(Re)Thinking anti-racist pedagogies in early childhood education: An exploratory case study of the perspectives of Muslim Mothers in Ontario

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Abstract

This exploratory multiple case study explored Muslim mothers' perspectives and experiences in relation to their young children's education in Ontario, Canada. The study included seven cases, each being one Muslim mother of a child/children aged between 4 and 8. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with each participant mother and analyzed through a deductive and inductive thematic analysis. The five main deductive patterns discussed are home-school partnerships, sense of belonging, mothers’ conceptualization of education, the influence of media, and Islamophobia. The six inductive patterns discussed are fear as an emergent feeling, mothers as ambassadors, celebrations as a barrier, secular education, health education, and decolonizing the curriculum. Looking through the lens of anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside parents, key findings include: from the mothers’ perspectives, educators’ biases and misconceptions about Islam contribute to feelings of fear and being judged; classroom curricula are lacking the necessary resources (including programmatic curricula) to include Muslim students’ funds of knowledge resulting in critical inclusions of Muslims and Islam in public schools being the null curriculum (Eisner, 1994); schools are not secular spaces due to the celebration of Eurocentric, Christian holidays and occasionally other holidays that coincide with Christian holidays (e.g., Hanukah during the Christmas season); classroom curricula privilege one religion over another; there are no equitable mechanisms for dealing with tensions in curricula. In large sum, weaving some of the inductive themes that emerged from the data, it was evident that the perpetuation of Eurocentric ideologies is part of the hidden curriculum. Hence, this study offers recommendations in three areas: 1) recommendations that can inform the early childhood classroom curriculum; 2) recommendations for early childhood educators directed towards anti-islamophobia; and 3) recommendations for intentional anti-racist family engagement in early childhood education. Future research may include exploring anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside families in the early years’ classroom, examining the position of the educators and their conceptualization of the aforementioned pedagogies, and interrogating the lived curriculum in teacher preparation programs.
Keywords

anti-racist pedagogies, pedagogies of walking alongside families, racialization, Muslim mother, early childhood education, elementary education, Islamophobia, null curriculum, hidden curriculum, programmatic curriculum, classroom curriculum
Summary for Lay Audience

This exploratory multiple case study explored Muslim mothers' perspectives and experiences in relation to their young children's education in Ontario, Canada. The study included seven cases, each being one Muslim mother of a child/children aged between 4 and 8. Looking through the lens of anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside parents, key findings include: from the mothers’ perspectives, educators’ biases and misconceptions about Islam contribute to feelings of fear and being judged; classrooms curricula are lacking the necessary resources (including programmatic curricula) to include Muslim students’ worldviews resulting in critical inclusions of Muslims and Islam in public schools; schools are not secular spaces due to the celebration of Eurocentric, Christian holidays and occasionally other holidays that coincide with Christian holiday (e.g., Hanukah during the Christmas season); classroom curricula privilege of one religion over another; there are no equitable mechanisms for dealing with tensions in curricula. This study offers recommendations in three areas: 1) recommendations that can inform the early childhood classroom curriculum, 2) recommendations for early childhood educators directed towards anti-islamophobia; 3) recommendations for intentional anti-racist family engagement in early childhood education. Future research may look into exploring anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside families in early years classrooms, examining the position of the educators and their understanding of the aforementioned pedagogies, and reflecting on the lived curriculum in teacher preparation programs.
The heart of justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want it to be. More than ever before we, as a society, need to renew a commitment to truth telling.

-bell hooks
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All praise is due to Almighty God, who gave me the strength and health to complete this work during such troubling times namely COVID-19 which resulted in having my three kids at home with me, along with the rise of hate crimes against Muslims in Canada and elsewhere.

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Chapter 1

1 Introduction

This dissertation was written amidst troubling times. In the year that I was finalizing my research study, a global pandemic extended across the world due to the spread of the coronavirus. People were required to social distance, self-isolate and quarantine. During the several lockdowns in Ontario, Canada, the province in which I was writing, I could not help but acknowledge how privileged I was to have healthy children, a home, and food to eat. This pandemic was far from being an “equalizer” (Verma & Apple, 2021, p. 1). Instead, this pandemic “made visible and amplified global inequalities, the lack of safety… as well as exacerbating socio-cultural tensions” (p. 218). Apple and Verma (2021) wrote:

The mandate to ‘stay home, be safe, and stay positive’ in itself unveiled harsh class, racial, and social inequalities. The implication that everyone has a safe ‘home’, that all can feed and sustain their livelihood, is deeply problematic and is emblematic of what we earlier called an ‘epistemological fog’ that makes the real conditions of so many people’s lives invisible or simply ignored… This is part of what we meant when we said that hate doesn’t always need to be overt. It can be part of the daily functioning of structures that define who is and is not ‘worthy’ of being thought about in the first place. (p. 218)

Amidst the pandemic, a Black Lives Matter movement erupted, a riot of pro-Trump supporters invaded Capitol Hill in the United States, anti-Asian hate, violence, and shooting surfaced, the French senate voted to both ban the hijab for anyone under the age of 18 and ban mothers from accompanying their children on school field trips if they wear the hijab. Most recently, the discovery of the remains of more than a thousand Indigenous children found at former residential schools in Canada, a Free Palestine movement that has brought more global awareness of the continuous Palestinian struggle, and finally the brutal murder of the Afzal’s family in London Ontario. What is common about all of the above is the maintenance of white hegemony, structural inequities, and other forms of racial and gender-based violence nationally and internationally.
1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to contribute to knowledge about the type of relationships needed between educators and racialized parents to promote anti-racism in early childhood education. This knowledge may add to calls for recognizing the importance of educators “looking inwards” (Pushor, 2011) as they engage with racialized families so that children’s families may be included as a valued part of classroom curricula (what occurs daily in the classroom; the enacted curriculum [Dolye, 1992]).

1.1.1. Terminology

This study does not intend to essentialize the women that participated in this research. However, since this research aims to explore the experiences and encounters of women who identified as Muslim and a mother, I refer to the participants as Muslim mothers. The women that participated in this study are all unique individuals who bring into this research different experiences and encounters. Each one of them comes from different cultural backgrounds, childhoods and homes. This research does not explore each woman’s life encounter and experience (that is an interesting consideration for future research). Instead, this research focuses on the intersection of the participants’ Muslim and mother identities in relation to their children’s schools in Ontario.

1.2 Background to research

I am a Muslim mother, educator, and researcher who has experienced how racism and white hegemony is embedded in the educational system in Ontario with implications for early childhood pedagogy and curricula. These experiences were the genesis for the curiosities of this dissertation. This research explored the perspectives of Muslim mothers of children in early elementary years (ages 4 to 8) in Ontario.
Conducting research related to race, culture, and religion in early childhood in a multicultural country such as Canada is needed. According to Statistics Canada (2016), Canada has settled 1,212,075 new immigrants between 2011 and 2016. Most new immigrants come from non-European countries, which “has contributed to the growth of the visible minority population in Canada” (Statistics Canada, 2016, p. 6). As a result, “two in five Canadian children have an immigrant background” (p. 7). The steady growth of visible minorities will represent around 35.9% of the total Canadian population by 2036 (Statistics Canada, 2016). In addition to the increase of visible minorities in Canada, Statistics Canada (2016) reported that Canada's second largest religion is the Islamic faith and that “slightly over 1 million individuals identified themselves as Muslims, representing 3.2% of the nation’s total population” (p. 21). The steady increase of visible minorities opens up many questions about white western values and beliefs in the Canadian school system (Castagna & Dei, 2000), and even more so regarding early childhood education.

Four years ago, I completed my master’s degree which focused on the Ontario Kindergarten programmatic curriculum examining how the curriculum document represents children and families’ knowledge that is obtained from home (Ghannoum, 2017). The findings indicated that The Kindergarten Program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) had little emphasis on family involvement, home language, and deep understandings of children’s home, culture, and community perspectives. Despite these omissions, the programmatic curriculum document highlighted the importance of children’s sense of belonging and the freedom to express their opinion and ideas. The relationships between teachers, children, and families contribute to the construction of a bridge between school and home allowing children to value who they are and create a sense of belonging. One of the main points my study concluded was that it is essential for educators to communicate with families to construct a holistic understanding of individual children and their family networks, especially those who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

According to Raza (2014), “the current system of education is one that privileges Western knowledge and that operates within the notion that Whiteness is the norm” (p. 136). While some education scholars note that the Canadian government continues to praise multiculturalism and diversity among its citizens (Raza, 2014), others, such as Kempf (2011) recognise “a knowledge
gap persists (and is maintained) between the prevailing narratives that dominate the Eurocentric Canadian educational system, and the actual histories of the peoples who populate Canadian classroom and communities” (p. 93). The colorblind ideology persists in many early childhood classrooms despite the vast literature that have problematized it (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Costello, 2011; Husband, 2012). Perpetually adopting a colorblind approach "serves to reinforce the theorized invisibility of race and racism, thereby limiting one's ability to interrogate notions of privilege and its corollary, the deprivileging of minoritized social groups” (Solomona et al., 2005, p. 150).

Research that focuses on Muslim mothers and their encounters with early childhood education and schooling in Ontario is absent. Most of the existing studies were conducted on parents and children in high school (Zine, 2004). Further, the reported studies on Muslim mothers and schooling are conducted mainly in Alberta, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other parts of the world (Ahmad, 2001, 2007; Amjad, 2018; Din, 2017; Guo, 2015; Khan, 2019; Saleh, 2017). The public education system is still far from acknowledging the existence and complexity of white hegemony, structural inequities, and other forms of racial and gender-based violence.

The need for research that can interrupt the violence is reflected in my own lived experiences. I still remember the first spark of Islamophobia that occurred in my life. It was the day after September 11th, 2001; I was walking home after school, and a car full of teenage guys stopped in the middle of the street. They raised their middle fingers at me and shouted the ‘f’ word. My hijab (head scarf) identifies me as a Muslim from miles away. Now, as a Muslim mother who sends her children to a public school system in Ontario, I face the challenge when interacting with my child’s school of continuously swimming against the current of hate and violence that is portrayed about Muslims in media. I volunteer on a regular basis at the school, communicate almost daily with my children’s educators, and visit their classrooms to read stories about Ramadan and Eid. The motivation to establish a strong relationship with my children’s school comes from being both an educational researcher and a Muslim mother. As a researcher, I understand the great advantages of parental involvement and engagement. As a Muslim mother, I know that I need to work against the narrative that a Muslim body is backwards, uncivilized, and violent.
1.3 Research Problem

The literature demonstrates that more research is needed concerning Muslim mothers if anti-racist early childhood education is to be successfully established. In the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, the demonization of Islam has affected Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular have been placed in a difficult position. According to Ahmad (2003), Muslim women, especially those easily identified by their appearance, that is, “visible hijab-wearing women”, and/or those who belong to visible minority Muslim groups, “were amongst the most vulnerable victims of indiscriminate physical and verbal assaults” (p. 47). Thus, Muslims had to actively deal with the negative consequences of growing anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia. Beydoun (2016) defines Islamophobia “as the presumption that Islam is inherently violent, alien, and inassimilable. Combined with this is the belief that expressions of Muslim identity are correlative with a propensity for terrorism” (p. 111). According to research that was conducted after 2001, many Muslims in North America are targeted and are victims of negative stereotypes simply because they are Muslims (Amjad, 2018; Charani, 2005; Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001; Niyozov & Pluim, 2009; Shaheen, 2009; Sivanandan, 2006). Muslim mothers are presented in popular media in contradictory terms, from being barbaric to being dysfunctional. As Din (2017) puts it, the picture of a Muslim mother "remains much the same: Muslim women are alien, othered, and dehumanized” (p. 12).

Many Muslim women and mothers must defend who they are and try to cast off the stereotypical image of them being oppressed, barbaric, and dysfunctional (Saleh 2017; van Es, 2019). The stereotype of a Muslim mother can create barriers between them and the educators with whom they interact. Khattar et al. (2019) talk about this barrier as a wall that is “built around minoritized children and families” (p. 109). The authors used Loris Malaguzzi’s metaphor of the wall, which is used to describe the barrier “that keep educators from recognizing the knowledge, beliefs, and values of the [minoritized] children and families with whom we work” (Khattar et al., p. 108). Khattar et al. argued that “not all walls are created equal” (p. 109) and that the tallest walls are built around minoritized families. The authors claimed that “[t]hese walls breed ignorance in educators and education system” (p. 110) and maintain racism and Eurocentric
family engagement, in which the schools dictate what families do, think, and value (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Pushor, 2015; Wink, 2011). The literature on parental involvement “is grounded in assumptions of white normativity” (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017, p. 348). Racialized families then face an amplified fear of inadequacy when it comes to participating in school events (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). By engaging in this study, I hope to contribute to research in early childhood education and beyond to start breaking this wall between educators and Muslim mothers and thus allow new possibilities to emerge in relation to family engagement.

1.4 Research design and questions

The aim of this research is to examine, through an exploratory multiple case study design, the perspectives of Muslim mothers in relation to their children’s early education in Ontario. It is my aim to explore how Muslim mothers perceive engagement with schools and what their encounters have to say about the enablers and barriers created in relation to public schools in Ontario. Furthermore, I aim to understand ways to promote anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside families between educators, schools, and racialized families. These aims and goals of the study are reflected in the following research questions:

1. What are Muslim mothers’ conceptualizations of race and racism, and how do they understand these to be related to their families’ relationship with public schools (or not)?

2. What do mothers say are the enablers and barriers to their families’ opportunities to interact with schools in ways that are anti-racist?

3. What might an anti-racist reading of Muslim mothers’ cases have to teach about promoting anti-racist education in early childhood classrooms?

These questions guided the in-depth interviews I conducted with seven women who identified as both Muslim and a mother; they also assisted my exploration of their perspectives.

1.5 Overview of dissertation
Chapter one outlines the research context, problem, and purpose for conducting this study and the research questions that guided this research. Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework which informs the study. These include racialization, racialization of the Muslim body, and Orientalism. The chapter also presents anti-racist pedagogies and the pedagogies of walking alongside families as the orientation that guides this study towards bridging theory and practice. This chapter also includes relevant literature that encompasses conceptualization of multiculturalism in the Canadian classroom, colorblindness and its implication, anti-racist education, school and family partnerships, the Muslim identity, and finally, mothering as a Muslim. Connecting between theory and pedagogies along with the reviewed literature will allow me to better conceptualize and make sense of the data. Chapter 3 outlines my exploratory multiple case study methodology and the methods used for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 showcases the study participants through seven individual case studies. Finally, in chapter 5, I discuss the themes that emerged through reading the case studies of the Muslim mothers and the implications. In addition, the chapter will offer recommendations that can inform early childhood educators, teacher education program coordinators, and curriculum writers.
Chapter 2

2 Theoretical framework and literature review

This chapter includes the theoretical framework of the study and literature review. Racialization and Orientalism form the backbone of the theoretical framework that guides this research, while notions of anti-racist pedagogies and the pedagogies of walking alongside families guide the study’s orientation towards bridging theory and practice. The literature review examines research on multiculturalism in classrooms in Ontario, the phenomena of colorblindness, anti-racism in education, home and school partnerships, the Muslim body, and mothering as a Muslim.

2.1. Theoretical framework

This study is predicated on the conceptualization of racialization, racialization of the Muslim body, and the ways that the stereotypical narratives of Muslims are rooted in the concept of Orientalism.

2.1.1. Conceptualizing Racialization

This research spotlights Muslim mothers' perspectives and experiences in relation to their young children's education in Ontario, Canada. Apart from shedding light on this one set of experiences and perspectives, the research also produces knowledge that can be transferred to global issues of race and racialization and begins to suggest implications for early childhood education. Falguni Sheth (2009) is an entrée for the dissertation to begin to think with questions of race, challenging the binary that race is either a Biological Race (BR) or Political Othering (PO). The author explained that BR “emerges from contemporary American philosophical type, and genealogy to ground its argument” (p. 24) while PO “refers to the political structures and worldviews such as colonialism, orientalism, and imperialism to discuss the methods by which certain populations have been constructed as ‘foreign,’ ‘Others,’ ‘aliens,’ on grounds such as culture, political
Sheth elaborated that if race is defined as a biological category, then it ignores all the ways that race is used in politics and laws. Furthermore, she argued that addressing race as solely a social construct ignores the questions of who constructs it, why did they construct it, and how do they construct it? Instead, Sheth introduced the idea of race as a technology. Race as a technology

explore[s] how a population can be divided and produced as a ‘breed’ or ‘species’ extremely or completely dissimilar in fundamental ways from the population against which it is juxtaposed. By extreme dissimilarity, I wish to invoke the idea that ‘they’ could never be part of ‘us’, because ‘they’ don’t embody the foundational trails required to be ‘human like us’. (p. 25)

Sheth conceptualized race within the context of sovereign power, a term that is drawn from the work of Heidegger and Foucault. According to Sheth, the ones in power identify the unruly population through racialization, which answers the questions of why and how race is constructed. The unruly “is the element that is intuited as threatening to a political order, to a collectively disciplined society” (Sheth, 2009, p. 26). As for who, according to Sheth, it is the liberal power.

Liberal societies talk the talk of inclusion and universal human rights, even as they systemically exclude some and privilege others. Sheth (2009) noted that the promise of liberalism is very rarely realised for everyone. However, the sovereign power has to preserve the basic liberal assumptions, so it creates exceptions: the unruly. The unruly is identified through “the element that is intuited as threatening to a political order, to a collectively disciplined society” (p. 26). Sheth (2009) further explained that

the nature of the threat that is so posed to sovereign power can be rather ambiguous or board. It need not in fact be a clear or inevitable challenge to an existing regime; it need only be perceived as such… the ‘unruly’ threat is a transgression of the prevailing order; it signifies something intangible, such as a constructing ideology framework, like Islam, or the memory of a dangerous or troubling history or discourse surrounding that population, for example, slavery, colonialism, Nazism, the Cold War, and the ‘Clash of Civilization.’ But the danger can be represented or manifested by something else that
may or may not be tangible, such as outward garb, physical comportment, phenotype, accent, skin color, or something even more subtle. (p. 49)

In other words, if a group of people openly displays their private values in public, if a person reminds people that the law is not always administered equally, or if a person needs the welfare state to survive, then in the eyes of the sovereign power, that person can be a threat.

Racialization is the process by which a population is divided, and one group is pushed further away from the promise of liberalism both in the law and in the minds of the people (Sheth, 2009). Sheth clarified that racialization is not about “racial identities; rather, the perceived threat and vulnerability that characterize a certain subject-population becomes part of the ground of its outcasting as a species unto itself” (2009, p. 51). Racialization is

the process of delineating a population in contrast to a dominant population in contrast to a dominant (or powerful) population and a corresponding political tension; this population can be highlighted according to any range of characteristics – none of which have to be ‘racial’ qua phenotype or blood or physical characteristics; they might be religious, economic, social, etc. (p. 51)

To sum up, Sheth’s (2009) model of race as technology is neither a biological nor social construct; rather, race latches on to certain observable variations in humans, sometimes biological, sometimes not, and attaches sociopolitical importance to them in order to preserve power. When racialization becomes part of the law and the everyday discourse, it is easily perpetuated without even meaning to or realizing it.

2.1.2. Racialization of the Muslim body

Sherene Razack (2008) conceptualizes racialization in relation to the Muslim body in the Canadian context. Like Sheth (2009), Razack (2008) wrote about how the people in power create division among certain citizens through what she calls camps. The author explains that “the denial of a common bond of humanity between European people and those of different origins has given rise to the proliferation of literal and figurative ‘camps,’ places or bodies where
liberties are suspended and the rule of law does not apply” (p. iii). Camps are a consequence of racialization. Racialization appears to justify the need for camps by making the target population (Muslims) seem unsuited to existing outside of one, which Razack (2008) called the culture clash narrative. The culture clash narrative refers to Islam as fundamentally different from and incompatible with western values, and therefore, it needs to be eradicated (Razack, 2008).

