qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results and Discussion

Nurturing Young Muslim Students

The overarching question that generated the analysis was: How do Muslim teachers nurture their young Muslim students in American society and what challenges do they encounter? The weekly observations revealed that teachers nurture their Muslim students by infusing the values of embracing differences. Mrs Sarah started this by explaining that students had to understand the uniqueness of people. To be more specific, she emphasized that people might believe in different religions and have opposite norms than what they believe as Muslims. Recognizing such diversity guided her students to value those differences. The teachers' effort in fostering Islamic values was reflected in their teaching. Teachers in the current study gave emotional support to students through check-in questions. In the beginning, teachers asked about the students' condition and reviewed materials from the previous session. Then, the students were invited to continue classroom activities such as singing a song and reciting several verses including Surat Al-Fatihah,

Surat Annas, Surat Al-Falaq and Surat Al-Kafirun (19jan20FN). In this instance, check-in questions served as a fundamental element in knowing students' enthusiasm. In line with the EYFS theory, understanding the student's needs and interests guides students to obtain an increase in help for their learning growth.

Another practice of nurturing young Muslim students was reflected in daily life. During the interview, Mrs Megan who identified herself as having been a Muslim since she was born explained that people might have haters, referring to those who dislike someone for specific reasons, in their everyday routine. They might have devastating negative experiences. As she added, people in this world have various principles in their lives that influence the way they treat others (9Feb20InterviewMegan). Responding to this, Mrs Megan taught her students to ignore things against what they believed. She encouraged her students to focus on the positive values of being a Muslim. Even though students learn such values at a young age, teachers believe that they are capable learners in responding to everyday situations (Roberts-Holmes, 2012).

To deep dive into relevant learning, Mrs Sarah invited students to understand the significance of being a Muslim through an active examination of the Islamic dress as an uncomplicated example. For women, the Islamic dress is to conceal parts of the body such as from ankles to neck and the hair. Additionally, several Muslim women use the niqab or face covering when they are in public areas. Through this activity, Mrs Sarah emphasized that being a Muslim who wore Islamic dress was special. Connecting to the fundamentals of Islamic principles, she added that students had to wear those dresses as a practice of obeying their religion, which also serves as a guide for their lives. In addition, she highlighted how students should be proud of their special Islamic dress when they wore it. This activity demonstrates that Mrs Sarah infuses Islamic values by self-respecting their Muslim identity through religious dress. This is in line with the identity theory in which teachers infuse the value of living in the US through religious attire. Muslims are perceived by what they wear (e.g., hijab and niqab) in their daily life, which adds to their

Muslim identity. Even though society, especially in the US, may overlook what Muslims wear and frequently relate them to terrorism, teachers in the Sunday school promote the attire as a form of self-assurance.

The community that students belong to is a real world for them to observe with various opportunities (Allana et al., 2017). It is interesting to highlight the boundaries Mrs Megan draws upon. She explained that she was raised in an Islamic family, engaged with the Muslim community, and went to an Islamic school. These aspects inspired her to depict stories of discarding garbage properly in her daily teaching that reflects the attitude of a Muslim. Mrs Megan showed such an attitude as a lesson learned from her Muslim community. When I clarified specific Islamic figures, she shared her students' stories as an example. She invited students to critically examine whether the story should be imitated or not. Mrs Megan said, "Actually when I saw something ... one boy I saw after lunch, he cleaned his table and tried to throw the napkins ... under the table. So I told the class and taught the whole class that it's not acceptable" (9Feb20InterviewMegan, line 265–268). When I elucidated her explanation, Mrs Megan explained that being a morally correct Muslim was more than merely praying five times a day or fasting during Ramadan, which refers to a holy month of worship. She emphasized that it was about doing what was right according to Islamic principles and what Muslims believe. Through this activity, she delivered a crucial message to the students about being a Muslim role model in their community. As she added, even though people might not see the negative actions that we take, she told her students that Allah watched over people's behavior. Growing up as a Muslim in American society poses a different experience for Muslims, especially when Islamophobia becomes entrenched. Literature demonstrates that people overlook Muslims and too often view them as terrorists, which naturally causes problems in society (Elbih, 2015; Mir & Sarroub, 2019; Nojan, 2022). The misinterpretation of Islam and Muslims pushes teachers, like in this study, to not only educate young Muslims with knowledge of Islam in their daily teaching but also prepare them to live in a multicultural world. Through the instances they represent, they want to counter the cultural

misinterpretation and convey a message about how Islam should be acknowledged as a moderate religion, balancing a way of life between religion and moderation. It is essential to note that teachers were fully aware of the fact that they taught young children. Thus, all materials were explained by teachers in relevant languages and terminologies.