The culture clash narratives can be used to justify feelings of superiority in the dominant culture and can therefore be used to justify aggressive imperialism (Razack, 2008). We see this narrative being spun when Islam is referred to as barbaric, irrational, or medieval. The language of rationality has been used to mark out certain groups, such as Muslims, as incapable of being reached by anything but violence, located in a pre-modern and uncivilized state, where the supposedly more modern and civilized white western population must liberate the uncivilized Muslim population through the western ways of being and doing, not through Muslim’s term (Razack, 2008). Razack (2008) wrote:

We can see the same kind of media spectacle around the banning of the hijab in various countries, notably, France, a context to which many Canadian social commentators referred when discussing faith-based arbitration. In each of these ‘panics,’ Muslim women’s bodies become the ground on which nations and citizens are established as civilized and modern, while Muslims and immigrants remain trapped in the pre-modern. (p. 150)

The narratives of Muslim women are also particular. Razack (2008) noted that narratives featuring Muslim women portray them as being victims of violence, oppressed, and in need of rescuing. Razack (2008) elaborated that

the body of the Muslim woman, a body fixed in the Western imaginary as confined, mutilated, and sometimes murdered in the name of culture, serves to reinforce the threat that the Muslim man is said to pose to the West, and is used to justify the extraordinary measures of violence and surveillance required to discipline him and Muslim communities… It is virtually impossible to name and confront the violence that Muslim women (like all groups of women) experience at the hands of their men and families without providing ideological fuel to the ‘war on terror’. (p. 107)
It is essential for educators to understand how the sovereign power creates camps and racializes specific groups of the population. Early childhood educators “often fail to consider the influence ‘race’ exerts on children’s play and the social life of the classroom” (MacNevin & Berman, 2017, p. 837). Often, western narratives about Muslims are infused with notions of being barbaric and irrational, making it easier to justify the racialization of Muslim mothers and families by the allegedly more civilized and rational white western population (Razack, 2008; Sheth, 2009). This type of Othering can create distance between Muslim mothers and their child’s educators. Research shows that although classrooms are increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse, educators continue to avoid any discussions about race in the early childhood classroom (MacNevin & Berman, 2017). MacNevin and Berman (2017) note that “White teachers, who have the privilege of maintaining a colourblind ideology, may not believe that racism and discrimination are particularly salient or contemporary topics” (p. 834) because they don’t feel the daily impact of racism compared to a racialized person. The authors further explained that, while Ontario is recognized as being culturally diverse and the curriculum documents and policies encourage a sense of belonging for all, these same documents are “silent on topic of how race, ethnicity, culture, and other dimensions of difference should inform teacher-child interactions” (p. 827) in early childhood classrooms and beyond.

2.1.3. Orientalism

Stereotypical narratives of Muslims abound (Jamil, 2012), and many of these stereotypes are rooted in the concept of Orientalism (Said, 1978), which produces particular Muslim subjects. Mamdani (2004) suggested that the Muslim subject is situated within a binary: a good Muslim versus a bad Muslim. A good Muslim is the Muslim who is moderate and can be integrated into the Western ways of life and living while the bad Muslim is primitive, barbaric, and uncivilized (Mamdani, 2004). The subjectification of Muslims can be seen as located in Orientalism with Ahmed (2000) arguing,

The production of the nation… requires some-body or some-where to not-be in order for it to be… The Orient comes to embody that which the Occident is not… Orientalism
creates an imaginary geographical divide based on the binarism of Occident/Orient.… (p. 99)

In other words, the Orient is always seen as backwards, and the Occident is the progressive. This notion of the Occident/Orient is extended by further dividing the Muslim body into the good versus bad. Kassam (2011) wrote:

Muslims are presumed to be ‘bad’ unless proved otherwise; this bolsters the authority of the state to justify action against other bodies. On the other hand, ‘good’ Muslims aspire to be like ‘us’ and hence, can be assimilated into the nation, and can then both reinforce the nation’s image as benevolent, and be co-opted into support for the policies of the state. (p. 561)

Ahmed (2000) positioned this good versus bad Muslim notion as familiar stranger versus stranger stranger. The author suggested that:

The very habits and gestures of marking out bodily space involve differentiating ‘others’ into familiar (assimilable, touchable) and strange (unassimilable, untouchable) . . . The nation becomes imagined and embodied as a space, not simply by being defined against other spaces, but by being defined as close to some others (friends), and further away from other others (strangers) . . . The proximity of strangers within the nation space – that is, the proximity of that which cannot be assimilated into a national body – is a mechanism for the demarcation of the national body, a way of defining borders within it, rather than just between it and an imagined and exterior other. (p. 100)

Kassam (2018) noted that another Muslim figure emerges in Western discourse, the Acceptable Muslim. She described the Acceptable Muslim as “modern, as one who supports the ideological and political foundations of Western society, and who espouses a privatized faith with few or no public expressions of faith and cultural belonging – and even then, only acceptable expressions” (p. 2). Kassam juxtaposed this image of the Acceptable Muslim against the Muslim Other situated as dangerous and violent. In other words, for a Muslim to be viewed and treated like a human, they need to let go of their faith-based practices in the public sphere and instead keep their faith-based practices hidden from Eurocentric eyes. The figure of the familiar stranger or
the good acceptable idealized Muslim plays a significant role in reinforcing hegemonic social relations patterns (Kassam, 2011).

Gender is situated at the core of Orientalist discourse. The persona of exotic and veiled Muslim women is part of the western imagination (Kassam, 2011, 2015). Yegenoglu (1998) maintained that “the question of sexuality cannot be treated as a regional one; it governs and structures the subject’s every relation with the other” (p. 26). She extended Orientalism’s framework by arguing that the Orient is “a fantasy built upon sexual difference… the figure of the ‘veiled Oriental’ woman has a particular place in these texts, not only as signifying Oriental woman as mysterious and exotic but also as signifying the Orient as feminine, always veiled, seductive and dangerous” (p. 11). Through the lens of Islamophobia, Zine (2006) said,

In the case of gendered Islamophobia, the discursive roots are historically entrenched within Orientalist representations that cast colonial Muslim women as backward, oppressed victims of misogynist societies. Such representations serve to justify and rationalize imperial domination over colonized Muslims through the emancipatory effect that European hegemony was expected to garner for Muslim women. These stereotypical constructs have maintained currency over time and have served to mark the border between the binary spaces of the West (read: progress, modernity) and the East (read: illiberal, pre-modern) as irreconcilable halves of a world living renewed relations of conquest and subjugation. (p. 240)

The discourse of the idealized Muslim woman continues to be situated between two binaries, the carrier of tradition through the view of the Muslim community and on the other hand, as the oppressed third-world woman that needs rescuing by the North American society (Kassam, 2011). It is deeply troubling that the narrative of a Muslim woman is always associated with this image of an alienated Other or boiled down to arguments and discussions about the hijab (Islamic headscarf). Saleh (2018) explained that there is “an uncomfortable fixation on why we do/don’t do it [the word ‘it’ in the text refers to the hijab], how we negotiate expectations related to it, what happens when/if we do/don’t do it, etc.” (p.132). Although knowing and understanding why Muslim women wear the hijab is essential, the fixation on the hijab is also incredibly troubling and disturbingly narrow. Narrowing the narrative of a Muslim woman to
understanding the reasoning behind wearing the hijab is one of the catalysts that guided this research to explore the experiences of Muslim mothers in relation to their children’s early childhood education.

2.2. Orientations for Thinking with Pedagogies

Two interconnected orientations for thinking with pedagogies guide this study; they are pedagogies of walking alongside families and anti-racist pedagogies. Pedagogies of walking alongside calls upon the need to engage with parents as partners in teaching and learning (Pushor, 2015). Pushor (2015) explained that pedagogies of walking alongside "shifts the relationship between parents and teachers from one that is hierarchical and primarily unidirectional to one that is side-by-side and reciprocal" (p. 235). Pedagogies of walking alongside challenges educators to take the time to know parents and come to understand, learn, and value families' lived experiences. Anti-racist pedagogies and theory, on the other hand, have emerged as an intellectual response to the notion of multiculturalism and colorblindness, complexifying issues of race and culture from a socio-political lens. Dei (1996) claimed that an anti-racist approach "names the issues of race and social difference as issues of power and equity rather than as matters of cultural and ethnic variety" (p. 25). The anti-racist theory challenges educators to unpack the complexity of race and racism concerning social power and privileges.

2.2.1 Pedagogies of walking alongside families

I draw heavily on Canadian scholar Debbie Pushor, who coined the pedagogies of walking alongside families. She has been publishing research that focuses on education and educators working with parents and families for over 18 years. Pushor (2011) used the word parent consciously to signify the role of caregiving instead of care receiving, "a role lived out in a family by someone who has more responsibility than others in the family for the care and well-being of family members" (p. 226). She further explained that this role of a parent is inclusive of biological and nonbiological individuals to the child. Pushor's (2011, 2013, 2015) work is grounded in parental engagement, which focuses on listening to parents (Ferlazzo, 2011) and
working with parents (Wink, 2011). When educators ally with parents, it mirrors what Pushor (2015) coined *pedagogies of walking alongside*, where educators and parents work alongside each other, “[a]cknowledging that both teachers and parents are holders of knowledge, together they work towards mutually determined goals and outcomes…” (p. 236).

School is the nexus between the public and private. Early schooling may be one of the first encounters where children and families become part of such a nexus. In a pedagogy that aims to walk alongside parents, educators "see the provision of schooling as an opportunity to walk alongside parents and families in the education of their children, as an opportunity to support them in realizing their lifelong hopes and dreams for their children" (Pushor, 2015, p. 236). The knowledge that the parent and the educator bring into this relationship equally emerge together to diffuse a lived curriculum that values the "schools' agenda and the hopes and dreams of the parents and families" (p. 236). Pushor (2011, 2013, 2015) drew from Green and Christian's (1998) work, who wrote about ‘accompanying’ to help educators visualize what the pedagogy of walking alongside entails.

Green and Christian (1998) described *accompanying* as rooted in the state of mind rather than acquiring a set of skills to implement. They examined the Chinese characters of the word *listen* and found that it consists of five symbols: an eye, ear, heart, as well as the concept of “you” and "undivided attention" (p. 3). The listening concept then becomes this conscious effort of being present at the moment, offering empathy and support. Green and Christian (1998) express this conscious presence through the words and thoughts of "I am with you" (p. 3). Working with families and parents through this pedagogy is complex and requires time and effort to understand and learn from parents, their *lives, context, and knowledge* (Pushor, 2015). It also requires educators to reflect and notice their thoughts that dwell in their minds about the different families that they work with in educational settings.

Pushor (2011) invited educators to look *inward* instead of *outward*. When educators look outwards, they view families from a deficit perspective, pinpointing the challenges that exist within families and how they engage with the school's agenda. When educators adopt this outward view of parents focusing on things that educators believe parents "should do, [they] only serve to widen the distance and feelings of alienation between the school and the home" (p. 66).
However, when educators look inwards, they move away from assumptions that shape their relationship with parents and look for new ways to engage with parents (Pushor, 2011), questioning what about their own practices in schools might need to change. In other words, educators need to shift their orientation from always thinking of ways to involve parents to serve the school’s agenda, to an orientation that looks for opportunities to engage with parents.

The literature on home and school partnerships emphasizes the significant impact such relationships have on fostering learning and development in the early years (Heath, 1983; Moll et al., 1992; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Taylor, 1983). These studies emphasized the need for home practices and knowledge to tie in with school curricula. One of the first and most influential studies was conducted over nine years by Heath (1983). Her research found that school minoritized racialized students' knowledge and practices, creating achievement gaps between these children and their white, affluent counterparts. Rowsell (2006) stated that "our first memories of making meaning with words, images, and objects occur in our homes" (p. 7). The home is the core of learning, development, and making sense of one's surroundings.

The literature indicates two main types of relationships between home and school, family engagement and family involvement (Ferlazzo, 2011). Ferlazzo explained that a school that strives towards "family involvement often leads with its mouth - identifying projects, needs and goals and then telling parents how they can contribute" (p. 8). However, family engagement "tends to lead with its ears - listening to what parents think, dream and worry about" (p. 8). Wink (2011) named these two types of relationships as "Doing It to Them" versus "Doing It with Them" (p. 199). Despite the existence of a large body of research and evidence of students' academic success, there continue to be only "random acts of parent engagement" (Weiss et al., 2010) and little emphasis on understanding and including family knowledge in schools (Frey, 2010). Instead, educators continue to focus on "how can parents serve the school's agenda?" (Pushor & Amendt, 2018, p. 206), or how can schools and educators wrap up or envelop parents into serving the school system (Benson, 1999)? Lawson (2003) argued that a schoolcentric relationship involves parents by prescribing their involvement. Often, these prescriptions are imposed by white and middle-class educators (Crozier, 2001; Reay, 2008), perpetuating Eurocentric notions of parental engagement (Pushor & Amendt, 2018).
Crozier and Davies (2007) explained that when parents decide not to engage in the prescribed ways, they become marked as "hard to reach parents" (p. 296). There are these unspoken “taken-for-grantedness” (Pushor, 2012, 464) notions, "norms, expectations, and assumptions that constrain marginalized families and educators" (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017, p. 343) that perpetuate inequalities in educational spheres. Khattar et. al. (2019) used the metaphor of the wall as a way to describe barriers that "we live with and construct" (p. 108) while working with families. The authors further explain that "not all walls are created equal; those that are built around minoritized children and families are the tallest and most rigid" (p. 109). According to research in recent years, "even when policies and structures aim to foster partnerships between families and schools, the dominant norms, expectations, and assumptions in schools can constrain the possibilities for families from marginalized communities to work with educators in exercising collective agency to disrupt these inequalities" (Ishimaru and Takahashi, 2017, p. 344). As a result, the wall between schools and racialized families continues to get taller.

Schools need to build relationships that validate families’ home experiences and perceive these experiences as a precious resource for understanding children's home practices. Valuing families empowers them and enables them to "come to authenticate their skills as worthy of pedagogical notice" (Gonzalez et al., 2005, p. 108). Hensley (2005) noted that when teachers value parents, they give them a sense of empowerment, which dramatically enhances school-home relationships. To build a healthy relationship with parents, "school should consider cultural and economic difference of families." (LaRocque et al., 2011, p. 119). Moreover, LaRocque et al. note that it is essential for schools and teachers "to address emotional barriers, physical barriers, and cultural differences to increase parent involvement for all families, and in particular families who are from diverse backgrounds" (2011, p. 118).

Thus, to break that ever-growing wall between schools and racialized families, educators and schools need to build a relationship that seeks engagement instead of involvement. However, since this research focuses on understanding Muslim mothers' perspective, further research into understanding the identity of a Muslim would provide further information on how to engage with Muslim mothers in educational settings.
The concept of looking inwards, that Pushor (2011) describes, could be useful when early childhood educators are engaging with Muslim mothers given the proliferation of problematic discourses about them as discussed earlier in this chapter. Pedagogies of walking alongside does not address the complexity of working with racialized families, however, combining anti-racist pedagogies with pedagogies of walking alongside families might allow this study to make fuller sense of its intensions.

### 2.2.2. Anti-racist pedagogies

Anti-racist pedagogies are approaches to education that recognize and actively fight against racial injustice. Husband (2012) argued that "racial injustice exists in and is furthered through the formal and informal ideologies, policies, practices, and texts implemented in schools" (p. 366). In practice, anti-racist pedagogies seek to battle against what is currently implemented in schools since it is constructed on the belief "that schools are racist by virtue of being reflections of a larger racist society" (p. 366). Consequently, anti-racist pedagogy can be seen as contributing to the development of awareness and consciousness of race and racism (Husband, 2012) among educators, challenging and negotiating the historical silencing of issues of race and racism in early years education.

Dei (2000) argued that to discern privilege and power, anti-racist discourses and hence pedagogies, need to be examined through the concept of *whiteness*. Frankenberg (1993) defined whiteness as "a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and moreover are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination. Naming 'whiteness' displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance" (p. 62). Levine-Rasky (2013) conceptualized whiteness "as the quality of a set of social relations defined by differential access to power, resources, rewards, meaning, status, and futures" rather than as a reference to people (p. 18). Dei (2000) further explained that whiteness weaves dominance into the fabric of political, social, and psychological systems over racialized others. Derman-Spark and Ramsey (2006) argued that whiteness manifests power and privilege within the educational system. Following up on this, Escayg et al. (2017) suggested that "Whiteness and its defining
characteristics is an important part of a comprehensive analysis of racial attitudes among White and minority Canadian children" (p. 14). Dei and McDermott (2014) reminded us that although Canada claims to be a country that nurtures multiculturalism, "to speak race and anti-racism is considered to be stirring up trouble in the face of post-racial discourses" (p. 2).

Discussions and conversations about anti-racist pedagogies are not only essential when it comes to educational institutions and educators, but should also be a vital part of the lived curriculum in the early years. Earick (2008) contended that society, communities, homes, and schools are not neutral spaces – racist connotations and activities can and do exist in these spaces. Children in the early years are neither naïve nor colorblind (Earick, 2008). From an early age, children can think and talk about racial identities (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2004; Park, 2011). According to numerous research studies (e.g., Rizvi, 1993; Tobin, 2000; Dulin-Keita et al., 2011; Shutts et al., 2011), children who live in colonial settler countries, such as the United States, Canada or Australia, believe that the lighter the skin tone, the more beautiful a person is. In this regard, Earick (2008) reported that racial identities exist in the early years' classrooms just as they exist in society and the communities where these children live.

There is a common misconception in early childhood education that children cannot understand race and racism and that it is not appropriate for educators to engage children in discussions about such topics (Husband, 2010; 2012). The early childhood classroom is the first place where children encounter people who might be different from them socially, culturally, linguistically, and racially (Farago, Sanders, & Gaias, 2015) and such spaces are not devoid of racism. To the contrary, many scholars have found that young white children develop a positive racial attitude towards their own racial identity and tend to formulate a negative mindset towards racialized groups (Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Johnson & Aboud, 2013; Escayg et al., 2017). Farago et al. (2015) remind educators not to eliminate discussions about race and racism. Children need to learn “about the oppression and marginalization of groups of people throughout history (Farago et al., 2015, p. 33).

In the context of listening to Muslim mothers' perspectives regarding their children's schooling and developing anti-racist pedagogies, it becomes vital to address the complex, dynamic and fluid nature of racial identity and how it intersects with gender. hooks (1981) highlighted the
interconnected relations between racism and sexism and argued that by no means can we “divorce the issue of race from sex, or sex from race” (p. 12). According to hooks (1984), "feminist theory would have much to offer if it showed women ways in which racism and sexism are immutably connected rather than pitting one struggle against the other, or blatantly dismissing racism" (p. 52). Standpoint theory, founded by Haraway (1988), is one of the most influential theories in feminism, which asserts that knowledge claims are socially located, and knowledge is better sought at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchies. According to Ardill (2013), “standpoint theory sheds light on the maintenance of power relations, and aims to transform those relations through the production of knowledge” (p. 325). Dorothy Smith has also contributed to standpoint theory. Smith (1987), who conceptualized women's everyday world as problematic, believed that feminist methodology should be based on women's concrete experiences and standpoints. Smith argued that "a standpoint in the everyday world is the fundamental grounding of modes of knowing developed in a ruling apparatus" (p. 108).

Critical feminist, anti-racist discourse examines race and gender and how it can either fracture or enhance the understanding of communities and individuals (Calliste & Dei, 2000). Calliste and Dei (2000) argued that "understanding gender and race relations is knowing about power relations in society" (p. 12). The authors further elaborated,

Critical anti-racist feminism locates the dialogue in the reality of women's lives and at the intersection/s of race, gender and class. Racism, patriarchy and colonialism continue to dominate power relations in North American society and within institutional settings. It appears few resources have been allocated to supporting forms of intervention that are not merely reproductive of the alienation, oppression, marginality and exploitation of marginalized groups. (p. 15)

According to Crenshaw (1991), women of colour are uniquely vulnerable to gendered violence and oppression. Looking at Muslim women's identity, especially those veiled or wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf), the intersection between race, gender, and religion, becomes much more complicated. According to research by the Canadian scholar Barbara Perry (2013), whose research centers around hate, bias and extremism in countries such as Canada, United States, UK and Australia, Muslim women "are often constructed as racialized, exotic Others who do not fit
the Western ideal of womanhood" (p. 79). The author continues to write that Muslim women "are further subject to specific gendered constructs, which serve to Other them in very specific ways, ways that render them vulnerable to harassment and violence" (p. 80).