Encouraging Muslims to be a Good Role Model: A Scale Concept on Judgment Day

As we observed the teachers' classroom, Mrs Sarah explained the concepts of heaven to students. She asserted that Muslims believed in death and eternity which occurred after death and the day of judgment in which Allah would evaluate someone based on her or his deeds. She told them that when students had good manners, they would enter Jannah, referred to as heaven. In contrast, if they were bad, they would go to hell (12Jan20FN). In that event, Mrs Sarah invited students to consider how they should behave as a Muslim by remembering the concept of scale. If the bad side outweighed the good side, people might go to hell. Conversely, believers entered eternal home, Jannah, when positive attitudes exceeded the negative.

This explanation was extended by presenting Muslim figures. Mrs Sarah asked, "Who's our angel?" (12Jan20FN). She then guided her Muslim students to understand that the angel was Jibril and the first Nabi or prophet of Islam, the one that God sent to people, was Adam ʿalaihis salam. He was the first person who lived on earth and the last or final prophet was Muhammad (SAW). Presenting Islamic figures in daily teaching allows students to study Islam from their life experiences and provides a long legacy they leave to their followers. As the teacher said, there were various aspects of the Islamic figures' lives as lessons to be learned. Students should not only be familiar with the names of Nabi and Rasul but also with the principles they need to learn, as nowadays Muslims are required to follow all things that Muhammad taught about Islam. Learning from Islamic figures presents a model for Muslims for their community and society overall. They are expected to have the moral

values of Islam and practice their belief in their daily lives. Through this learning material, young Muslim students acquired an increase of guidance for their spiritual growth from their Muslim teachers who encouraged them to show a positive self-image as Muslims (Dellarosa, 2022).

Disconnection Between Home and School

Learning would be more meaningful when there is a relevant connection between what students learn in formal education and what they practice at home. In reality, the interview with Mrs Sarah revealed her concerns about the disconnection of a learning experience for the Muslim students. She told us that she was not sure if families were as committed as her to supporting young Muslim students at home. She explained that it was hard to teach Islamic values when there was a lack of support from families. If parents only relied on teachers to infuse Islamic values, students might find it hard to obtain relevant role models for practicing Islam in their daily lives.

Mrs Sarah realized that young Muslim children who lived in an English-speaking country, the US, might experience a language barrier when they wanted to practice Arabic. This is mainly because society uses English rather than Arabic. Even though Arabic is the language used in the Qur'an and daily prayers, people speak English in their daily communication. Take, for example, the real influences of English in Mrs Sarah's life. She was aware that English served as the global language and was used by most people to communicate. Positioning herself as a non-English speaker, she found it hard to convey meanings when using English. During the interview, for instance, she apologized several times for her English because she felt that her English was not good enough to explain her responses. Mrs Sarah was a teacher who was fully aware of how language plays a crucial role in people's lives. Her knowledge in the power of language influenced her teaching.

Understanding such challenges guided Mrs Sarah to support her Muslim students through the use of language. She introduced Arabic to young Muslim students through her teaching materials. Our observations

in her class revealed that students were invited to recite verses in Qur'an written in Arabic. They were given an opportunity to repeat the verses several times. Sometimes, teachers paused the activity to assist students who needed extra help in pronouncing the verses. As a result, students started being familiar with Arabic from an early age, as Mrs Sarah said. Even though young children found it hard to speak Arabic fluently, she at least provided opportunities to work on pronouncing the Arabic words. Providing significant learning opportunities in a supportive environment through the familiarity of Arabic plays an essential role because language serves as a tool to communicate and understand knowledge. Given the multicultural society, imposing a dominant language in the educational system can be a source of injustice that leads to broader issues of inequality (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016). When students were able to understand Arabic and the meanings of the verses they recited, they would be able to understand Islam.