Zine (2006) identified the notion of *gendered Islamophobia*, which refers to the "specific forms of ethno-religious and racialized discrimination leveled at Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that inform individual and system forms of oppression" (p. 240). A Muslim woman's identity is complex and places her at an entirely different level compared to women who identify as white, black, Asian, and Aboriginal (Perry, 2013). Media is one of the major contributors that influence the identity of a Muslim in general. Moore (1995) observed,

> Crude caricatures of Muslims appear abundantly in the production and organization of popular culture. Events and situations, whether fictional or real, are presented to us within a framework of symbols, concepts, and images through which we mediate our understanding about reality ... The news and entertainment media both generate stereotypes and rely on our familiarity with them in order to formulate the world in their terms and communicate ideas in an efficient, i.e., timely, fashion. (p. 16)

The media portrays a misguided image of a Muslim that fuels the continuous mistreatment and suspicion of the Muslim identity, making Muslims less than human and not worthy of respect. Enacting anti-racist pedagogies in return help educators to identify misleading messages portrayed about Muslims and the pedagogies of walking alongside families will invite educators to break the wall that is placed between educators and racialized Muslim mothers.

An anti-racist approach to education is central to educational institutions that seek to promote social justice in education. For the practice of early years educators, this means discussing and reflecting on

> the processes inherent in the construction of racial difference: how power differentials structure relationships between white and non-white groups; the racialized nature of institutional power; racial imageries attached to racialized persons and how these signify
power imbalances; and the material effects that such symbolism creates for racialized persons in the Canadian context. (Escayg et al., 2017, p. 16)

Educators come into the classroom with knowledge and experiences accumulated over the years, from childhood into adulthood. The educators' funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2016) are weaved into the fabric of their daily interactions within the social world. Funds of identity are the "lived experiences by the self that can include significant others, cultural tools, geographical places, institutions, and activities that people use to express and understand themselves" (Esteban-Guitart, 2016, p. 51). Teachers do not come to class as an empty slate, they come with life-long experience, personal beliefs and assumptions. As a result of the dramatic demographic shift in today's classrooms, many educators have become aware of the importance of acknowledging children's cultural differences, yet many continue to express racist behaviour and practices unconsciously. In this regard, Ríos (2018) argued:

> We all have [developed] an awareness of the impact and existence of racism historically and in present-day reality and even globally. However, the subtle ways that racism manifests itself in peoples and systems are still so layered and complex, it makes it possible for a person to understand racist ideology but behave in racist ways in some area of their lives. (p. 36)

The impact of racism has manifested in societies and people's minds for hundreds of years, which implies a reality that "racist ideology is now part of our collective consciousness" (Ríos, 2018, p. 35). Racism is nourished and continues to grow as part of society. As Rios put it, "racism is taught, learned, nurtured, and perpetuated in every aspect of society" (p. 36). Becoming conscious and having regular discussions about race and racism is vital in cultivating an anti-racist classroom environment, which builds a society that is conscious of race and works towards a more just world.

When educators value the complexity and the significance of infusing anti-racist practices in the classroom, they will push against the oppressive social norms. This infusion is said to help children to be equipped "with the cognitive, linguistic, and social tools necessary for identifying, deconstructing, and countering racially biased information acquired in and outside of school" (Husband, 2012, p. 368). Farago et al. (2015) told us that “discussing race and racism with
preschoolers may be particularly effective in changing their racial attitudes and setting a foundation for tolerance and respect” (p. 33). When educators weave anti-racist theory into their practices, they will empower children with the tools they need to recognize, challenge, and react to racist encounters in a constructive way (Tatum, 1992).

Anti-racist practices in the early childhood classroom have been documented as affecting children's understanding of race within the classroom and their peers. Farago et al. (2015), for instance, affirmed that children exposed to and involved in discussions about racism and white privilege are more likely to interrupt racist behaviour, actions, and words. As a result, children will better recognize how race and racism negatively impact racialized people. Therefore, educators in the early years can foster children's understanding and awareness about social injustice in society.

Anti-racist pedagogies are viewed by some in the literature, as needing to start with the self (MacNevin & Berman, 2017), in this case, the educator. In their practice, educators might unconsciously or consciously perpetuate their own biases, stereotypes, privilege, and power (Ríos, 2018). Unless educators are intentionally working towards an anti-racist pedagogy, the literature exhorts that racism will continue to be reflected in their teaching (Farago et al., 2015; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). The literature on home and school interactions indicates that the educational institutions are grounded in Eurocentric ideology, which works towards maintaining racism by continuously prescribing to parents a set of expectations of what to do, how to think, and what is valuable (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). As will be shown in the next section, acknowledging children’s home lives in the classroom is one way for educators to enact anti-racist pedagogies. As such, more attention is warranted to the significance of relationships between racialized families and educators.

2.3. Literature Review

I reviewed literature pertinent to the research questions and theoretical framework of the study. This review is organization according to six broad themes that I identified in the literature. These themes are conceptualization of multiculturism in the Canadian classroom, colorblindness and its
implication, anti-racist education, school and family partnerships, the Muslim identity, and finally, mothering as a Muslim.

2.3.1 Multiculturalism in the Canadian classroom

The literature review identified that Canada prides itself on its commitment to multiculturalism (Escayg et al., 2017). However, the origins of Canadian multiculturalism "did not stem from an expansive understanding of Canada's manifold diversity. Rather it came from attempts to solve long-standing tensions between French and English Canada" (Chazan et al., 2011, p. 1). Looking at some recent statistics of Canadian immigration, Canada settled 1,212,075 new immigrants between 2011 and 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2016), and most new immigrants come from non-European countries, which "has contributed to the growth of" what Statistics Canada calls "the visible minority population in Canada" (Statistics Canada, 2016, p. 6). This population will represent about 35.9% of the total Canadian population by 2036 (Statistics Canada, 2016). In a country like Canada, where whiteness and Christianity are the norms, religion becomes racialized (Meer, 2013; Taras, 2013). As reported by Statistics Canada, "slightly over 1 million individuals identified themselves as Muslims, representing 3.2% of the nation's total population" (Statistics Canada, 2016, p. 21), and Muslim women, by their visibility when wearing the hijab (Williams & Vashi, 2007), can bear the brunt of Islamophobia. Furthermore, the pro-White attitude that continues to exist in the Canadian classrooms (Escayg et al., 2017) asks what needs to happen in schools, so they become spaces of welcome to all.

The literature is clear that decorating classroom walls with pictures of people of colour and filling up the library with multicultural books does not mean that the educators are conscious of their behaviour towards children of colour and that they are intentionally addressing anti-racist practices in the lived curriculum and their interactions with families. Educators tend to focus on "the folkloric elements of a culture such as artifacts, food, and holidays, among others" (Riojas-Cortez, 2001, p. 36) while ignoring the political entanglement of power within the classroom and the world. Ignoring the political entanglement of power and privilege stems from colorblind ideology which communicates the message that everyone is the same. Adopting a colorblind approach "serves to reinforce the theorized invisibility of race and racism, thereby limiting one's
ability to interrogate notions of privilege and its corollary, the deprivileging of minoritized social
groups" (Solomona et al., 2005, p. 150).

Multiculturalism has still to deal with its conceptualization and premises, including its
relationship to whiteness. Escayg et al. (2017) write that the essence of “multiculturalism
relegates difference and culture to non-White bodies and in the process normalizes Whiteness”
(p. 12). Multicultural discourse in the Canadian context maintains the status quo by ignoring the
relationship between power and privilege (Escayg et al., 2017). Solomona and his colleagues
(2005) drew attention to the maintenance of whiteness in educational institutions, adding that the
teaching profession's historical conceptualization as a white and middle-class occupation. The
perpetuation of white dominance in education is a clear indication of white privilege. Kempf
(2011) asserted that "a knowledge gap persists (and is maintained) between the prevailing
narratives that dominate the Eurocentric Canadian educational system, and the actual histories of
the peoples who populate Canadian classrooms and communities." (p. 93). According to
Solomona et al. (2005), the danger lies in not addressing race and racism in educational spheres,
since it influences "the minds, subjectivities and futures of minoritized youth" (p. 150) as a result
of their interactions with their educators.

Canadian classrooms adopt a curriculum and textbooks deeply rooted in a multicultural discourse
(Sensoy et al., 2010). Srivastava (2007) described multiculturalism as "a 3-D approach – one that
celebrates dance, dress, and dining, but fails to take into account the multiple dimensions of
racial and social inequality” (p. 291). This multicultural discourse in schools is referred to
as heroes and holidays (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2002), or the tourist
approach (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Regardless of its label, the discourse of multiculturalism in
Canadian schools portrays diversity as a superficial celebration of differences and diversity at a
surface level through multicultural music, dance, food, and clothes while ignoring the
complexity of racial and cultural differences in a political context (Lee et al., 2002).

Multiculturalism in schools and classrooms can mean anything from hosting a "taco day' at
school to incorporating all aspects of culture into the curriculum" (Kailin, 2002, p. 49).

Although there might be an "official recognition of Canada as a diverse society" because of the
adoption of a multiculturalism policy in the early 1970s, "the normative vision of Canada as a
white man's country is still pervasive" (Baldwin et al., 2011, p. 4). Although Canada’s perennial claim is that it is race-neutral and is a multicultural society, racism and colonialism still exist and are reported in various ways (Baldwin et al., 2011; Jiwani, 2006; Razack et al., 2010). According to Raza (2014), the discourse in the educational system remains white dominant. Raza (2014) asserts that "schools are structured on the logic of Whiteness, and they aim to indoctrinate this logic upon all students. Multiculturalism works within this colonial system" (p. 146). The multicultural perspective completely ignores whiteness and white skin privilege (Farago et al., 2015; Hollingworth, 2009; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Instead, the discourse of multiculturalism in Canadian schools and classrooms maintains the utopian view of "diversity without oppression" (Sensoy et al., 2010) or includes cultural and ethnic content as an additive approach (Banks 2006).

James Banks, who is a pioneer and one of the principal founders of the discipline of multicultural education, referred to the additive approach as an approach that works towards the integration of culture and ethnic content to the curriculum through adding "content, concepts, themes, and perspectives to the curriculum without changing its basic structure, purposes, and characteristics" (Banks, 2006, p. 140). Banks (2006) further explained that this approach can mean that schools or educators can add books, a new unit, or design a course representing a culture and diverse ethnic groups without changing it substantially or engaging in critical discussions and conversations. This approach to multiculturism in schools is problematic since the focus remains basic and does not ignite a higher level of thinking and knowledge in students and educators (Banks, 2006). The discourse of multiculturism as an additive also maintains and reinforces the knowledge and perspectives of the dominant Eurocentric norms, leading to "viewing racism as a past historical injustice, rather than one that remains prevalent in the present day" and filtering the voices of minorities and the racialized other through the perspectives of the dominant (Sensoy et al., 2010, p. 5). Srivastava (2007) argued that this focus on learning "about the other merely reinforces, rather than transforms, racialized identities and relations of power" (p. 292). Educators continue to focus on the celebratory approach to multiculturism, focusing on a few heroic figures while failing to address racialized students' real experiences and challenges (Banks, 2006; Sensoy et al., 2010). According to Banks (1993), the Othering of this type perpetuates the dominance of the Eurocentric perspective because it
reinforces their false sense of superiority, gives them a misleading conception of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups, and denies them the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge, perspectives, and frames of reference that can be gained from studying and experiencing other cultures and groups. (p. 195)

The Ontario curriculum’s focus on multiculturalism in its approach to cultures and diversity has resulted in educators adopting a colorblind mindset (MacNevin & Berman, 2017), which views everyone through the lens of we are all the same (Boutte et al, 2011). However, further research into colorblindness indicates that using this approach dismisses the fact that race, racism and racial privilege exist in classrooms, schools, and society.

2.3.2 Colorblindness

The literature reviewed suggested that the significant consequence of employing colorblindness in multicultural education is that it leads educators to believe that racism is not a concern that warrants attention, and therefore, educators need not take social action towards rectification (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). To interrupt racism, educators should recognize that silencing and ignoring issues of race and privilege contribute to the maintenance of racism within education (Boutte et al., 2011). Many scholars assert that the ideology of colorblindness minimizes or disregards race and racism within modern-day society (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Farago et al., 2015; MacNevin & Berman, 2017). According to Hollingworth (2009), the vision of colorblindness that calls for eliminating racial discrimination is actually "founded on the seemingly paradoxical notion that it is noble to ignore race while simultaneously honoring diversity" (p. 34). According to the observation of Omi and Winant (1994), adopting this ideology works towards maintaining the "existing positions and political stability" and not towards "fairness" (p. 130).

In a society, such as Canada, that values and promotes the rhetoric that we are all the same regardless of how a person looks, it is not surprising that educators have also internalized that a colorblind standpoint is more appropriate within their classrooms (Boutte et al., 2011). However, Kailin (2002) suggested that avoiding and ignoring race and ethnicity in classrooms can easily
degenerate into racial oppression. Besides, "colorblind attitudes may contribute to the maintenance of a system in which racial injustice is interwoven into the fabric of society and is made invisible early in life - maintaining the status quo" (Farago et al., 2015, p. 33). The continuous adoption of colorblindness also preserves the existing racial stereotypes present in society (Derman-Spark & Edwards, 2010).

A study by Hollingworth (2009) presented an example of an educator, named Patrice, who engaged with issues of race, privilege, and power while adopting a colorblind ideology. Her approach prevented her from engaging in critical discussions about current issues of racism, and instead, she situated issues of racism as a historical artifact. Patrice was an elementary school teacher who taught children about multiculturalism through her ideological lens. While Patrice wanted to adopt a curriculum inclusive of people of colour, she avoided conversations about privilege, social power, and social justice and expressed the belief that "we are all the same underneath the color of our skin" (p. 55). Patrice discouraged students from addressing issues of power, race, and white privilege. She also displayed discomfort at the idea of being an activist who discusses issues of social powers and privilege at the elementary level of schooling. Her colorblind approach exemplifies *boutique multiculturalism*, a term coined by Fish (1997) to denote artificial respect towards other cultures and the withdrawal of that respect when cultural practices differ. The study concluded that Patrice was keen on fostering a classroom that deeply respected other cultures; however, she did not see the need to discuss social privilege and white power with her students at such a young age. The tendency for white educators to ignore colour differences, social power and privileges constitutes what Bonilla-Silva (2014) called *new racism*. Bonilla-Silva (2014) breaks down new racism into five parts: (1) the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and racial practices; (2) the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever growing claim by whites that they experience 'reverse racism'; (3) the elaboration of a racial agenda over political matters that eschews direct racial references; (4) the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality; and, finally, (5) the rearticulating of some racial practices characteristic of the Jim Crow period of race relations (p. 32).

Colorblindness is present in education and is characterized by educators and curricula ignoring race and racism. However, to work towards combating racism in schools’ educators need to adopt an anti-racist approach when interacting with families and children in school settings.
2.3.3 The Muslim body

The literature reviewed suggested that the phenomenon of Islamophobia has contributed to systemic forms of oppression and discrimination against Muslim communities (Sivanandan, 2006). As mentioned in Chapter 1, this dissertation adopts Beydoun’s (2016) definition of Islamophobia: "the presumption that Islam is inherently violent, alien, and inassimilable. Combined with this presumption is the belief that expressions of Muslim identity are correlative with a propensity for terrorism" (p. 111). The crisis of 9/11 has significantly contributed to the increase of Islamophobia in Canada, and it has resulted in the eruption of long-held, hidden fears while introducing new ones (Hogarth & Fletcher, 2018).

According to research conducted after the 9/11 crisis, many Muslims in North America are targeted, victimized, and negatively stereotyped simply because they are Muslims (Amjad, 2018; Charani, 2005; Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001; Niyozov & Pluim, 2009; Shaheen, 2009; Sivanandan, 2006). Muslims worldwide face intense discrimination a form of revenge for the 9/11 attack (Zine, 2012). The book *A Space for Race* (Hogarth & Fletcher, 2018) engages in critical examination of the Muslim identity constructs that developed after 9/11. The two Muslim identities that are explored in this book are Muslim as a terrorist, and Muslim as a victim. The authors further argued that "the media and political rhetoric that has informed the consciousness of the populace even beings to challenge the possibility of a victim identity for Arabs generally and Muslims specifically" (p. 83). The book further discusses racism and multiculturalism and the ongoing tensions and challenges embedded within Canada’s policies and practices. Engaging in understanding the Canadian sociopolitical context concerning racialized groups in education helps inform educators of the framework that has informed their imaginings of these groups.

Many Canadians have a stereotypical conceptualization of a Canadian Muslim, grounded by assumptions about the Islamic faith, culture, lifestyle, and aspirations (Jamil, 2012). In mass media, Islam is often portrayed as an inherently violent religion, and a threat to Western values (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005). When discourses of violence are always associated with Islam, educators might develop fear when interacting with Muslims (Guo, 2015). Fear and unfamiliarity might be exacerbated by curriculum and teaching practices in K-12 education, which continuous the perpetuation of Eurocentric perspectives, standards and values, and dismissing the
knowledge and values of students and parents who are culturally and religiously diverse (Jones, 2003). A tendency to regard “difference as deficit” (Dei, 1996) builds a taller wall between educators and parents. Many educators ignore diversity, minimize it, or view it as an obstacle to learning process (Cummins, 2003; Dei, 1996). To break the wall built, educators need to draw on different cultural groups as an opportunity to learn from them and bring into the classroom their experience, knowledge, and perspectives. This model of difference as deficiency infuses the general society, “and its reach is reflected in school cultures and institutional practices that systematically marginalize or pathologize difference” (Guo, 2015, p. 190). In other words, fear will continue to be present between educators and Muslims if educators continue to see “difference as deficient” (Dei, 1996). This has an especially significant impact on Muslim mothers since mothers are usually at the forefront when it comes to children’s schooling (Crooks, 2013; Smythe, 2006, 2013).

2.3.6. Mothering as a Muslim

Mothers are usually on the frontline when it comes to children’s schooling (Crooks, 2013; Smythe, 2006, 2013). Research in family literacy and partnerships with families tell us that they are deeply rooted in Eurocentric norms and ideologies (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Kassam, 2011; Pushor & Amendt, 2018; Smythe, 2006). Crooks (2013) argued that discourse on family literacy has gendered implications towards the mother. Mothers are assumed to be primarily responsible for preparing children to succeed in schools (Crooks, 2013; Smythe, 2013). Crooks (2013) stated that this gendered idea “is also reflective of the way in which family literacy practice is embedded in mothering discourses that emphasize the mothers’ role as critical to their children’s (literacy) development” (p. 105). In a way, the notion of family engagement and involvement becomes heavily associated with mothers rather than other family members.

Eurocentric ideologies surrounding motherhood confine mothers to unrealistic expectations that omit the many ways mothers effectively teach and raise their children (Crooks, 2013; Smythe, 2013). This ideology creates this notion of good motherhood (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). Goodwin and Huppatz’s (2010) assertion that “the good mother is known as that formidable social construct placing pressure on women to conform to particular standards and ideals, against
which they are judged and judge themselves” (p. 1). Social constructions of normativity harness the notion of a good mother (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). Since notions of good motherhood are deeply rooted in Eurocentric ways of being and doing, being on a margin of, or outside of, these roots of what labels a mother as good mother then places other mothers who do not confine to the Eurocentric notion of a good mother into a place of being “deficient or lacking in ‘goodness’” (Saleh, 2017, p. 268). Saleh (2017) reminded us that Muslim mothers “are always in the process of facing and resisting stories of who… [they] are and who… [they] should be as ‘good (Muslim)… Mothers’” (p. 301). More research that invites racialized mothers needs to be conducted so change can be co-created rather than placing racialized mothers as recipients or subjects of that change (Smythe, 2013). Therefore, my research focuses on the complex nature of being a Muslim woman and a mother and how this relates to their child(ren)’s education.

The literature I reviewed identified that the rise of Islamophobia and the racialization of the Muslim woman, in general, adds a complex layer to being a Muslim mother in educational settings (Din, 2017). Muslim mothers have been finding their way through popular media with contradictory headlines, from being barbaric to being dysfunctional. As Din (2017) put it, the picture of a Muslim mother "remains much the same: Muslim women are alien, othered, and dehumanized" (p. 12).

Writing about the relationship between Muslim mothers and their child's education in Ontario is vital. According to Zine (2001), Eurocentric ideologies ground public schools in the Canadian context, which means that religious minority parents need to continuously negotiate their faith-based principles regarding their children's education and activities within schools. As discussed earlier, media coverage portraying the Islamic faith as violent and barbaric has cultivated Islamophobia in many people's hearts (Guo, 2015).

According to Zine (2004), Islamophobia affects the realities of Muslims and children's everyday lives, and youth are the most vulnerable victims of these hateful assumptions against all Muslims. Jasmine Zine, a professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, has written numerous articles and books that address Muslim youths and education in the Canadian context. Although her research does not focus on the early years, it still provides excellent insights into Canadian
schools' situation regarding Muslim students. According to Zine (2004), Canadian schools have also witnessed the impact of 9/11.