Lack of family support can lead to a disconnection between home and school. Mrs Sarah explained that students who did not practice Arabic with their parents at home might experience learning difficulties, especially those who spoke English at home, "S*ome of them gampang some of them agak susah tounge nya karena pakai English* (some of them found it easier while others found it difficult pronouncing it [Arabic] because they used English)" (26Jan20FN). She added the context when students' parents were not Arab which made it harder to experience authentic Arabic words. Nevertheless, she believed that her dedication to supporting her Muslim students at a young age would benefit them in the development of their adult faith (Ruppell, 2004), "*Tapi mereka masi kecil kan tapi gak apa apa sebetulnya mereka kalo tetep terus ... akhirnya sampai bisa.* (Even though they were young, it is appropriate to introduce Arabic at that age. They would get used to and master it)" (26Jan20FN). Students who did not practice reading the Qur'an at home and relied only on their learning at Sunday school would encounter barriers. This was mainly because there was less time to practice Arabic. Consequently, they were left behind in understanding the Qur'an. According to Mrs Sarah, this was because students were required to memorize verses in the

Qur'an. Early and recent studies have demonstrated that the relationship between parents and children influences both the spiritual and religious growth of early-age students. This was because families performed as interpreters and gave foundational knowledge for their children about religious ideology (Boyatzis, 2005). As Ross et al. (2023) asserted, families were key role models for their children. In line with the EYFS framework, nurturing students at a young age requires the role of family participation. Mrs Sarah highlighted the importance of applying what students learn at school to their everyday lives.

Understanding students' various levels of learning, Mrs Sarah shared that several students experienced grade retention, referred to as repeating a grade. Some of her students stayed in her kindergarten classroom for another academic year before entering the first grade. She viewed this as an opportunity for those who wanted to learn deeper rather than continue directly to the higher grade. She further explained that students who had to do grade repetition were supported and approved by parents. Some parents might feel that their children are not ready yet to continue to the higher level. According to Mrs Sarah, it was because some of them who enrolled in Sunday school came with a basic and zero understanding of the Qur'an.

The Role of Language in Navigating Teaching Interest

As we have explained in the capacity of teaching language, teachers found that language significantly impacts how they share knowledge. The interview with Mrs Sarah revealed that language influenced aspects of her teaching. As a non-Arabic speaker, Mrs Sarah explained to us how she was familiar with Arabic but did not fluently speak the language. As such, her decision to teach was impacted by her knowledge of understanding Arabic. Within her expertise, she explained that she preferred to teach younger kids. According to Mrs Sarah's explanation, this level allowed her to share her knowledge of Islam in a more familiar language, English. In terms of content, as her knowledge was influenced by the language, Mrs Sarah explained that she loves teaching Islamic studies as part of social studies because it captures the

broad range of topics about Islam in general. The themes covered in this subject included stories of Islam and Muslims, Nabi Muhammad, the five pillars of Islam, Islamic festivals, and Nabi and Rasul. Another reason for Mrs Sarah to teach Islamic studies was because Arabic was not a mandatory language. In other words, she could use English as a medium of instruction.

Mrs Sarah said:

> ... Arabic is not my language (i.e., not her mother tongue), so in kindergarten I have to teach all of them ... In the upper level, since I am not an Arabian, my pronunciation, my tongue, maybe isn't very good. But Islamic Studies because it is general it is easy for me to teach it (2Feb20TranscriptInterviewSarah, line 140–145).

Conversely, Mrs Megan who positioned Arabic as her mother language found it pleasing to teach various subjects related to Islam, especially when the content incorporated Arabic. The weekly observations captured how Mrs Megan taught Arabic and the Qur'an. As she asserted, "... this (Arabic) is my language" (9Feb20TranscriptInterviewMegan, line 176). When we clarified her reasons for teaching Arabic, she believed that students would gain different learning experiences if they heard it from native speakers. Furthermore, Mrs Megan said that students would learn and hear the original pronunciation from Arabic native people, thereby, influencing their speaking in reciting the Qur'an. Her expertise in mastering her native language shaped her commitment to teaching multiple subjects, especially when it required Arabic. Having more opportunities to teach various subjects allowed her to infuse Islamic values into Muslim students across grade levels. As she said she taught not only kindergarten level but also higher grades. Both teachers in this study demonstrate how they strengthen Muslim identity through the role of language. Mrs Megan ensured that her students practiced Arabic and the Qur'an at home with their family members by memorizing verses in the Qur'an and pronouncing the language.

Living in the US, where many people do not speak Arabic, guided Mrs Megan to encourage the family to participate in practicing Arabic with their children. This effort, for sure, benefited students in deepening their religion. As she said, "when their parents teach them and memorize with them ... they will come to master it ..." (9Feb20TranscriptInterviewMegan, line 231). Given such expectations, her role in nurturing her students to learn Islam was as a facilitator. She was eager to welcome students who wanted to practice speaking Arabic. Interestingly, Mrs Megan's commitment to supporting her students was expanded through her interaction with students' families. The individual interview with her revealed that she emailed parents regularly, suggesting that students should practice reciting verses at least ten minutes a day in their own time. She also confirmed that teaching Arabic formally was too early for kindergarten students, especially when Arabic was not the main language spoken in the country. She added that they might have no idea about Arabic. Nevertheless, introducing the language from an early age familiarized students with how they produced sound and pronounced it through relevant activity (see Figure 1). As Mrs Megan added, later when they were adults, teachers would be proud because they took part in establishing the foundational knowledge for the young generation.

Similarly, Mrs Sarah asserted that she invited students to read Arabic, but not "*teaching*" the language as they had to master the meaning and practice the pronunciation (26jan20FN). Mrs Sarah explained in detail that for the kindergartener, students were asked to memorize and read the Arabic alphabet (see Figure 2). According to teachers, the first, second and third graders extended their learning by learning the letters. To convey specified materials, teachers used English to explain the meaning of the Arabic words.

Figure 1. *Learning Arabic*

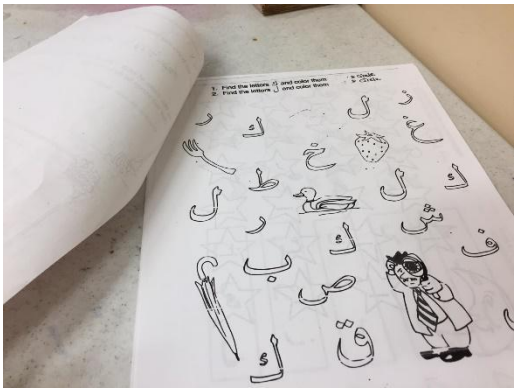
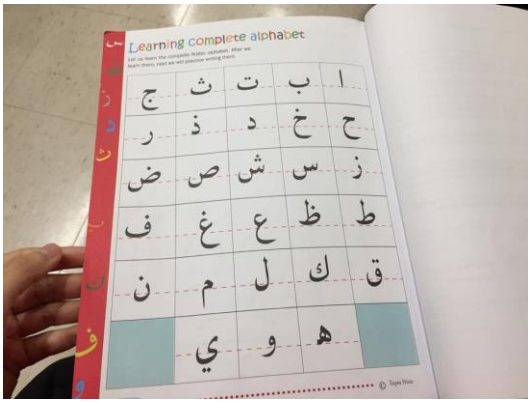


Figure 2. *Introducing the Arabic alphabet*



To enrich the Islamic learning experience, teachers ensured that students received high-quality instructional materials. Mrs Sarah, especially, explained that the materials addressed essential information of Islam in relevant terminologies. This is essential because research shows that a limited explanation of terminologies leaves the interchangeability of several terms such as faith, spiritual, and religious development (Hay, Reich & Utsch 2006). Providing descriptions of the words learned signifies learning. Moreover, the principals and teachers ensured that the quality of materials delivered was in line with Islamic principles. As Mrs Sarah said, "when they're making the book, they make sure of course that everything was very right (referring to the Islamic principles) ... also the principal is very strict (in selecting the materials)"

(2Feb20TranscriptInterviewSarah, line 151–154). As Tickell said (2011), "During the early years a strong start in learning and development is an essential foundation for progress through life" (p. 19). Choosing the right instructional materials serves as an essential factor in nurturing young Muslim knowledge, as they impact the students' understanding of Islam.