There is an alarming absence of the Muslim mother's perspective in the related literature, which warrants the need to explore and listen to the perspectives of Muslim mothers. As I was trying to find literature to support this section of my dissertation, I did not find any research that explored the perspective of Muslim mothers who have children in the early years, kindergarten to grade 3, in Ontario or anywhere else in Canada. I did come across a few research studies that explored the perspectives of Muslim parents in Alberta, Canada; however, the research focused on children who attended upper elementary grades (grades 7 and 8) or high school (Amjad, 2018; Guo, 2011, 2015; Saleh, 2017). Although these studies do not focus on mothers of children in the early years, it still provides excellent insights into teachers' perspectives and relationships with Muslim families and their children.

Guo's (2015) study explored the responses of pre-service teachers on Muslim parents’ requests to some religious accommodation in the public-school system, found that "the perspectives of Muslim parents religious diversity needs to be better accommodated in public schools and teachers' attitudes play a significant role in this" (p. 199). The author also found that the pre-service teacher perception of Muslim mothers who wore the hijab as "dumb", uneducated, and cannot communicate in English. One pre-service teacher in her study observed that:

> When we see someone dress differently, look differently, we associate that with the fact that they must not know English. If that person can't communicate at the same level, then they must be dumb… This superior/inferior attitude remains. It takes a teacher to acknowledge their own inhibitions and more past this general negative attitude towards others. (p. 195)

Zine (2006) pointed to the importance of educators acknowledging biases and deconstructing any associations they may have linking the way a person dresses (e.g., wearing the hijab) with their intelligence, educational background, or English proficiency. Guo's (2015) research also found that many pre-service teachers have difficulties accepting and managing some of the Muslim parents' religious requests. She claimed that this study "showed that some pre-service teachers indeed regard Muslim parents as alien 'Others', and that this regard is based on unexamined
individual beliefs and assumptions, many of which contribute to the perpetuation of systemic racism" (p. 200).

Amjad's (2018) research, on the other hand, investigated the perspective of seven Muslim elementary school students' who attended a public school in Alberta. Her research found that although

an essential goal of Canadian multiculturalism is an increase in the sense of belonging of all cultural groups, teachers in Alberta are failing to achieve this goal in relation to Muslim students due to widespread negative views about Muslims in Canadian society and schools. (p. 316)

Amjad (2018) explained that negative media depictions of Muslims consumed by educators affected the way they approached Muslim students' images in their classrooms. She argued that working towards an anti-Islam representation in class significantly "depends on how the teacher presents global issues to the class. They can either blindly oppose Muslims and Islam or provide evidence so that students can see the bigger picture" (p. 327). She added that educators "naturally have their own personal viewpoints, but being teachers, they have an obligation to help children develop their ability to critically examine a topic while considering alternative, sometimes conflicting, perspectives" (p. 327). Amjad also acknowledged the power that educators hold in influencing a child's impression of who they are. Furthermore, the findings of the study "confirm that unintentional comments can have devastating effect on students' peer relations and class performance" (p.328).

In sum, a lot more research is needed to understand Muslim mothers' experiences and perspectives regarding their children's schooling in Ontario and especially in the early years. Inviting educators to engage with anti-racist pedagogies and the pedagogies of walking alongside families will help understand and support Muslim mothers and their children within educational settings.

2.4. Conclusion
In conclusion, this chapter discussed the theoretical framework that ground this study, racialization and Orientalism. It also presented the orientation that guided this study: the pedagogies of walking alongside parents and anti-racist pedagogies. The literature reviewed in this chapter indicates that teachers often teach students about cultures and diversity through the lens of multiculturalism, adopting a colorblind conceptualization of race and diversity. Furthermore, research into colorblindness revealed that using this approach dismisses the fact that race, racism and racial privilege exist in classrooms, schools, and society. When educators adopt a colorblind ideology, it contributes to maintaining the status quo.

The literature also indicated growing evidence that anti-racist pedagogy is needed to help educators tap into the thoughts they bring in with them into the classroom. Educators might come into class consciously or unconsciously perpetuating their own biases, social stereotypes, privileges, and power. Unless educators are consciously working towards an anti-racist mindset and pedagogy, racism will continue to reflect in their teaching. The literature on home and school interactions indicates that the educational system is grounded in Eurocentric ideology, which maintains racism by continuously prescribing to parents a set of expectations of what to do, how to think, and what is valuable (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). The literature also suggested that there is an ever-growing wall between schools and racialized families. Educators and schools need to build a relationship with parents that seeks engagement instead of involving parents in matters that only serve the school's agenda.

This chapter indicated that more research is needed to understand Muslim mothers' experiences and perspectives regarding their children's schooling in Ontario, especially in the early years. The following chapter will outline my case study methodology and the methods used in data collection and data analysis.
Chapter 3

3 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an exploratory, multiple case study design (Stake, 2010; Yin, 2012) to explore the perspective of Muslim mothers in relation to their encounters with early years education in Ontario. The study responds to the questions:

1. What are Muslim mothers' conceptualizations of race and racism and how do they understand these to be related to their families' relationship with public schools (or not)?

2. What do mothers say are the enablers and barriers to their families' opportunities to interact with schools in ways that are anti-racist?

3. What might an anti-racist reading of Muslim mothers' cases have to teach about promoting anti-racist education in early childhood classrooms?

A multiple case-study design fittingly provides the opportunity to “analyze within each setting and across settings” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 550). There are seven settings or cases in this study, with each mother being a case. Yin (2003) explained that multiple case-study designs are robust in nature because they provide rich evidence from multiple sources. In my study, each mother brings her own experiences and encounters to the interview providing rich data. This research design was useful in comparing the encounters of each mother’s case. In addition, mothers’ perspectives were compared to provide across-case findings, analyses, and recommendations for designing and implementing anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside families in early childhood education. This chapter outlines my multiple case study methodology and the methods used in data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Exploratory Multiple Case Study

To ground the qualitative nature of the study, I drew first on Yin’s (2014) description of research design as "the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study's initial research
questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions" (p. 28). I also designed this study through Patton’s (2015) advice that "qualitative inquiry documents the stuff that happens among real people in the real world in their own words, from their own perspectives, and within their own contexts" (p. 12). Equally, Creswell (2013) maintains that qualitative research seeks to address "the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 44). Further, employing a qualitative methodology allowed me to produce understandings of “the meaning people make of their lives in very particular contexts" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 9).

More specifically, the study is a multiple case study. A multiple case study design situates different contexts by comparing different cases (Yin, 2014). I have identified seven cases, each mother as an individual case. Stake (1995) focused on the context of each case as being crucial because "the uniquenesses are expected to be critical to the understandings of the particular case" (p. 44). To gain an understanding of each unique case, a thick description (Geertz, 1993, as cited in Stake, 2010) is an imperative component of case study, as it strives "to derive a(n) (up-)close or otherwise in-depth understanding of a single or small number of 'cases,' set in their real-world contexts. The closeness aims to produce an invaluable and deep understanding" (Yin, 2012, p. 4). Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) also stated that "context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects," and researchers "investigate and report the real-life, complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events" (p. 289).

The study is exploratory in nature because little previous research has been conducted on this topic. The study aims to offer themes for further investigation and to offer ways to integrate both anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside families in early years classrooms and into programmatic curriculum and policies. When a case study “contains more than a single case” (p. 550), a multiple case study is employed, “allow[ing] the researcher to analyze within each setting and across settings” (p. 550). This study was designed to achieve its objectives through a descriptive multiple case study as outlined by Yin (2009, 2012), with a deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following section will layout the participants, methods, and the method of analysis.

3.2 Data collection
The following section outlines my data collection methods, which include participant recruitment, in-depth interviews, and reflection journal.

**Recruitment.** After gaining ethical approval from my institution's Research Ethics Board (REB) (Appendix A), recruitment began. As per the approved ethics protocol, I posted on my public Instagram account to invite Muslim mothers who live in Ontario who are interested in participating in my research study. My Instagram account is a platform that intertwines positive parenting and Islamic parenting and aims to serve mothers in general and Muslim mothers in particular. Multiple Insta stories (Appendix B) were posted twice during a 2-week recruiting period between February 3rd, 2020 and February 21st, 2020. Muslim mothers who lived in Ontario and were interested in participating in the research project either sent me a Direct Message (DM) on Instagram or sent me an email asking for more details about the research project. Upon receiving a DM or an email from an interested participant, a Letter of Information and Consent form (Appendix C) was sent directly to them through email. Each participant could withdraw from the study even after completing the Letter of Information and Consent Form. Given the purpose of this study, purposeful sampling was the most appropriate technique to use. According to Patton (2002), there are 16 different strategies for purposefully selecting information-rich cases. This research deploys critical case sampling to collect data. Critical case sampling refers to picking "the site that would yield the most information" and one that has "the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (Patton, 2002, p. 236). The study's purposeful sampling procedure ensured that participants identified as Muslim and mothers to help address the research questions. A recruitment questionnaire (Appendix D) was conducted before the interview.

**Participants.** My inclusion criteria for the participants included mothers who identified as Muslim, lived in Ontario, and who had a child or children that were between four and eight years old. *Table 3.1* presents the 7 participants in the first column, their highest level of education in the second column, their work status in the third column, their marital status in the fourth column, how many children they have in the fifth column, how many of their children are between the ages of 4 and 8 in the sixth column, the birthplace of their children in the seventh column, the number of languages spoken by the mother in the eighth column, and the type of education their children attend in the final column.
### Table 3.1

**Participants background information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Highest level of Education</th>
<th>Work status</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th># of children</th>
<th># of children between the ages 4-8</th>
<th>Child/ren birthplace</th>
<th># of Mother’s spoken language/s</th>
<th>Child/ren education</th>
<th>Language of instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Highschool</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Homeschool</td>
<td>Private Islamic school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zahra</td>
<td>Undergraduete</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>French immersion public school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dina</td>
<td>Undergraduete</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Public school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afra</td>
<td>Undergraduete</td>
<td>Part-time work</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>French public school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>Graduate studies</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Public school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrien</td>
<td>Graduate studies</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Private Islamic School</td>
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<td>Hind</td>
<td>Graduate studies</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Private Islamic School</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Interviews.** This study relied on interviews as the key data source. Interviews are “the most prominent data collection tool in qualitative research,” and they are “a very good way of assessing people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality. Interviews are also the most powerful way we have of understanding others” (Punch, 2009, p. 144). Interviews are considered to be an appropriate way to collect data within case study research since they provide the researcher with in-depth and detailed data that stems from the lived experiences of participants. Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori (2011) explains that interviews “can research areas of reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible such as people’s subjective experiences and attitudes” (p. 529). Further, “we interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe and to understand what we have observed...we cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intention” (Patton, 2015, p. 426). The interviews in my study were designed to be open-ended and semi-structured given the advice that “questions should be asked
in a truly open-ended fashion so people can respond in their own words” (p. 446). This kind of flexible interviewing “allow[ed] the person being interviewed to select from among that person’s full repertoire of possible responses those that are the most salient...[to] use whatever words they want to express what they have to say” (p. 447). Open-ended and semi-structured interviews were the best fit for my research since I had “a specific topic to learn about, prepare[d] a limited number of questions in advance, and plan[ed] to ask follow-up questions” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 31). Following this method, the conversation and the interactions remained focused while allowing flexibility for the participants to share their perspectives and experiences as their thoughts emerge (Patton, 2002).

An interview protocol was used for the interview process (see Appendix E). An interview protocol is helpful since the interviewer comes to the interview prepared with a list of questions or “issues that are to be explored,” and “it prepare[s] one to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed” (Patton, 2015, p. 439). Employing an open-ended interview procedure allows the participant to move the conversation in their own direction in relation to their own experiences (Patton, 2015). Some of the topics discussed included how the mothers felt about the public-school system in Ontario, the barriers or challenges they face in regard to their child’s education, their understanding of home-school relationship, and their conceptualization of race and racism in relation to education.

### 3.3 Deductive and inductive thematic analysis

Data from each case were analyzed through thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was both deductive or top down (Boyatzis, 1998; Hayes, 1997), as well as indicative or bottom up (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). Braun and Clarke (2006) claimed that thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research, yet, it has been poorly acknowledged compared to other qualitative research methods such as grounded theory and ethnography. They argued that “thematic analysis should be seen as foundational method for qualitative analysis” (p. 78) as it provides core skills for conducting many other forms of qualitative analysis. Many researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004; Leininger, 1992; Nowell et. al., 2017; Thorne, 2000) have argued that thematic analysis should be recognized as a research method in its own right. Nowell
et al. (2017) claimed “that thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions” (p. 2). It is a method that supports research in identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined various advantages of conducting a thematic analysis which are pertinent to my study, such as it “can generate unanticipated insights”, which “can be useful for producing qualitative analyses suited to informing policy development”, also it “can highlight similarities and differences across the data set” and “flexibility” (p. 97) to mention a few. Having the flexibility during the process of thematic analysis can “potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (p. 78).

Nowell et. al (2017) suggested that a detailed description of how a qualitative research study was analyzed must be communicated in the reporting of all studies. Thematic analysis provides the research with a detailed description of how to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 3.2 provides the six phases of thematic analysis: 1. Familiarising yourself with your data; 2. Generating initial codes; 3. Searching for themes; 4. Reviewing themes; 5. Defining and naming themes; 6. Producing the report. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that the six phases in thematic analysis are not to be used rigidly. The six phases need to be applied flexibly to fit the research questions and data (Patton, 1990) since analysis is not a linear process that moves from one set to the next so seamlessly. Instead, thematic analysis is a recursive process that moves back and forth across the phases and should not be rushed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Description of the process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:</td>
<td>Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes:</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes:</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. **Reviewing themes:** Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.

5. **Defining and naming themes:** Ongoing analysis to refine the specific of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

6. **Producing the report:** The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

This research used codes and themes that were generated through both deductive and inductive approach. A deductive approach enables the researcher to create and use predetermined codes and themes that are driven by the study’s theoretical framework, questions, and literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006), while an inductive approach generates codes and themes from the data themselves (Patton, 1990). This research applied a deductive approach by thinking with anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside families, as well as with the research questions and literature. In addition, this research study used an inductive approach to allow codes and themes to emerge from the data itself. The inductive detailed reading of the data was not only to gain a complete understanding of what was said (Gale et al., 2013), but also to ensure that all key aspects of the data are captured (Charmaz, 2014; Gale et al., 2013). I transcribed the transcripts, then read and listened to them line by line and highlighted any inductive themes that emerged. Key concepts and themes were identified using the research questions, literature, and theoretical framework as the lenses. An inductive reading of the raw data prevents the possibility of the researcher forcing only predetermined results (Bradley et al., 2007; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Glaser, 1992). The *keyness* of themes depend on “whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research questions” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Braun and Clarke (2006) add that the use of themes “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). *Figure 3.1* displays the process of preparation, organization and data analysis process including the deductive and inductive methods.
Figure 3.1
Process of preparation and organization for data analysis

Data transcription of audio-recorded interviews

Looking at the interviews through a deductive approach in relation to the research questions and framework

Inductive approach

Multiple reading and listening to data to make sense of it

Deductive approach

Emerging codes from the data

Looking at data through predetermined codes

Categorisation 1

Categorisation 2

Collapsing categories and writing detailed description of each case (chapter 4)

Cross-case reading of the data: identification of overlapping categories, refining and reduction of themes by clustering categories in relation to research questions

Organizing and writing final report (chapter 5)
Table 3.3 provides a sample of the predetermined codes that were generated from matters mentioned in response to the interview questions in relation to the research questions. The predetermined codes provided initial focus in identifying certain key aspects of the data that directly related to the research questions, literature, and theoretical framework. The first column in Table 3.3 presents the interview questions category. The second column includes the sub-questions from the interview guide that relate to the first and second research questions shown in the third column. The predetermined codes are shown in the fourth column, while the fifth column explains the rationale for the predetermined codes.

Table 3.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding process</th>
<th>Example of interview questions category</th>
<th>Sample of sub-questions from interview questions</th>
<th>Research questions related to the codes</th>
<th>Sample codes</th>
<th>Code rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s relationship with education/schools in Ontario</td>
<td>Tell me about your experience with communicating with your child’s school.</td>
<td>Q1. What are Muslim mothers' conceptualizations of race and racism, and how do they understand these to be related to their families' relationship with public schools (or not)?</td>
<td>-Patterns of family involvement -Patterns of family engagement -discomfort -comfort -communication -Muslim identity</td>
<td>To think with home-school relationships in relation to the pedagogies of walking alongside families</td>
<td>To explore the comfort level of Muslim mothers in relation to school interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell me about your challenges when communicating with your child’s teacher/school.</td>
<td>Q2. What do mothers say are the enablers and barriers to their families' opportunities to interact with schools in ways that are anti-racist?</td>
<td>To understand school spheres in relation to anti-racist approaches to parental partnerships (specifically concerning mothers who identify as a Muslim)</td>
<td>To explore opportunities Muslim identities in relation to schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The research employed a cross-case analysis method (Graebner, 2009; Yin, 2003), using tables to compare and contrast data by themes between the individual cases (Graebner, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2004) argued that the process of thematic analysis is useful when examining the perspectives of different participants and can highlight similarities and differences while generating new insights. Patton (2002) explained that when looking at multiple cases, it becomes essential to first gain an in-depth understanding of each individual case. He posited that once this first important step is done, cross-case analysis can begin in order to identify patterns and themes that cut across individual experiences. Chapter 4 presents a detailed description of the seven individual cases followed by Chapter 5, which outlines the cross-case reading to the data in relation to the research questions, literature review, and theoretical framework.

### 3.4 Ethical process

Gaining ethical approval was central to this research. According to the second edition of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2, 2014), also known as TCPS2, “ethical principles and guidelines play an important role in advancing the pursuit of knowledge while protecting and respecting research participants” (p. 5). All ethical procedures outlined by my institution’s research guidelines were followed, and informed consent was attained by all participants. The purpose of informed consent is to ensure “that the participants understand the nature of the research, are always aware of the risks [if applicable] it poses, and are not forced either covertly or overtly to participate” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 91). Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of all participants. All children names are also pseudonyms. As the research, I took the initiative in creating the pseudonyms. Participation in this research was completely voluntary as “participants should be given opportunities to refuse participation in the project so as to ensure that the data collection sessions involved only those who are genuinely willing to take part and prepared to offer data freely” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 66); hence, participants were clearly aware that they had the option to withdraw from this research at any point they felt that they no longer were interested in participating in this research.
The benefits to participants in this study was the opportunity for them to voice their thoughts and opinions on the barriers and/or enablers to building a relationship with their child or children’s school. The study hopes that educators and others connected to the education of young children will be able to truly make early education more welcoming, inclusive, diverse, and anti-racist.

3.5 Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, I have chosen to use the original trustworthiness framework of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Trustworthiness was established through the four criteria of credibility (of the findings), transferability (of the findings to other contexts), dependability (of the finding as logical, traceable, and clearly documented [Tobin & Begley, 2004]), and confirmability (findings are clearly shaped by the data and not through researcher’s bias [Tobin & Begley, 2004]). Braun and Clarke (2006) state that a rigorous thematic analysis can drive insightful and trustworthy findings.