Experienced teachers like Mrs Sarah and Mrs Megan claimed that there were no significant challenges in delivering materials. Their capabilities in sharing knowledge were reflected in the classroom filled with a warm and caring atmosphere. Teachers greeted the students in Islam by saying "*Assalamu alaikum* (peace be upon you)". Each time we entered the classroom to conduct the weekly observation, teachers used to welcome students with positive interactions. Establishing a favorable environment leads to the creation of an optimal learning space where students' emotional competencies are addressed. For students, being involved in the Muslim community that shared the same goals allowed them to experience spiritual growth (Fleer 2003). Understanding the fact that their students came from various cultural backgrounds, teachers believed that students learned Islamic principles as they were taught globally.

There were several limitations in the present study that influenced the results, mainly because it was conducted during the global pandemic. As we proposed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), we had several in-person observations in Mrs Sarah's and Mrs Megan's classroom. Nevertheless, we postponed the classroom observation when the Sunday school principal announced the home-shelter order, followed by the national policy throughout the nation to stop the spread of the contagious virus. It was a difficult moment for everyone, including the researchers, because each of us was self-isolated and forced by the situation to practice "a new norm" with insufficient guidance (15March20FN). Understanding the limited interaction that we had with both teachers guided us to acknowledge their struggles during this difficult time. Many people encountered food insecurity, health issues, mental health problems, job insecurity and housing issues. The city where this study was conducted implemented a lockdown policy

(15March20FN). As a result, people found it hard to buy food as the food supply chain was disrupted by the pandemic. We witnessed how people encountered panic buying in which people bought a large amount of products in anticipation of inflation. Moreover, women experienced significant problems when they had to juggle multiple roles, such as being a mother who had to take care of their children and a career woman who had to secure their job. Such challenges led us to be compassionate to our participants. Thus, we explained to them how flexible we were and how we cared about them. We let them know that we would be helpful in any way we could. Regarding the research, we asked them if they needed to reschedule the interviews. To maintain the safety of the community during the global pandemic, we gathered data through online communication (i.e., WhatsApp, text messages and phone calls). These types of communications were chosen by the participants. Mrs Sarah responded to the online interview, aiming to clarify her answers from the previous in-person interview. Nevertheless, there was no further communication with Mrs Megan during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic influenced people's lives in various aspects.

Conclusion

This study explores how Muslim teachers nurture their young Muslim students by incorporating the spiritual aspect into the children's lives that contributes to the development of a child. Enrolling young Muslims in Sunday school encourages them to spiritually thrive in a conducive Muslim community. Such involvement allows them to practice, observe, interact, communicate, and be involved in a group of Muslims who share the same purpose to deepen their faith. As it has been discussed, family and community such as Sunday school contribute to the most influential learning on students' early development. Through this study, Muslim teachers encourage their students to be proud of their Muslim identity because Muslims in secondary schools, especially, have experienced an increase in fear in the post-9/11 era. The interviews with teachers revealed that even though Muslim students came from various nationalities, teachers believed that they learned the same Islamic

tenets. Additionally, the weekly observations demonstrated the teachers' dedication to teaching the beauty of Islam reflected in daily life. From the data obtained, the current study highlights the significance of fostering young Muslim students' identity through pedagogical practices demonstrated by both teachers. Future research may explore how the diversity of Muslims contributes to religious tolerance, as it adds to students' skills in thriving in a non-Muslim country where religious discrimination toward Muslims has been systematically shaped (Kozaric, 2023).

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Note:

1. Data in this study was filed based on the types and date. For example, 1May20FN refers to data collected on May 1st, 2020. The type of data was field notes.