Creswell (2007) remind us that qualitative research does not follow a rigid step-by-step process during data collection, data analysis, and report writing; instead, they are interconnected and occur simultaneously throughout the research process. Although, Braun and Clarke (2006) present a linear, six-step method, for thematic analysis, the process of analysis consists of moving back and forth between phases, as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

The following paragraph explores Lincoln and Guba (1985) trustworthiness framework to account for the process of data collection and analysis. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that to establish credibility, member check is essential. As such, thought the interview, I employed “respondent validation” (Stoecker & Brydon-Miller, 2013, p. 24). During the interview, I asked further questions to give the participants the opportunity to further discuss and explain their viewpoint. Also, I repeated some of the responses and asked to clarify if I understood or missed anything from their response. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggested the importance of research triangulation which I employed through triangulating the data with the literature. Highly detailed description of the cases allowed me to plan for the conditions of transferability: how the findings may be
transferred to new scenarios or environments. To ensure dependability, I provided a detailed description of the research design, as well as information about data collection and analysis. I also worked closely with my supervisor to ensure that the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Finally, confirmability was established through debriefing with my supervisor to ensure that the analysis and discussion was driven from the data. Koch (1994) recommended researchers to provide a clear explanation and reasoning for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices through the entire study to provide the reader to a full understand of the how and why behind the decisions made.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined and described my methodology and methods for my study’s design. The research methodology is designed as an exploratory multiple case study exploring and understanding Muslim mothers’ conceptualization of race and racism regarding their child’s education and schooling in Ontario. I further outlined my recruitment procedure, which adhered to ethical procedures as required by my institution. Within data collection, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven mothers who identified as Muslim and who had a child between the ages of 4 and 8. Next, I outlined deductive and inductive thematic data analysis, which involves working with predetermined codes that were driven from the research questions, literature and theoretical framework, as well as allowing for new codes to emerge from the data itself. Then, I outlined the ethical process that was taken to ensure voluntary participation and confidentiality. Finally, I described the process I took to ensure this research trustworthiness. In the next chapter, I present an in-depth description of each case.
Chapter 4

4 Findings

This chapter presents a detailed description of the seven individual cases of the mothers who participated in this research study. The chapter presents each mother's perspective, stories, and encounters with her child's education/schooling in Ontario. In Chapter 5, I draw on the content of this chapter to provide a cross-case reading of the data in relation to the research questions, literature review, and theoretical framework. Each case follows a similar scope and sequence, corresponding to the interviews' trajectory, exposing readers to a detailed description of each case. Each case starts with background information about the participant, then presents participants' encounters with home and school, followed by their conceptualization of racism and Islamophobia, along with concluding thoughts.

4.1 Megan

Megan identified as a Muslim woman who wore the hijab (headcover) and the niqab (face cover). She had two children, aged eight and two. Her eldest was born in Alberta, and her youngest was born in Ontario. At the time of data collection, Megan and her family were living in Ontario. Megan's highest education level was high school. Megan worked at home caring for her children while running two businesses of her own. Her husband worked in Alberta and visited whenever he could. Consequently, Megan took care of the day-to-day for her children.

I asked Megan two questions to help me understand how she identified herself and what it meant for her to be a Muslim mother. I said, You answered at the beginning of the interview that you identify as a Muslim mother. Do you also identify as a visible minority? Megan paused for a second and said:

So, I am white like I am… I wasn't born a Muslim. Um, however, I don't even know exactly how to answer this because I'm white, but I also am a niqabi [a person who wears ahead and face cover], so people look at me as if I'm a visible minority because I wear a
niqab and Abaya and hijab… but I'm white… so yes and no (audio recording, 2020-02-25).

When I asked, *what does it mean to be a Muslim mother?* With great expression, she said:

That. Is. A. Very. Big. Question… to me, it just means to raise my children conscious of the oneness of Allah and to make sure that Islam is incorporated in every action of their daily life (audio recording, 2020-02-25).

Megan expressed that she identifies herself as white, yet because she wears the hijab, an abaya and niqab, the larger society sees her as a minority. As for being a Muslim mother, her main goal was to incorporate Islam's practices and teachings into her everyday life. The following section presents Megan's thoughts about education and the decisions she made for her family in that regard.

### 4.1.1 Megan and education

At the time of the interview, Megan’s children were being schooled at home. Megan explained that homeschooling was something she knew she wanted to do at some point. Prior to this, Megan’s daughter, Amira had attended an independent Islamic school; however, an incident at school made her decide to homeschool her daughter before they had anticipated. Concerning this choice, Megan shared the following story regarding her eight-year-old daughter:

Amira … went to preschool… kindergarten, grade one and grade two until the Monday after March break. And then we pulled her from school, and I’ve been homeschooling ever since… so we had moved back to Ontario, and we had her in grade 2 here… we have been discussing homeschooling starting grade three. I wasn’t happy with the… curriculum that the [Islamic] school was using, and I wasn’t happy specifically with the attention or lack thereof, to Indigenous topics. So, I felt like it was really skimmed over. I felt it was really surface and kind of like a very sugar-coated explanation of colonialism and… Indigenous people. However, on top of that, Amira was experiencing a lot of bullying… it was from the, quote un quote, I hate to say it, but like the regular bullying… she had kids like, so I'm white, and her dad is Somalian, so he's black… there was kids
who were picking on her because she wasn't Somalian enough and... kind of making fun of her, that her mom was white, and then some other kids were making fun of her because I wasn't black... there was an incidence during March break outside of school, but it was a school girl who had a party, and the bullying was so bad there, that when she returned to school on the Monday, my husband and I had to drop something off, and we kind of peeked in on her gym class and she was just sitting by herself in the corner, and it just killed me... she just looked miserable. My husband was like, khalas [Arabic word for: that’s it], just take her out today. This is her last day. So, it was our intention to homeschool because of the curriculum, but it was the social bullying and things like that that ultimately... we decided to pull her before we intended to start homeschooling.

(audio recording, 2020-02-25)

To gain insight into the background that drove her to choose a private school, I asked Megan, *What made you choose alternative schooling in the first place, why did you decide not to send her to a public school?* She right away said:

> For us personally, public school was never even on the table... we thought that that was protecting them [her children] from racism, from Islamophobia, from maybe curriculum that we weren’t comfortable being taught at young ages... I do believe that consent and things need to be taught, but some of maybe the sex ed curriculum, I wasn’t comfortable with it at such young ages. So, Islamic school was always the way we were going to go. We never really even considered public school.

(audio recording, 2020-02-25)

Since one of my research questions aimed to understand the Muslim mothers’ conceptualization of race and racism, I was curious to know more about what Megan meant by saying “sugar-coated explanation of colonialism... and Indigenous people” (audio recording, 2020-02-25) in the curriculum, and why she thought it was essential for children to learn about that. She explained that, because her daughter was attending an independent school, the school had more control over what they were teaching or not teaching compared to the public school system. Megan said that the school’s understanding of Canada's history was simplified: “settlers came over and asked the Indigenous people, and they shared the land” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). She continued by saying, “I think that that’s a really slippery slope in Canada because I didn’t
learn about residential schools and the plight of Indigenous people until I left school… like it was not taught” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). Megan explained that yes, the school system is becoming more aware and is bringing such topics into the classroom; however, she added, “We have a lot of problems in Canada when it comes to the rights of Indigenous people, and I don’t think it’s healthy to not teach that in an authentic manner. Age appropriate, of course, but we can’t lie” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). She further explained that the process of educating ourselves and our children about the colonial history of Canada is “important because there’s a lot of healing that needs to be done in Canada” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). She asked the question, “How can we stop the injustices that are happening to people if we don’t learn about what happened?” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). She narrated,

I was born here. My parents were born here, and their parents were born here. So I can't help that I was born here, but I do recognize how Canada came to be and whose land this is… until Indigenous people have the same clean water that I have, until the police and the media care about murdered and missing indigenous women the way they would about white women, until they have the same chances that non-indigenous people have in their own land. I honestly and truly believe that it is my obligation as a non-indigenous person living on indigenous land to do what I can to raise awareness, to teach my children to be better than I was and to be better than my grandparents were. (audio recording, 2020-02-25)

Education for Megan is not just about books, math, and rote learning. Instead, she expressed that education is about “being well rounded” and “it’s learning other people’s experiences. It’s about learning about how to be empathetic, to be in other people’s shoes” (audio recording, 2020-04-16). She explained, “Of course we need to know our multiplication tables, how to read… but education to me isn’t just a workbook… it’s learning how to be a productive, empathetic, and contributing person to society” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). Megan added that her experience of “adversity, becoming a Muslim, being married to somebody from a completely different culture” (audio recording, 2020-02-25) had taught her that interacting with people and being empathetic “are more important than just knowing how to write a book report” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). Megan’s conceptualization of education and what she regards as important stems from a collective of experiences she encountered in life, starting when she was attending school.
as a youth, her relationship with her husband who comes from a culturally and linguistically
different background, and her present encounters with her daughters’ school.

4.1.2 Megan’s home and school encounters

In order to better understand the enablers and/or barriers that Muslim mothers experience in
regard to the opportunities to interact with schools, I wanted to gain insight on Megan’s
experience and conceptualization of home-school relationships and encounters. When I asked
Megan, *What are your thoughts about the relationship between school and home?*, Megan
expressed, “We are a team. Like, I am her parent in life, but you [school] are her guide eight
hours a day” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). She explained that it is important for the educators
to work with the parent. Although she never faced any problems concerning her daughter
academically, Megan still attended all parent-teacher nights. She said that teachers always
wondered why she was persistent in attending every single meeting and every teacher. She
shared,

I was always signing up to meet with every single teacher on every single meet-the-
teacher night… I was signing up to meet them. And they'd always say to me, why are you
here? Like we have no problems with Amira. And I always said we have to have an open
dialogue… We are a team… like I am her parent in life, but you are her guide eight hours
a day. Like we are a team. So, I don't think you just wait until your kid is problematic or
in trouble or falling behind before you open a dialogue with people that you are
entrusting your child to for eight hours a day. You are entrusting them to shape your
child, to teach your child, to uphold morals with your child too, you know? So, I always
said, I'm not going to wait until she's falling behind. Let's get ahead of that before
anything like that even happens. We should always have an open dialogue. So, I think it
goes hand in hand, you can't expect somebody or an institution to basically raise your
child, part of the time, without talking to them. (audio recording, 2020-02-25)

Megan talked about the importance of working with the school and the educator as a team.
However, she also acknowledged that teachers have many responsibilities to handle during the
day, making it hard to build a strong relationship between the teacher and the parent. Megan elaborated by saying:

There is so many kids, and there is so many kids that really are going through a lot. Like you've got social media… having older siblings, you know, problems in the home… I don't think that some kids weren’t really eating properly. There is a lot that a teacher has to take on. So when my kid, Allhamdullah [Thank God]… isn't getting in trouble, isn't falling behind in academics, then the teacher honestly just doesn't have time for me because she's got a laundry list of parents that she's trying to get a hold of, and fires they're trying to put out… and things they are trying to get ahead of, on top of that they have to mark their homework and tests and create lesson plans and all of that. So, I think that was always probably the biggest problem is that they're just overworked. There's just so much, so many complicated issues happening with so many kids these days. (audio recording, 2020-02-25)

For Megan, staying connected with the school and regularly communicating with the teacher is an essential part of her conceptualization of how the relationship between the school and home needs to be.

4.1.3 Megan’s conceptualization of race and racism

Concerning race and racism and the questions I asked about them, Megan expressed confusion and uncertainty on how racism relates to her as a white woman in Canada. When I asked, What does racism mean to you?, she narrated her own experience and how it was different than her daughter’s by saying:

Wow, that's hard because I never experienced racism. I'm white! I was just some white girl living in Canada, right. And then I became Muslim, and I'm not sure if that's racism, Islamophobia and racism… I'm not sure that they're the same thing. I did have people tell me, you know, to go back to my country, and you know, all these things. But when my daughter experienced that, it's so hard because it's not something you can change, or nor should you want to change. She can't change the colour of her skin, and she should never feel like she should. So, it really was earth-shattering. It really was really hard for a child
to try and process why anybody would care what colour her dad is or what colour or language her mom can speak. So, I think it's different what age you are, how you can process it. But that's hard for me to answer because I'm white. (audio recording, 2020-02-25)

When Megan spoke about Islamophobia, she talked about the rage and the ignorance she associated with it. She said:

It [Islamophobia] is so wrapped up and rooted in ignorance and anger that I just can't understand… and it really affects a person's life… I mean, I wear a niqab, and I lived in Alberta… it's like a hard place to live when you're a niqabi. I mean, it's tough to have people scream at you in public when your kids are standing right there. It's really hard for me to understand why people are that angry about what I choose to wear or who I choose to pray to, or how many times I choose to pray a day. And I really think that is all misinformation and ignorance wrapped up in hate for no reason. Like if you ever try to talk to people who hate Muslims, they don't even really know why they hate them because the things they say, when you rebuke it, they're like, oh! Like they don't even really know why they hate Muslims. (audio recording, 2020-02-25)

Megan indicated that for her personally, she did not experience racism; however, her daughter has experienced racism because of her skin colour. Nonetheless, she expressed that her experience with Islamophobia is present because of the way she dresses.

**4.1.4 Megan’s conceptualization of Islamophobia**

To better understand what are the anti-racist opportunities that the educational system in Ontario affords Muslim families, I asked Megan questions about Islamophobia in relation to education. Megan expressed that her first encounter with Islamophobia was during her school years, when September 11th happened, and she saw other students at school who were affected. Megan was not a Muslim at the time. She also stated that her husband had a hard time when he came to Canada and attended public school. Megan further explained that Muslims’ lives are affected by people believing the stereotypes about Muslims and what it means to be a Muslim. She said, “Like my life is affected when people come up to me in the grocery store and tell me to go back
to Afghanistan… or try to save me by saying, you know, you don't have to wear that here” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). She explained that her advocacy towards Indigenous rights and why she believes the educational system needs to educate students about colonization, the history of this land, and the Indigenous peoples, is intended to work towards rebuking stereotypes and spreading awareness. Megan said, “How can I hope that one day I can be free of other people's stereotypes of me if I'm not actively working to free others of the stereotypes people have of them [referring to Indigenous peoples in Canada]” (audio recording, 2020-02-25).

Megan communicated that for schools to combat racism and Islamophobia, they need to offer a moment of acknowledgment when things happen, whether nationally or internationally. She gave the example of the Mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand and the mosque shooting in Quebec and said, “That deserves, like, a moment” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). Her idea is that if educators and schools do not talk about it or acknowledge what has happened, it creates fear. She gave two examples; the first example was after September 11th and how she witnessed several students not attending school for a while out of fear, and the second example was at an Islamic school in Alberta that decided to lockdown out of fear of being attacked. She further explained that because we live in an instant world with information and news flooding our screens everywhere, “We cannot just think that kids don’t hear things. They might not understand it, but they hear it… so, when things happen, I hope that the school acknowledges it… especially schools with high Muslim population” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). Then she shared a story of how her friend's daughter, who attended a public school in Ontario, experienced difficulties because her daughter wore the hijab and was trying out for basketball. Her daughter was told, “That it’s [the hijab] not part of the uniform, if she wants to try out for the team, she would have to take off her hijab” (audio recording, 2020-02-25). From Megan’s experience, her daughter did not encounter incidence of Islamophobia because she attended an Islamic school. However, she stated that she heard stories from her friends that send their children to public school who have encountered Islamophobia in the public school system in Ontario.

4.1.5 Megan’s concluding thoughts

Concluding the interview, I offered Megan the space to express any additional thoughts, concerns, or ideas that she thought would be beneficial or would support this study. Megan
expressed that issues related to racism and Islamophobia in educational settings should be addressed immediately. She projected that:

I really think that racism and Islamophobia when it happens, no matter how big the issue is, it needs to be dealt with in the moment. Like the children really need to know that they belong, that they are Canadian, whether they're Muslim or not. The amount of people that tell me to go back to where I came from, it's insanity, because it doesn't matter if I was like, I'm white, like I was born here and it shouldn't matter if I came yesterday or if I have six generations. So, I think it's really important for our kids to feel like Canada is theirs and if they feel like Canada is theirs… they will feel invested to make it the best Canada it can be. (audio recording, 2020-02-25)

Megan’s concluding thoughts expressed the need for children to feel a sense of belonging regardless of their racial or religious background. She also indicated the importance of dealing with issues of racism and Islamophobia immediately.

4.2 Zahra

Zahra identified as a Muslim who wears the hijab, and the mother of four children, aged 20, 16, 13, and 8. At the time of data collection, Zahra and her family lived together as a nuclear family in Ontario. Her eldest child was born in the USA, and three of her children were born in Canada. Zahra graduated with a BA in the field of Social Sciences, and she identified as “a domestic engineer. i.e. stay at home mom”. To understand how Zahra identifies herself, I asked her, Do you identify as a visible minority? She said,

I don’t think, not in our area. I wouldn’t say we are a visible minority… we live in the GTA [Greater Toronto Area] and uh, there’s enough of us that I don’t think we’re a minority anymore. We might have been at one point. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

I asked Zahra, What does it mean to be a Muslim mother? She replied,

Um, in this day and age? I think… being a mother… it's a huge responsibility, and it's a full-time job. Being a Muslim mother even more so maybe because you're trying to balance your culture, your religion. You're trying to balance what's happening and the
external factors as well… you have to kind of be on top of everything without… being a nagging mother as well, right… um, so yeah, I think for me it’s like, you know, uh, to be that best that you can be while trying to hold onto our own, uh, religion and, uh, letting the children also explore and understand their surrounding and sort of grow into that. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra expressed that as a result of the growing population of Muslims in the area she lives, she does not identify herself as a visible minority. As for being a Muslim mother, Zahra indicated that her responsibility is to be able to balance the cultural and religious values they follow and believe in, while allowing children space to explore and learn about the society they live in.

4.2.1 Zahra’s and education

At the time of the interview, Zahra’s eight-year-old son was attending an independent Islamic school and her other two children were attending a public high school. Concerning this choice, Zahra chose to share her encounters with education starting with the public school system in Ontario when her eldest son, who was 20 at the time of the interview, was entering kindergarten until present time. She narrated:

I remember walking into a public school… and coming home and actually crying. And the first thing I told my husband was that I cannot send my son there… he was like, why? Now, you know, on the surface, the school was very welcoming, but it really bothered me, a couple of things really bothered me about the school. Um, I found they were a little rigid on… for example, we personally don’t listen to music. My father was a little rigid on giving into the music aspect… the other thing that really bothered me was, uh, and it was maybe something that was my issue, is that… my son would have had to sit on the same table where they were having pork… I think they were a little confused by my concern about that… it was a really good school and… the principal was very welcoming, but I was just so stumped because they were really concerned when I, when I was like… I would like to opt out of music. And I knew this was like, he's 20 now, so this is like 16 years ago, things have changed. Um… the fact, like, I was just very uncomfortable. Like I did not feel comfortable. That's the word I would like to use, is that
I really did not feel comfortable when I went there… I did feel welcomed, yeah. I mean, they were professionals… I just, you know, and… maybe it was me. Maybe it was coming from, you know, a fear of what was happening outside as well, but I did not feel like this was the place for my child… so we actually decided to homeschool him, and we homeschooled him for two months, and then I put him in the Muslim school. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

They later moved cities, and by that time, she had two children. She enrolled her children in a small private school, which she said: “were very accommodating of our culture and religious needs” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Later on, they moved to the Great Toronto Area (GTA) and decided to send her children to a private Islamic school for the elementary years, where she explained that all their needs were met. When her children graduated from elementary school, they would transition to the public school system for the high school years. As Zahra started to explain her experience as her children transitioned to the public school system, she paused and said, “I am not sure how candid can I be in this conversation?” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). I reassured her that everything is kept confidential and that I would love to listen to her authentic and honest experience. Zahra continued by explaining that the area they live in is predominantly Jewish, and the high school that her children attended had a large Jewish population. She expressed that “there was a very low level of inclusivity for anyone other than Jews”. To combat that, Zahra educated herself on the public school system laws and joined the school council board to bring inclusivity. She did face some challenges and resistance during her journey. Here is one example that she shared:

We had requested a prayer room for the kids, or during the month of Ramadan, we had wanted them to have a room, a meditation room where they could just sit and not have to sit in the cafeteria. And, uh, initially there was a little bit of resistance more than resistance, I shouldn't say they were resistant… they actually were baffled and uneducated because they had no idea why we were asking for these things. And there's a lot of fear. So, when we said that we wanted a prayer room, they automatically jumped to like, oh, well we don't hold Jumaas [Islamic weekly Friday prayers] in public schools. And it was like, we're not asking you to hold a Jumaa, we're just asking you to give us a room for them to pray in… I came to the understanding and realization that they actually
were not aware of what was going on. Like they really did not understand where these kids were coming from… But initially, I think I was more surprised than them that they actually did not know what was going on… and I think that comes from… a place of fear because they don't know what we're trying to do, right. But I found the key is education. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

To understand what education meant for Zahra, I asked her, *What does education mean to you?* She said:

> Education is not just academics. When you're educating a child, you're educating them about everything from, uh, morals to math, to science, to how to deal with emotions, to how to deal with people, to how to be inclusive, to how to be tolerant, to how to have empathy. So it's not just, well, you know what? Here you go, you figured 98%... in math, you're great. You've been educated at science and now go on and take on the world. So, when you're educating a child, you're really building a human. And I think you really have to put in a lot of effort to educate. Like, it's not just they're in your [educators’] classroom, and you import the knowledge, and then they're out of that classroom. Um, you're also character-building… you're also teaching them how to deal with people who are different than them. You're educating them. You're giving them those tools that you know what… when you [the student] leave from here, you're gonna work with people who are different than you, from different backgrounds, different cultures. You have to have that capacity and capability to be able to do that. So, for me, education is actually making a child that's all rounder. Having someone who comes out who is able to deal with life and not just, you know, words and numbers. Cause that's, in my opinion, that's actually what makes or breaks a person at the end of the day. Because you can be a brilliant student, but if you don't have tools to deal with life, then… I don't think you can make it. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra expressed that her understanding of education “comes from my religion” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She added that

> My religion teaches me and tells me that when you’re educating a child, you’re giving them the tools to actually thrive as a human being. You’re not just telling them that, you
know what? Two plus two makes four. That’s great. But what are you going to do with that four when you’re out in the world? And how are you going to take that forward and make a difference for humanity? (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra further explained that “humanity is not just obviously Muslims, humanity, is literally every single person out there” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Education for Zahra is not only about academics; instead, it is also about learning how to socialize and interact with others and how to make a difference in the world.

4.2.2 Zahra’s home and school encounters

In order to better understand the enablers and/or barriers that Muslim mothers experience in regard to the opportunities to interact with schools, I wanted to gain insight on Zahra’s experience and conceptualization of home-school relationship and encounters. When I asked Zahra, What are your thoughts about the relationship between school and home? Zahra said,

Very important. I think parents have to be very involved… in their child’s education…it’s very important in an education system to stand up for and with your principals. So, there is something that you feel very strongly about… you have to vocalize it, and you have to present them with a solution, or… an alternative to it. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra continued, “There’s a fine line between being an overbearing parent and being a parent that’s involved” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She explained that parents cannot dictate the content and methodologies in the classroom, but nor should they be disconnected from school and “let things just happen” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She found the teacher to be receptive when she communicated with them as a partner. Zahra said that

I think when you’re kind of involved with what’s happening with your child and as a parent you know each child very well… and you know their strengths, and their weakness… you kind of go in… and you say, you know, this is what I’m thinking, can you please, you know, work with me on this?... I find that teachers are already defensive before you walk in… you know that statement- kill them with kindness, so when you go
in, and you’re very kind, and you’re like, look, I understand you… but I need you to work with me… I found them [teachers] to be very open. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

In Zahra’s opinion, it is imperative to approach teachers with empathy and understanding while communicating her thoughts and views to the teacher and the school. Here is what she said:

I think for me it’s very important in an educational system to stand up for and with your principals. So there is something that you feel very strongly about… you have to vocalize it and you have to present them with a solution or… an alternative to it. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

She thought that for schools to be inclusive, parents need to bring schools and teachers' attention to valuable matters to parents. To explain her thoughts, Zahra narrated an encounter that she experienced with her children’s high school. Zahra says:

So, for the longest time in high school, they would have a Holocaust assembly, and they would bring in a speaker. And the speaker, who is a Holocaust survivor, she was in her mid-nineties, very sweet lady. But she would begin her speech by saying how she is a Zionist… When I went in to meet with the principal and the VPs, I said, you know, I would like to bring a speaker, and I would like that speaker to talk about how he’s Palestinian and how he believes that Palestine should be a separate state. And they all looked at me, and I said, that’s the message you send through that woman every single time she comes on that stage. And I’m like, why is that okay and how is that okay? They had no idea what a Zionist was according to them… and so they… made a note of it and this year they had a Holocaust assembly, but they brought in a different speaker, and one who talked about more about what actually happened to them as opposed to how they feel about the current political situation… to actually tell me that you have no idea what that even mean is, is so confusing. Cause, I said to them… okay, I’m a jihadist. And they all looked at me. I said, how is it that that word has you raising your eyebrows and getting stressed out, but that word didn’t. Like, you know, I said literally, if you look at the Arabic meaning, jihad just means to struggle, literally. That’s all it means… that’s all it is. So why can I not have a speaker come in and talk about that but you have a speaker talking about this [Zionism]… So again, I mean I have found that, I don’t know if they
pretend to be uneducated on these things, but once it is brought to their attention, they do take action… and I think that’s when they realized that they really needed to bring in the NCCM [National Council of Canadian Muslims] and get some classes done on Islamophobia and Islam because they really had no idea. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra also talked about how her son’s culture and home values are represented in school since it is a private, faith-based school. However, she says that she heard a lot about public schools located in an area with a large Muslim population that they are becoming more inclusive. Zahra said that many of her friends and family send their children to public schools, and they tell her how different classrooms are celebrating Eid and becoming more aware of the Islamic holidays. However, in the area that she lives in, it is very different. She said,

From what I can tell from my friends, inclusivity was not always there, but they are trying to bring it in… so they may not celebrate Eid in classrooms, but they know what Eid is… so they will recognize it as a diamond day. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

She also thinks that educators are challenged because they have to wear so many different “caps”. Zahra explained,

I think they [teachers] are wearing too many caps, and they’re trying to handle too many things in classrooms. From trying to accommodate too many personal lifestyle choices to religious lifestyle choices… I think there’s just too much going on, and I think sometimes it’s a very overwhelming classroom to be in. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

She further explained that some teachers have classrooms that have children from a wide variety of cultures, religions, and ways of living. Zahra firmly believed that

There’s a lot happening in that one classroom… sometimes I feel like one of these kids will fall through the crack or they will lose out or they will… encounter an issue that will affect them. So, when I look at that, I feel like there’s just too much going on, and there’s too much for one person to be handling in there. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

The conversation with Zahra about home and school relationship revealed that she emphasized that importance of parents being proactive in communicating their thoughts and concerns with
the school and educators in order to see change happen in the educational system. Zahra also pointed out that the educators in the public school system have to many responsibilities, which she found concerning.

4.2.3 Zahra’s conceptualization of race and racism

Concerning race and racism and the questions I asked about them, Zahra expressed that her encounters with racism in regards to her children’s education did not start in the elementary years since they attended an Islamic private school; however, racist encounters started when her children attending high school in the public school system. When I asked Zahra, *What does racism mean to you?*, she took a deep breath and said,

Racism is uneducation. You’re an uneducated person who has decided to… not go out there and get yourself educated. And you are fearful of the unknown. And so, you’re reacting that way. You’re reacting cause you don’t understand… something and you’ve chosen not to understand it, and so your reaction [being racist] is this now. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra’s encounters with racism in regard to her children’s schooling started to surface when her daughter went to high school since, during the elementary years, her children attended a private school, or a faith-based private school. Zahra narrated two incidences that her daughter encountered in high school. The first incidence was when “my daughter and her friend were walking down the hallway, and they heard a kid call them… move out of the way, the Taliban… terrorists are coming down the hall” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Zahra continued by explaining that the “girls wear hijab… so they’re visibly Muslim girls”. The second incident was during a science class, and another student asked, “How can you be a Muslim and not be a terrorist?” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Zahra then explained that the problem is rooted in “uneducation and fear” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). When I asked Zahra about her thoughts on the best way to prevent racism in education settings, she said, “I think the key is… from a very early age, you have to… give them the knowledge to not be scared of something that is different” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She further explained that in her home, she told her children,
Just because we may not, as a family, believe in someone’s personal lifestyle choice, does not mean that we judge them or we’re scared of them... we don’t have to agree with them, that’s totally fine, that’s our opinion, but we still need to be kind and empathetic towards them. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Then she related, “A lot of this, that we see children are doing, is coming from home. This is what they’re hearing in their family rooms and their kitchens, and… over dinners” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). In her opinion, the solution is for teachers to continuously educate themselves and be up to date with what is happening worldwide. Zahra said,

I really think for racism to leave the system, there really needs to be a conscious drive, not the feel good huggy, kissy drive that we have going on, but more of a very conscious drive... you need to sort of understand that everyone is intrinsically good. Yes, there’s bad segments in every place, there are bad people for sure, but that is not reflective of the culture or the religion... that I think, how we’re going to shift the narrative... it’s really starting at a young age and going forward from there... once kids start realizing that, hopefully, they’ll start realizing that just because you know, Ali or Adnan or Mustafa or Hussain... you know, Muslims, that doesn’t mean that they’re terrorists... or that they’re okay with what’s happening... I think that is the key. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra added,

If public schools were very inclusive and public schools... did not have the racism issues they had, I personally feel, faith-based schools would not exist. I think that it only comes about because of what has been happening in public schools. So, I do feel that if people felt that level of comfort, that welcoming, then they would not be looking at these schools. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra explained that parents that send their children to a faith-based school are not solely based on religious needs. Instead, it stems from the fear of their kids being bullied and has to face racism because of how they dress, what they eat, or the colour of their skin. She said, “I think it’s scary for a parent. It’s very hard for a parent to have to deal with that. Very scary” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Zahra expressed that racism exists in the public school system and that
is one of the reasons some parents make the decision to send their children to an independent school.

**4.2.4 Zahra’s identity as a Muslim mother in relation to education**

I wanted to understand Zahra’s conceptualization of what it means to be a Muslim mother in relation to her children’s education since she stressed the fact that she is involved in her children’s school and education. Zahra expressed that there is an extra layer to being a Muslim mother. She explained,

> I feel a lot of immigrants who’ve come to this country… they’ve come to a country that’s them, that we’re inclusive, we’re tolerant. Welcome… you come in and then you get this splash of cold water. Because what, you’re not welcome. You’re welcome, but you’re welcome on our terms… I feel for me the public education system is set up in that way… I feel that, yes, as a Muslim mother, you have to make that extra strive, as a Muslim parent… it’s not like I have just send my kid to school and I’m like, okay, you know what, I don’t have to worry about anything… my kid is not going to have any racism incidents, things are going to be okay. My daughter is not going to explain why she doesn’t want to do dance class… my son is not going to have to explain why he doesn’t want to make a video on gambling… No, I then have to. Or my child has to then go in and take that extra step, explain it, explain the why of it. It’s never just accepted at face value. And then, what happens is that when you do that, it’s almost as if they’re like, ahhhh, fine… now I have to make an exception for you because of your religion. No, you can’t do that. You can’t make me feel bad because I want to stand by my principles… you cannot do that… that’s not the right way of doing it. So just like you’re okay with… having a Jewish club… a LGBTQ club, you have to be okay with me having a Muslim club without rolling your eyes, without raising your eyebrows and be… like yeah, cool… I think that’s where I feel like as a Muslim parent for sure, you have that extra layer.

(audio recording, 2020-02-13)
Zahra then used a metaphor of being invited to a party as a way to explain how it feels when Canada’s immigration campaigns encourage people from around the world to come; however, reality after entering Canada contradicts their expectations. She said,

They go out there and they’re like, oh, bring in these people from this country… then when all these people come in, and they come in feeling so good, it’s like you’re invited to this party and your like, man, I’m going to be… the best person at this party. You’re dressed in your best clothes. You show up, only you walk in, and you’re told, well you know what, you’re not good enough. Or you’re good enough, only if you’re able to eat this, this, and this, and then you’re like… baffled, and you’re literally blindsided because you’re thinking, what, what, what just happened… I was invited to this place, and I got all dressed up, and I came here, and I came in with all my education, and I packed up, and I moved across the ocean with my family, with this wisdom that I’m going to give back to this country. This is my home. This is going to be my identity. Only to be told, no you’re not Canadian enough because… you’re not following what I deem to be the values… this is what bothers me… you can’t… say that… or be honest and say, look, I’m sorry, we’re a public school system. We’re secular. We don’t take anyone’s faith into account. We don’t take anyone’s personal lifestyle choices into account. This is the way we run our school… finish. No problem. That’s awesome. Then you know what, I don’t have to fight with you because you’re not giving XYZ more importance, you’re not giving this person more important… this is the way it is… but when… you’re saying we’re all inclusive than actually be all inclusive. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra expressed that because she wears the hijab and abaya and is, thus, visibly Muslim, she feels the need to take an extra step to justify her actions or thoughts. She said that almost every time she has met with an educator, they are very curious about her high English proficiency and they ask questions like, How long have you lived here?, or, Where are you from? She expressed frustration that she always needs to explain the religious reasons why her family opts out of certain school activities. For example, her daughter does not take part in co-ed swimming or pep rallies. She explained to me in an assertive voice,
I don’t want to have to explain. I just, I don’t… I want you to respect the fact that I don’t want them to be in it. There has to be a valid reason why I don’t and that’s that… and not be judged… and not question me about it, and not me have to sit down and explain everything to you. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra then made the link between educators being open to learning and educating themselves. She said, “We have so much to learn from each other… but if we could just take fear out of the equation, we would be able to thrive a lot more, especially in public systems” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She continued, “Educating, it’s not just numbers. Educating is actually building these children up with character to give back to humanity. And we’re not. I think personally… right now… we are failing as a public system” (audio recording, 2020-02-13).

According to Zahra, there is a layer of complexity when it comes to being a Muslim mother in the educational system. She finds herself constantly explaining herself and explaining why she is making the decisions she’s making. She linked this to her visibility as a Muslim “because I wear the hijab and abaya” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Zahra said she often feels judged. She then concluded that the problem stems from educators not being educated enough about Islam and Muslims. To move forward, educators need to be willing to learn and educate themselves about others.

4.2.5 Zahra’s conceptualization of Islamophobia

To better understand the anti-racist opportunities for Muslim mothers afforded by the educational system in Ontario, I asked Zahra questions about Islamophobia in relation to education. For Zahra, Islamophobia comes “from a place of uneducation where you have taken what the media and what the mainstream… written media is portraying Islam to be” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She said that people listen to what the media has to say about Islam, and now they have “taken that to be the stamp of approval on what this religion is” all about (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She stated that Islam as a “religion is not being portrayed in a very nice way… whether it’s movies… written paper… radio presentation” and as a result “people get very, very scared and very upset” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She gave an example of a few years ago when there was a movement, led by John Tory, to fund faith-based schools; however, there was
backlash that voiced, “We don’t want Sharia schools. We don’t want… schools that are going to have… militants coming out of it” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She explained that Islamophobia is “fear-mongering… people have been fear-mongering into believing that this religion… has no goodness in it… that women are suppressed… it’s a very subservient religion… it’s a very sad religion” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). According to Zahra, this messaging results in fear of Islam and Muslims. Zahra stated her belief that Islamophobia exists in schools. She explained that “teachers are humans at the end of the day… and they do have personal opinions and biases. And I think those biases and opinions are being formed through what they are viewing… reading” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She said that schools and educators are becoming more cautious since the “York region district school board, they’ve been sued twice now… for racism” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). However, she thinks that the educators have inherent negative biases toward Islam and “they try not to bring it in, but sometimes it does come out” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She shared an incident with her daughter’s teacher, where the teacher was trying to convince her to put her daughter on the swim team. Zahra narrated,

So, my daughter… an amazing swimmer… and the teacher says to me, well you know, I would like to put her on the swim team. And I said, I’m sorry, but no because it’s a coed swim team. She said, well, you know what, she could just wear the burkini [a swimsuit that covers the whole body except for the face, hands, and feet]. And I said, I understand that, and I respect that you feel she can wear the burkini, but please understand that’s not just the way we do things (audio recording, 2020-02-13).

Zahra explained that the teacher started to say things like, “She’s a girl, why are you doing this to her?” and Zahra could sense from the teacher’s body language and the way she was speaking and looking at her that “she felt like I was being unfair on my daughter because she’s a good swimmer, she should be allowed to be part of the… swim team, and if she’s in a burkini, what’s the big deal?” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Zahra described the teacher as a “very good teacher… very sweet teacher” (audio recording, 2020-02-13); however, she felt that the teacher was biased in her belief that Zahra was being unfair to her daughter because she was a Muslim. Zahra reassured her that it was not about being a girl or a boy; as a matter of fact, she would have done the exact same thing if it was her son.
Zahra expressed that there is a lot of fear projected on people who practice the Islamic faith which stems greatly from how the media portrays Muslims. Islamophobia, in Zahra’s opinion, exists in schools. She has noticed that educators are trying to work towards being more sensitive when it comes to issues related to Muslim families and children. However, educators have underlying biases about Islam that influence their relationship with Muslims.

### 4.2.6 Zahra’s concluding thoughts

Concluding the interview, I offered Zahra the space to express any additional thoughts, concerns, or ideas that she thought would be beneficial or would support this study. Zahra expressed that she is a big believer in the maxim: “If you want to see change, you have to be part of the change” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She said,

> If we want to be part of this country, and we are part of this country, we want to be heard, and we want to have a voice, and we want to shift the narrative. We really need to actively take part in it. We cannot just sit back and say, yeah, this needs to be done. No. We need to get up. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Zahra said, “I think at the end of the day… everyone is intrinsically trying to do their best… there’s always room for improvement” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). In conclusion, Zahra believes that everyone has to actively work at changing themselves in order to change the educational system and the world.

### 4.3 Dina

Dina identified as a Muslim woman who wears the hijab. She has completed a bachelor’s degree in linguistics and obtained a graduate diploma in teaching English as a second language. At the time of data collection, Dina was a stay-at-home mother. Dina lives with her husband and three children in the suburbs. She has two boys and one girl, ages 8, 5 and 2, who were all born in Canada.

I asked Dina two questions to understand more about how she identifies herself and what it means for her to be a Muslim mother. I asked, *Do you identify as a visible minority?* Her answer
was, “Yes… I wear the hijab… I guess I would say that’s why I’m a visible minority” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Then I asked her *What does it mean to be a Muslim mother?* She said,

> It means to me… that… I carry my faith with me, and that to be a Muslim mother, it means that I am trying to teach my kids… Islam. On top of my own practicing, I’m trying to teach them about my religion as well. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

For Dina, she has a responsibility as a Muslim mother to practice her faith and teach it to her children.

### 4.3.1 Dina and education

At the time of the interview, Dina’s children were attending a French immersion public school. Prior to this, Dina’s children attended a daycare, and for the kindergarten years, she enrolled them in a private school. Her eldest son attended the English public school system before attending to the French immersion in grade two. Dina expressed that all educational choices are made by both her husband and her.

To understand Dina’s conceptualization of what education means to her, I asked, *Can you tell me a little bit more about what education means to you?* Dina conveyed that academics should not be the primary purpose of education; instead, it is about her children learning the social skills needed to thrive in life. She explains,

> Schooling is kind of like the social aspect… how to communicate with other people and… learning the social dynamics… the academics is important too, but I don’t feel like that’s a main thing… goal… a lot of it is like socialization, how to… communicate with other people, other cultures, getting to know… how to function with different types of people. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

To gain insight into Dina’s encounters with the school as a Muslim mother in regards to her child’s education, I asked her, *Do you face any challenges or barriers in regards to your child’s education?* Dina stated,
I think... the only challenge that... I’m seeing is that I feel like I am the one pushing, always kind of trying to... have the school be inclusive towards... my son. Like, you know, let’s celebrate Ramadan. Let’s celebrate Eid. Where, you know, they... have the materials in the curriculum for like Hanukkah and they have it for... Chinese New Year and they have it for Christmas, of course, and stuff like that. But they don’t have like the resources on hand for like Ramadan and Eid, which is kind of like shocking... so what I’ve done in the past is I’ve gone into the classroom, and I teach the kids I give them a lesson about Ramadan and Eid... when my son was in JK and SK, I made him make a little poster board about Ramadan and then the teacher kind of gave the lesson. Another time, there was actually a Turkish teacher at school, and so she... read them like, you know, Curious George, Ramadan, and stuff like that... when he went to public school, I went into the classroom, and I kind of gave a whole lesson. The teacher gave me a whole period to teach... and then they actually did follow up, and they did do more activities after I had gone in... I feel like I... always... kind of pushing it... I’m the only one kind of pushing it. And the thing is he doesn’t have a lot of... Muslim representation in his school for some reason. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

Dina emphasized that education should play a big role in teaching children how to socialize and interact with one another. She also expressed that she finds herself constantly being the person initiating the first steps to include her family’s celebrations, which they participate as Muslims, in her child’s classroom.

4.3.2 Dina’s home and school encounters

In order to better understand the enablers and/or barriers that Muslim mothers experience in regards to the opportunities to interact with school, I wanted to gain insight on Dina’s experiences and conceptualization of home-school relationships and encounters. I asked her, Tell me more about your understanding of home and school relationship and the communication between home and school? Dina said, “I definitely think it’s very important” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). From her experiences, she noticed that when she was involved as a parent, the teacher paid more attention to her son. Dina explained,
I feel like, when I’ve shown interest in my son’s education, and the teacher is aware of that, she’s much more vigilant, and she kinda cares for my son a little bit more… like she watches out for him and… he’s on her radar. Whereas, like there was one time that he started school and I didn’t have any communication with the teacher, and then when we got… a progress report, I was like, oh well, he’s doing really poorly… like an average in this… it was like music… I was like, well, do you know that he actually knows how to play the piano… he goes to lesson… he did level one… and she was like, oh, I didn’t even know that. And then like, you know, lo and behold… when the actually report card came out, it was like, yes, okay, A+ on that. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

Dina gave an example about an encounter when she was going to meet the teacher to learn more about how her son is doing in class. During this conversation, she started suggesting different tasks that she thinks will help her son. She said, for example, “Why don’t you give him a leadership role in the classroom?” or she would say, “He already knows his notes… why don’t you give him a leadership role, and he can help other kids” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). In her experience, when she communicates with the teacher, the teacher was “willing to do things or help out in the learning process” (audio recording, 2020-02-11) and build on the expectations that they have for her son. Dina explained that she understands that the teacher has many children in her classroom and some “kids in the class… need extra attention” (audio recording, 2020-02-11); however, she feels like she “want more opportunities to go into the classroom” (audio recording, 2020-02-11) and have regular conversations with her son’s teacher. Dina acknowledges that the teacher does try to keep in contact with the parents: “They do send out like a weekly email… of what they’ve done in school that week… I used to email the teacher if I need her to be aware of certain things” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Dina also added that once when the teacher had a professional development day, she called them to check in and gave them a verbal progress report on how their son was doing in the class: “We talked about my son and… things that he’s doing in school and where he’s excelling, where he could use like a little bit of help” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). However, Dina feels that parents need more opportunities for the parents to participate in the classroom. Dina explained that the only time she has been invited into the classroom is when they have “student-led interview” and that happens “once or twice a year” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She has not felt satisfied by these interviews
because she doesn’t get the chance to “sit down with the teacher and… discuss… face to face” (audio recording, 2020-02-11) how her son is doing. Instead, Dina described those sessions as you go in [to the class]… and your child shows you all their work… and the teacher is just there to like… supplement and… encourage your child to like say, oh, and what about this piece of work that you’ve done. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

During the student-led interview, Dina wanted to have a conversation about her son and the teacher responded by saying, “If you want to continue this conversation, let’s book another time because I’m under a time restriction” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Dina said,

It was basically 10-15 minutes of my son showing us around the classroom and showing us his work. But I wanted to kind of keep going with the teacher cause we were talking about a certain thing, and she’s like, oh I don’t have the time right now, but let’s book an appointment. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

However, Dina thinks that since parents have already taken time off to attend this meeting, the school

might as well make it like 20 minutes… and then you’re doing two things, your child is showing you around the classroom and being proud of their work, and then you’re also getting your fill of communicating with the teacher. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

Dina expressed the wish for more direct communication between the teacher and the parent; she would rather have regular conversations, even if they were short, directly with the teacher instead of through her child.

To better understand the opportunities that the school affords parents to engage with the school, I asked Dina to elaborate about wanting more opportunities to come into the classroom. She said,

So, in grade one, they encouraged it [come in the classroom and help]. Like, I used to be the… parent reader, you know, like they do reading… because it’s such a big class and a teacher can’t do… school reading with all the kids every single day. So, she [the teacher] does a lesson in the classroom and you kind of sit outside in the hallway and… call each kid, one by one, and you just sit down, and you just listen to them read… they really
pushed that in grade one because obviously, they want the kids to start reading… and then grade two… it just stopped, but he did go to French immersion. So, then it just stopped… they didn’t need any more parent involvement in the classroom. Now… my last student-led meeting with the teacher… I was telling her, cause there was some like, you know, issues in the classroom and my son was having some issues, and so I said… I want to just come in, and I want to observe you teaching the class, and I want to observe my son in the classroom… she was a little hesitant. She was just like, well, let’s see if we can remedy this other ways. But, yes, if you really want to, we can set up a day and time that you can come in and observe my class… I didn’t, I didn’t feel like she wanted me to come in and observe her and she hasn’t asked for anyone to come and volunteer in the classroom for anything specific. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

Dina then explained that the only reason she wanted to go into the classroom at that time was to observe her child and to understand “why was he so sad about it, or why is he like not wanting to go to school?” (audio recording, 2020-02-11) She was trying to understand the source of her son’s unhappiness and discomfort. Dina said that if the teacher had welcomed her “with open arms, like come in anytime you want kind of thing”, it would have helped her to have a better understanding of what might be bothering her son since “that’s the challenge that we struggled for a long time, trying to figure out what’s going on” (audio recording, 2020-02-11).

From Dina’s experience, she noticed that the teacher only asked for help when it was related to academics, so “teacher can focus on other things and teach the class and then still have all the kids do their… 10 minutes of reading a day” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She said, “You cannot just… pop by or say that you… want to help out for any reason. You kind of have to be invited in.” One exception was the time she asked to come into the classroom to teach the class about the Ramadan. She asked the teacher to “let me know what days work… and they didn’t say no… but… I have to ask them to come in” (audio recording, 2020-02-11).

Dina felt welcomed the most during the school orientation when her son moved from the English public school system to the French public school system. The school invited the new parents and their children to the school, where they attended a presentation that gave them an overview of the school, and their children got the chance to tour the school with grade seven and eight students
who were attending the school. She felt that was an excellent way for her son to get to know the school he was going to be attending in the fall, and she said, “Even as a parent, like that was a really… warm welcome… I got to also walk around it [the school] and see where’s the library and where he would be” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Her experience was not the same when her son transitioned from the private school to the English public school system when entering grade one. She said that they were not invited for orientation and that the orientation was only provided for children entering junior kindergarten. According to Dina, having an orientation for all children entering the school regardless of grade is essential “because it’s a new environment. It doesn’t matter how old you are… the kid still want to be comfortable” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). In short, Dina expressed that the relationship with school and home is an important one, and it can be strengthened through regular visits and conversations between the educators and the parent.

4.3.3 Dina and cultural representation

Concerning cultural representation and the questions I asked about them, Dina expressed confusion on how culture can be represented in classrooms; however, she thinks that educators have the duty to have conversations with the children as a way to prevent bullying. I asked Dina, *Do you feel that your child’s home values, and culture are represented in your child’s school settings?* Her response was, “I don’t know… I mean, he’s also a visible minority in his class, so… I don’t know. I mean it’s represented when like it’s… Ramadan or something maybe” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Ramadan was only discussed after she went into the classroom and read a story about Ramadan. Then I asked Dina, *If you could have a one-on-one authentic conversation with your child’s teacher, what would you want to tell her?* She said,

I would encourage her to always… seek out, you know, points of conversation or topics or… things that maybe happening around the world… and incorporate that into their discussions at school. Especially, like now, he’s in grade 3… they’re like a little bit more aware of… the world and things happening around the world… to just be a little bit more mindful of things that he might be experiencing that maybe other kids… wouldn’t experience or know. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)
She explained that it is tough to know what is going on inside the class. She said, “Kids, in general, don’t exactly give you the full picture of… what goes on… what kind of discussions go on in the classroom” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). However, her son mentioned that a Chinese child in his class was being made fun of during the time that COVID-19 was spreading, and the news coverage was intense. The teacher's action was to have a discussion with the class and explained that “because he’s from China doesn’t mean that he has the virus” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). No further steps were taken to communicate that with parents. Dina thought it would have been a good idea if the teacher had emailed the parents to inform them about the incident so that parents had the chance to talk to their children and to be aware of what was happening in the classroom. Then she presented a possible scenario:

If something was to happen, where in the news… Muslim or something like that was happening, I would definitely want the teacher to address that and kind of say… well, you know, this and this, and to have my son feel… okay about it and not feel attacked. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

Dina stated that having an open conversation with the teacher is vital when Muslims might be targeted or in the news. She said,

I would hope that… she [the teacher] doesn’t give her opinion to the kids… because… yeah… everyone has their own opinion about whatever is happening… I would just want to… have like the basics… if somebody starts talking… or… bullying my son or something like that, how would you handle it… I’m just like at a normal human level… not about… the politics behind that, I wouldn’t care about that really. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

In the end, the most important thing would be knowing that the teacher dealt with the situation well.

4.3.4 Dina’s conceptualization of racism and Islamophobia

Concerning racism and Islamophobia and the questions I asked about them, Dina expressed the importance of educators having conversations with children about race and racism and including
books in the classroom that represent minorities. I asked Dina what racism meant to her, she said, “The fact that you [a person]… put one kind of people better than the other” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). In reference to her child’s school, she said, “I never felt like they were kind of like discriminating against me or anything in any way” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She holds a strong belief that the teacher plays a role in preventing racism from happening in school settings. In her opinion, having regular conversations that teach the children “that it doesn’t matter how you look like, or your abilities… we’re all the same and that we shouldn’t feel superior to each other or between one another” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Dina further said, “If… major event happened and that was in the news, I feel like she [the teacher] would have the responsibility to kind of give them a whole lesson on that” (audio recording, 2020-02-11).

Dina suggested that teachers could use classroom materials to encourage inclusivity. In particular, it could emerge informally by reading stories that include people who wear the hijab. She also said that “trying to be inclusive… I would say that it should be an ongoing conversation… but it should be in their curriculum, like in materials… and it should come up naturally when the kids see [the teacher say] oh, let’s look at this book, let’s read this book together. Maybe it’ll be a natural conversation” (audio recording, 2020-02-11).

Dina said that this approach is not something that she has seen in the public school or in her son’s classroom. However, she said, “I am planning on changing that for my son’s private school. I’m planning on… giving them a list of books that I actually want them to have and put in the classrooms” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). In her younger son’s private school, she noticed that they included some Ramadan books during Ramadan; however, she still wanted to give them a whole list of books for her son’s classroom. When I asked her if she approached the public school regarding including more books that represented Muslims, she explained that she did not because she felt as if there would be a school pushback due to funding. However, she also expressed that because she is paying for her son’s private school, that “it’s kind of their responsibility and we’re paying for my son’s education, and so, we want to be represented” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Dina did give them a list of books; however, she has not seen new books added to the shelves.
When I asked Dina to explain her understanding of Islamophobia, she answered “I definitely feel that it’s real… even in like this modern-day society and stuff… I definitely see it. Like I can definitely tell and feel it around” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Then I asked her, *Do you feel it in your child’s educational settings too?* Dina answered quickly and said “No, not necessarily”. Dina did not say much about Islamophobia other than she thought it existed without further explanation.

### 4.3.5 Dina’s concluding thoughts

Concluding the interview, I offered Dina the space to express any additional thoughts, concerns, or ideas that she thought would be beneficial or would support this study. Dina expressed that research in this area is important, “especially coming from minorities” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She explained that “any kind of [research about] minority in the educational system, I think is good and it will hopefully cause change… in the educational system for it to be more representative” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Dina concluded the conversation by saying that she thinks that the curriculum should be more inclusive in terms of… having… good amount of material about Muslims and Ramadan and Eid and stuff like that… I understand it’s like… secular… there’s no religion… but it’s good to still teach kids about that there are different religions out there… the same way they teach the kids about… Chinese New Year… there's like lunar calendar and different kind of things… okay, well, also Islam has that… Muslims… follow the lunar calendar as well… and just for the material to be there and… for the teachers to have those kinds of inclusive resources… ready at hand so that if anything comes up… they already have the material to discuss it, to talk about it with the kids. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

In Dina’s opinion, the curriculum should include material that represents people from different religions and backgrounds. She also stated that more research that includes minoritized people in the education is needed.

### 4.4 Afra
Afra identified as a Muslim mother who wears the hijab. Afra is a Charter Professional Accountant (CPA) and at the time of the interview was working part-time. She lives with her husband and 3 children in an urban area in Ontario. Her children are ages eight, five, and two. Afra’s eldest son was born in Alberta, and her younger two were born in Ontario. Two of her children were attending a public school in Ontario.

I asked Afra two questions to help me understand more about how she identifies herself and what it meant for her to be a Muslim mother. I asked her, *Do you identify as a visible minority?* She quickly said, “I do, well our background is Pakistani. I also wear the headscarf; I think that makes it an additional minority” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). When I asked Afra, *What does it mean to be a Muslim mother?*, she laughed and said,

> That’s a good question. For me, personally, it’s just balancing… raising the children in a good Islamic environment at home… to offset what they’re learning in school, but to also ensure that they’re getting a quality education, secular education, I guess. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

For Afra, teaching her children their Islamic values and receiving good education is important.

### 4.4.1 Afra and education

At the time of the interview, Afra’s two older children were attending public school. Prior to this, her eldest son attended an Islamic school during junior and senior kindergarten. Her second son attended public school starting from junior kindergarten right away. I asked Afra to tell me more about the reason behind deciding to move her son into the public-school system. Afra explained, “The Islamic school that he was in… did not have certified Ontario teachers” (audio recording, 2020-02-14), which concerned her. Then I asked her to tell me more about her reasons for enrolling her son in a faith-based school in the first place. She elaborated,

> My husband and I were not sure what route we wanted to go to because we were new… so it was more kind of to getting to know the community. Our children were still young… just to kind of get the foundation level of… prayer and starting your day off with Islamic values and manners… it was more that side of it… having Quran and… all those
reminders through the day of your identity, for us it was important. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

Afra expressed that education is not about receiving high grades but instead about socialization. She said, “To me, it’s very important for him [her son] to learn at his own pace… I really do feel like the socialization aspect is very important. Playing with his peers and teamwork and group projects, and presentation” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She linked her understanding of what education should be to her own personal experience. Afra explained that when she was a child, she didn’t do a lot of, like, I’m very scared to speaking publicly… I think that kind of skill is very important to teach kids at a young age… and like teamwork and whatnot. I think in the workforce… or even at university, you really need to learn to work with people that you don’t get along with or you have different views from… I think that starts from a young age, to learn to adapt in different environments. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

Afra hoped that her son would benefit from learning those skills early in life because she describes him as “kind of is socially awkward” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She explained that her eldest son is “going through some testing for ESD and ADHD” (audio recording, 2020-02-14).

When Afra described the curriculum, she said,

   Educationally, I think from a curricular perspective, I do think it’s a little bit slow… they really take their time in teaching things… but I do find that a little bit concerning, but nothing… to the point where I’m going to go to school and be like, what’s happening? It’s not to that point. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

Afra further explained that what concerns her is not receiving enough homework and that her son finds math easy, which makes her “not sure if that’s appropriate at his age level” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She hears from other friends that their children receive more homework. Afra mentioned that she checks the grade level curricula to “know what they are learning regarding health studies” (audio recording, 2020-02-14) because she thinks that it is the parent’s
responsibility to educate their children on their own perspective and belief regarding specific topics.

### 4.4.2 Afra’s home and school encounters

To better understand the enablers and/or barriers that Muslim mothers experience in regard to the opportunities to interact with schools, I wanted to gain insight on Afra’s experience and conceptualization of home-school relationships and encounters. I asked Afra, *Tell me more about your understanding of home and school relations and partnerships.* Afra said “I’m pretty… in touch with the school” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She described her involvement with the school as going in and volunteering in her children’s classroom and doing her “best to be up to date”. She explained that she is not in the “PTA [parent teacher association]… and I don’t really go to the council meetings and whatnot, but I’m aware of what happens… I think part of the onuses on the parents is to make sure that they know what your children are learning” (audio recording, 2020-02-14).

Afra stays in touch with her son’s teacher regularly. She explains, “I send notes to her through… email if I have any concerns. She’s very responsive… and if she has any concerns, she’ll email me” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She also added, “I’ve met with the principal a few times, and she’s very open to meeting and setting up time to meet” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). When I asked her if she feels that the school is welcoming, she said yes and then explained,

> In the beginning of the year, they do like an open house, come meet the teachers. Then later in the year they do kind of a year-end barbecue… I think they try to do something mid-year… I really liked last year, they sent out an email informing everybody of… Ramadan coming up and… what Ramadan is about and what they have in place for kids who are fasting. So I really did appreciate that. They’re very open and inclusive… when Diwali comes up, they talk about it… I do like that they’re very aware of different cultures and different religions and they send out emails regarding that, so it’s nice. They are a very diverse school, so they are very aware of that. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

Concerning cultural representation within the school, I asked Afra, *Do you feel that your child’s home culture is represented in the school or classroom?* She responded “Yes, it is… I think
other things are represented too strongly, like Valentine’s Day and Halloween” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). Afra added that “there’s just too much of an emphasis on those things, so that makes it a little bit hard”, yet she acknowledged that “they talk about Ramadan” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She also went into her son’s classroom “to talk about Ramadan, and they were very happy to have” her (audio recording, 2020-02-14). However, she feels like “these other celebrations kind of take a whole new life of their own” (audio recording, 2020-02-14).

Afra expressed that she thinks that there is a lot of “emphasis on these other celebrations”, which she described as “a struggle for us in the public-school system” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She explained that “those things are made such a big deal” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She shared with me this example:

So, for example, Halloween. At that age, they make it a big deal, dress up… there’s a lot of lead up to it. There’s craft related to it… a movie… a costume parade… I didn’t actually send my kids cause I didn’t want them to feel bad… I think it isolates those kids that don’t dress up, and then they feel bad about it themselves, that we don’t get to do fun things. So it’s challenging… again, Christmas is made such a big deal that when you try to explain… he is so young… that’s not our celebration, it gets tricky… they feel bad. I think my older one is old enough to understand that we have our own traditions, but the younger one, I think he has a hard time… like, it’s not fair kind of attitude. And when it’s all around you all day in your school, it’s hard. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

When I asked her, Did you share your thoughts or feelings with the school? She said, “I didn’t… bring it up to them at all cause I didn’t really know what… I didn’t have any solutions to offer them. so, I didn’t think it was my place [to say anything]” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). However, later on in the interview, Afra added that “I don’t think they cared… I don’t think they’re bothered with why I’m keeping them home… they never asked” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). Afra mentioned that one of her child’s teachers asked at the beginning of the year, “What celebrations do your children participate in and which ones don’t they participate in?”; however, she feels like “they can’t really do anything about Halloween and Valentine’s day and… Christmas” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). Afra described these celebrations as “a traditional celebration in this culture, so, it’s not like they can tone it down” (audio recording, 2020-02-14).
She “did appreciate the effort of asking that questions [at the beginning of the year], but I can’t see how they would change things” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). Afra expressed that it is her responsibility and choice not to have her children participate in such events, not the school. Yet it is a challenge since she feels “like my kids are left out” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She described that her challenge is that her children struggle with that. She said,

my older one… I can kind of explain to him further. I told him… on Eid and Ramadan, we will give cards to your friends, and you can include a candy because we can highlight our own celebration… he’s more understanding… the younger one… he doesn’t get it… cause he sees all this decoration and all this fun stuff, and for him, Eid is boring because it’s not like the school is decorated. We do the best we can in our own home… so, to him, it’s kind of not exciting… whereas something like Valentine’s Day or Halloween is very fun. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

Afra explained that the school does try to decorate and do some activities; however, “it’s not like… Valentines will take up their whole week… Halloween will take up your whole week. It’s all around you… whereas as Ramadan and Eid, it’s not like that” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). Overall, Afra expressed that the educators try to include her family’s celebrations; however, the other celebrations are a lot more visible.

4.4.3 Afra’s conceptualization of racism and Islamophobia

Concerning racism and Islamophobia and the questions I asked about them, Afra expressed the importance of educators being educated about racism and Islamophobia. For Afra, racism is “to be treated differently on the basis of your religion or culture” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). In her perspective, racism is not something that she has encountered at school since she feels that the “classes are so diverse… their [her children’s] classrooms are more ethnic than they are white”, and the school is doing a “good job” (audio recording, 2020-02-14) in her opinion. Afra believes that the best way to prevent racism in educational settings is by “firstly starting with training of the teachers” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She explained that, “Oftentimes, the teachers just don’t know. It’s not that they’re trying to be racist or trying to undermine
person’s culture or religion, they just are ignorant” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She shared a personal encounter when she was a child at school. She said,

When I was a child, I had henna on my hand, and I got sent to the office… I was so young; I didn’t know how to explain it… my teacher said… you coloured on your hand. I got sent to the principal’s office. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

To prevent that from happening, she believes that “basic training around traditions… celebration and different traditions would highlight that… these things are much more known and accepted [now]… I think it does start with training the teachers” (audio recording, 2020-02-14).

When it comes to Islamophobia, Afra defined it as “treating someone different based on being Muslim,” and that it stems from “social media… and the mainstream media” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). When I asked her, Do you feel that Islamophobia exists in your child’s educational setting? Afra said,

I do not yet… maybe when we are requesting to pray or those kind of things… maybe it would come, but at this point… [my children are] not fasting yet and they are not praying yet in the school, so I don’t feel like it’s been an issue. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

Afra thinks that Islamophobia stems from the media: “Social media… and the mainstream media for sure” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). I followed up it with the question, How does it feel to be a Muslim mother in the education system? Afra said,

I do think it could add some complication because people are ignorant. They don’t know… or they might find what I’m saying ridiculous. Like, oh, my kid can’t go to dance and sometimes that’s just outrageous, right. So, I do think there would be pushback, and there would be people who don’t understand or appreciate where I’m coming from. But that’s okay, I have to show up for my kids. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

For Afra, there is a layer of complexity being a Muslim mother because there are things educators might not understand about her decisions.

4.4.4 Afra’s concluding thoughts
Concluding the interview, I offered Afra the space to express any additional thoughts, concerns, or ideas that she thought would be beneficial or would support this study. Afra expressed that this type of research is essential because “school boards… can use it to inform, how to provide training or how to improve things in schools that maybe they don’t see as an issue… I think this… research is very valuable to… make changes within the systems” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). Regarding the curriculum, she said, “There could be improvement. I don’t know if I say change, I think improvements would be the right word” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She explained that

the health and wellness portion of the curriculum… I’ll give you an example… I understand there’s a need to teach certain things… I think it’s our responsibility as parents as well to inform our children that this is what’s out there… however, I do feel like some things are a little bit too pushy… where I get a little bit concerned, where you don’t need to shove it down their throat. Like, you can teach them, inform them, but you can’t now say this is right and this is wrong… like force your opinion on someone. That’s not right. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

Afra continued,

I’ve been in this school enough, and there’s a lot of… LGBTQ and there’s this group and like it’s very in your face. Whereas, to me, I would prefer… okay, this is a thing, we’ll teach about it in school, and we’ll learn about it in our classroom, but I don’t know why it needs to be pushed as much. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

She noted that gender issues are strikingly more visible in school settings than issues of diversity and religious beliefs. She also predicted that things would get more “intense, in higher grades.” I asked Afra, Can you explain a bit more what you mean by things will get more intense? She said,

So, from what I’ve heard, and… again, I haven’t experienced it myself yet, but just from friends who have children who are older… it’s okay to… masturbate. It’s perfectly normal… it’s okay to explore those feelings [towards someone of the same gender]… I think it’s okay to teach these things are out there, but it’s not their place to say… yes, it’s
perfectly acceptable to do XYZ. Where I think, teach about it, but it’s up to the parent to kind of do that part of it. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

Afra explained that it bothered her that “there’s way too much visibility on gender and same-sex relationships and sexuality… and being inclusive of those things. There’s a much greater emphasis on that than… diversity and acceptance” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She said,

Just outside every classroom… there is a poster… this school or this classroom is an LGBTQ safe space… I have never seen a poster that says, this is a safe space for all cultures and religions… that’s how it should be. That should be the baseline, including… LGBTQ children, they shouldn’t be excluded. (audio recording, 2020-02-14)

She went on, “To me, it’s implicit that everybody… every space is safe, and every child should feel included” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She stated, “If I see a poster… inclusive of these children… LGBTQ children or gender fluid children, then there should also be a poster of… children of different religions and cultures… you should have both or neither” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). Afra expressed that the responsibility falls on her as a parent “to guide… and teach” her children, and she “understand why the schools need to do it [teach LGBTQ issues], cause it’s such a current topic…, and there’s a lot of changes around this topic… whereas race and culture… that was like 10 years ago, kind of thing. It’s old news” (audio recording, 2020-02-14). She concluded by maintaining that the responsibility falls on parents and their being more involved with the school.

4.5 Fatima

Fatima identified as a Muslim mother. Fatima holds a PhD in child development, obtained from a university in the United States. At the time of the interview, Fatima was a stay-at-home mother. She has a six years old son who was born in Jordan. She currently lives in Ontario with her husband and son.

I asked Fatima two questions to help me understand more about how she identifies herself and what does it mean for her to be a Muslim mother. I asked her, Do you also identify as a visible minority? Fatima said, “Yes… because I wear hijab… other than that… a lot of people think
that… I… look white, but I think it’s my hijab that makes me look like a visible minority” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). When I asked her, *What does it mean to be a Muslim mother?*, she said,

I think it has to do with… holding on to our Islamic values and really working to instill… the love of our Deen [religion] and the love of… God and our Prophet in our children. So basically, just working to help them inherit… those values. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Fatima went further to explain her Muslim identity. She narrated,

I was born and raised in the States, I struggled… when I went to Jordan, you don’t feel like you’re Arab, and then when you’re in America you don’t feel like you’re American 100%… but one thing that stays constant is this… Muslim identity…whether I’m here or there, the values are the same. The teachings are the same… it kind of gives you a foundation and a grounding about who you are… regardless of where, what culture you’re living in… you can make decisions that… are aligned with those values [Islamic values] (audio recording, 2020-02-13).

For Fatima, her identity is grounded in her faith. Therefore, as a Muslim mother, she expressed the importance of teaching her son about her religion.

### 4.5.1 Fatima and education

For Fatima, it is important for her son to attend a school with educational standards that meet her expectations. Fatima expressed that her education is about “preparing the child as a whole… making sure that the child as a whole is a thinker, a contributor… emotionally and socially… a positive citizen”, and the school’s role is to ensure “the child develops cognitively, socially, emotionally” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Fatima explained that her understanding and view of education stems from her own scholarly and professional knowledge. She added,

If it wasn’t for all the… articles that I’ve read and all the books that I’ve read… about child wellbeing… child development. Having a healthy, happy child is much more important than him bringing me straight A’s everyday… obviously, I want him to be successful, but to me… success is not only measured by the grades or if he’s outperforming his classmates… that’s not my focus… it’s more like, are you interested in
learning or are you thinking… do you care about other people? Do you care about the world… that’s something that schools… should work on instilling. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Fatima explained that in their home, her child’s education is “a joint” decision; however, her husband does rely on her to make the final decision since he says, “You’re more familiar with this… the decision is up to you” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She explained that the reason behind putting her son in a public school was to encourage him to “start speaking in English” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She added that “the quality of education, the way the teachers interact with the students, I feel is more positive and more preferable than the interactions that we often see in the more traditional route with the Islamic schools” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Fatima expressed that she appreciates the public school system and that she has noticed a difference in her son’s way of asking questions since beginning school, “his inquisitiveness… how much he enjoys… general inquiry… and critical thinking” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Fatima added,

I chose a public school system versus homeschooling because I have considered homeschooling… is because… even though I know there’s a lot of co-op opportunities and things like that… I just feel like my son… because we are alone here in Canada, and we don’t have any relatives. His only chance for daily interaction, social interaction, is through the school. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Fatima elaborated further about why they considered homeschooling: it

has to do a lot with the struggles that I had… while I was in Jordan… I felt like the teachers were not trained… I knew that my… son wasn’t a monster… they would describe him to me… I just felt like as his mother, I knew who he was. I wasn’t… being biased because I was his mother. I just didn’t agree with the… approaches that they were taking. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Her experience with the school in Jordan caused her to contemplate homeschooling. Fatima also mentioned that the other mothers that she spoke to about homeschooling choose to homeschool because they feel like “the teacher has… so many students in her classroom, and she can only
keep track of so many” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). As she was speaking about the thoughts of homeschooling, she added,

I should mention that this morning… I was looking at… an Islamic school. And the reason that I also considered Islamic school is because… one thing with the… public schools that I’m struggling with… I’m all for diversity and understanding other religions and all that, but once they start introducing values that clearly contradict with our Islamic values, even though they’re going to be out there… and my son is going to be exposed to it… which is natural and there’s going to be conversations about it… but when they read to JK students about… gender identity and… transgender children… I just feel like it’s too early to expose my son to that. That conversation can happen later on, and I’m more than willing to have that conversation with him. Cause, I mean, we’re not living in a bubble… that was one part that I did not agree… that kinda… would make me consider something other than public school (audio recording, 2020-02-13).

Although Fatima’s son was attending a public school, the thought of homeschooling him or sending him to a private faith-based school is something she often thinks about.

### 4.5.3 Fatima and cultural representation

Fatima described her son’s class as “a big cultural pot”, indicating that the school her son attends is diverse. She elaborated by saying that the classroom does not “represent just one culture… they’re trying to be diverse, which I appreciate” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). When it comes to religious practices, Fatima described it as “lacking”; however, she thinks that it is understandable because it is a public school and “obviously there’s like hundreds of religions… they can’t represent all of them” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). However, she explained,

As a Muslim… obviously I feel that’s something that’s missing… the religious values… life, for example, you’re looking at the leaves… look at how Allah [God] created the leaves… you know, like those little things that… you’re connecting… the daily interactions with their creator… just their whole being and existence. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)
Despite this, Fatima didn’t think public schools have any obligations to represent Islam through daily interactions. Rather, she said, “I have the choice… to either put him in there or not” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Fatima explained that a public school system is an option that is “available for families who cannot afford… to put their children in Islamic schools or… who do not have the abilities to teach… at home” (audio recording, 2020-02-13).

Fatima does feel that it is essential to raise awareness in schools about Ramadan and Eid. She said,

Last year, I did not feel like there was… much recognition of… Ramadan and Eid compared to the other celebrations. One of the parents… actually… volunteered and said, Hey, can my daughter give a presentation about… Ramadan. Versus, for example, my friend who lives in Mississauga… there’s… many more Arabs and… Muslims there, she told me… their school… they do it just similarly to like any other celebration. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Fatima noted that the teachers are willing to learn about Ramadan and Eid; however, “they may not have the resources, they may not have the information” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). This is the point at which she believes it is the parents’ responsibility to “come in” and bring awareness about the celebrations.

When it comes to her child’s identity as a Muslim, she thinks that it is not represented in the classroom; yet at the same time, she believes that it is hard to represent her son’s Muslim identity because it might not relate to other children. Fatima says that the only time she feels like her son’s identity is conveyed is through Ramadan and Eid.

4.5.4 Fatima’s home and school encounters

In order to better understand the enablers and/or barriers that Muslim mothers experience in regard to the opportunities to interact with schools, I wanted to gain insight on Fatima’s experience and conceptualization of home-school relationships and encounters. Fatima expressed that continuous and constant interaction with her child’s teacher is essential to developing her child’s academic needs. She expressed, “At school… me and the teacher work one-on-one the
whole time” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Fatima also actively participates in volunteering at the school. She said,

One of the first things that I did as soon as I registered my son in school was, I went, and I got my background check… I immediately started volunteering at the school because I felt like that was critical for me… not only to understand the staff and the school but also for them to realize that… I’m a parent that’s... contributing… I was helping with the milk program and… reading program… just random things that they needed help with just so that they recognize that the parents are part of the… school community. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

She emphasized that “the home always needs to be a support and reinforce… what the child is learning at school” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Fatima further explained that if she saw her son struggling academically at school, she would work with him at home. She added,

If I don’t have the skills to do it, then maybe I’ll communicate with the teacher and let her know that… I see that my son is struggling with this point, and so can we work together, give me resources, can we meet, whatever, just so that… we can… work together. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

When I asked Fatima if being a Muslim mother contributes to her decision in volunteering at the school, she answered,

It definitely played a role in me going to volunteer because I noticed that… the more exposure… we Muslims provide to the Canadian community… they realize that… we are an important part of their community… that was definitely something that I specifically chose to do because of that… I am a Muslim mom, and I need to show that we are… contributing members of the community and of the society. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Fatima believes that it is crucial for Muslims to interact with others because in her opinion “Canadian Muslims are either immigrants or first generation… we’re still considerably new here” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She added that “not many Canadians… have had the opportunity to interact with Muslims,” and the stories that she heard from another mother at the
school who interacted with a Muslim woman were negative, so Fatima said, “I’m glad she had the opportunity to meet somebody that wasn’t… negative” (audio recording, 2020-02-13).

When it came to Fatima’s relationship with the teacher, she described it as a positive experience. However, she did notice a difference in her relationship with her son’s teacher last year and her son’s teacher this year. According to Fatima, the difference is that this year’s teacher “wouldn’t mind standing at the fence during dismissal and… have a whole conversation… she would initiate the conversation… she’s very open, easy to communicate with… and she’s really invested in… all the student's outcomes… and you sincerely feel that” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Fatima went on to describe how the teacher connects with the parents weekly through newsletters and sending classroom photos. She added that the children “have monthly project that they have to do. I feel like even the monthly projects that she selects… are very thought through and… they really help the child” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Fatima described the teacher’s communication as excellent; it made her feel

that she actually cared and that she’s willing to give the time to discuss… what needed to be done… she was willing to give her time, give her attention… she was also very like, let’s do this together kind of attitude… it’s a challenge and let’s… tackle this together… which I appreciated. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

Having regular conversations with her son’s teacher is something very important to Fatima.

4.5.5 Fatima’s conceptualization of racism and Islamophobia

Concerning racism and Islamophobia and the questions I asked about them, Fatima expressed the importance of interaction to bring more awareness. When I asked Fatima, What does racism mean to you?, Fatima defined racism as “a negative bias… based on… physical or religious choices or looks” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). She expressed that the best way to prevent racism in education settings is through “talking, exposure, reading stories… interaction” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Fatima explained that “the more I interact with others, the more they’ll be aware of who I am… so maybe that will erase or… change some of the ideas… you want to… increase the exposure, which I think would help with the racism” (audio recording, 2020-02-13).
When it comes to Islamophobia, Fatima defined it as “fear-based… thoughts or actions that are specific or against… Muslims or anybody that appears to look like a Muslim” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). In Fatima’s experiences, she has not felt any type of racism or Islamophobia concerning her son’s education and schooling.

4.5.6 Fatima’s concluding thoughts

Concluding the interview, I offered Fatima the space to express any additional thoughts, concerns, or ideas that she thought would be beneficial or would support this study. Fatima concluded her thoughts by noting that the only issue that she is struggling with is… introducing values that clearly contradict with our Islamic values. Even though… they are going to be out there and my son is going to be exposed to it… which is natural… when they read to JK students about… gender identity and… transgender… I just feel like it’s too early to expose my son to that, that conversation can happen later on and I’m more than willing to have the conversation with him. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)

She expressed that, children in kindergarten are young, and that is “not necessarily child-appropriate”. Fatima said, “you can deal with it, but you don’t need to set up a whole class time and read a book about it… activities about it… just like you would do with any other… holiday” (audio recording, 2020-02-13). Fatima expressed that she is not against sex education; however, she thinks that introducing such topics in older grades such as “fourth grade” would be preferred.

At the ended of the interview, Fatima was curious about whether Islamophobia exists in Canada and Canadian schools. She explained that her experience here in Canada is very different from her experience growing up in the United States. She said,

Some people say I’m exaggerating, but like there’s a big difference… because I was living in the South of Texas, so… it wasn’t that bad… but like the difference was instant over here. Like the way that… they approach you…I don’t even feel like there’s a scarf on my head… whereas… in America, that difference was noted. (audio recording, 2020-02-13)
She says that she finds my research interesting, and she cannot wait to read the findings of this research project.

4.6 Shrien

Shrien identified as a Muslim mother who wears the hijab. She has earned two master’s degrees, both in the field of economics. At the time of the interview, Shrien was working part-time as a French teacher in a private school since French is a primary language in her home. English is a language she learned when she came to Canada. Shrien and her husband and two boys live in Ontario. Her boys are six and three years old. Both were born in Canada, her eldest in Montreal and her second was born in Ontario.

I asked Shrien two questions to help me understand more about how she identifies herself and what it means for her to be a Muslim mother. I asked Shrien, *Do you identify as a visible minority?* She said,

Yes… because there’s not too much Muslim living here, especially not around me. I can see Muslims… that’s for sure… but it’s… not dominant… I live like a Muslim… I practice my faith; I wear the hijab, and I pray… and the way I eat and everything. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

Then I asked her, *What does it mean to be a Muslim mother?* Shrien replied,

For me, being a Muslim mother is… to be able to practice my faith… openly… having that… freedom to practice it at my house and even outside… teaching that… to my family, to my kids, and having like a Muslim home. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

To Shrien, her identity as a Muslim is embodied in her everyday life.

4.6.1 Shrien and education

At the time of the interview, Shrien’s son was attending a full French public school. Prior to this, he attended a private Islamic preschool before attending kindergarten. Shrien expressed her thoughts on what education means to her and what affects the educational choices she makes for
her children. For Shrien, education is about training “our brain… open our brain… our curiosity and… learning tools… that we can apply later in life” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She said that, even if the children were learning about a math problem, “it’s there to… teach you the tools that you can use and how your brain can use that simple tools so you can later use them in … real life” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Equipping children with life skills is important in Shrien’s opinion.

Shrien shared that her son began his education in an independent Islamic preschool when he was three years old. However, French is crucial to her, and she wanted to make sure that her children maintain the French language. When her son was four years old, she enrolled him in a French language public school. Shrien explained,

I had a little bit of fear when my son went on the… public school… I was…debating how they’re going to… react… if there is something… about religion… but until now in my son’s school I didn’t have any issues. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

Then she added, “Maybe… he’s still small.” This led Shrien to narrate an encounter that occurred when her son first started school.

I’ll tell you the first thing… when he went in the school, he went to the washroom and, um, he asked the teacher, can I have some water, because we take water in the washroom to clean himself. And the teacher said we don’t use that here. So then, he came home and told me, mama, I don’t want to go to the washroom over there because I can’t wash myself. So I went, and I talked to the teacher, and I told… her, look I’ve given him a little cup and he’s used to it at home and… everywhere we go, he use that… he’s going to be responsible… so can you please allow him to use it? So, she was very open, and she said, yes, I don’t have any issues with that… she let him use that… my son… he feels that the teacher is listening and accepting who is he. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

Shrien continued by explaining that the teacher is very open; however, she did emphasize that she “make… extra effort… to… show myself as… a Muslim mom” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). I asked Shrien, Can you elaborate a little more about what you said regarding putting more effort? She said,
I know that my son, mmm, feels that he is different from others… I think he’s lucky because his class is very diverse… he has Hindus, he has Muslims, he has Christian, he has Jewish people… it’s a very good mix… so it’s not like… Muslims are not present in this school and especially in his class… I think they are… I’ll say… four Muslims, and his class is very small, they are like 14 kids… because it’s a full French school, so there is not too much people…it’s good for him… but at the same time… we all practice your religion in a different way… but I like that because… for him it’s like a lesson that everybody… practice their faith differently… for example, the Jewish people that are in his class they don’t celebrate Christmas… so he’s not the only one who is not celebrating Christmas… but at the same time… I encourage him to write a little note for his friends who are celebrating Christmas to… wish them a happy Christmas… so it’s like you don’t celebrate that, but you can join… you can share that joy with them and you can… wish them a nice holiday… but I feel like… Christianity is very present… like now, it’s Valentine’s Day is coming, and you have all these at schools, especially in a public school. So I want him to feel like he has something to celebrate too at school… that’s why I make an extra effort for him to bring that at school because it’s not usual… usually, I feel like Muslim parents… tend to… assimilate with others and don’t… make themselves unique. I will say, not different but unique for me… we also have something to offer. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

During Ramadan and Eid, Shrien puts more effort into bringing their celebrations to school. She explained that she usually sends a letter to the teacher before Ramadan to explain to her that they will be fasting and will be busy doing many activities. She explained that she wants the teacher to be aware of what is happening at home if it affects his schoolwork. During Eid, she usually prepares small goodie bags that include a short description of Eid and gives it to her son’s teachers and his classmates. Shrien said, “They’re not going to celebrate that, but at least, in the class, they are gonna talk about it, and my son is very happy when… we do that” (audio recording, 2020-02-11).

To understand more about what Shrien meant when she said Muslim parents tend to assimilate, I asked her to further explain. She said, “Because it takes time to explain ourself. Because it’s not what everybody’s doing and it’s… we are like different” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Shrien
explained the dilemma of presenting oneself to others as complex and layered. The first layer consists of understanding oneself. Shrien said,

If you want yourself to be listen and if you want to… share your point of view, you need to understand it first. So sometimes we don’t even understand why we are doing those things and we are just practicing because… our religion in Islam is just like a heritage… so we don’t even understand ourself. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

The second layer is the fact that it takes time. Shrien explained, “it’s because it takes time… I think sometimes parents doesn’t have time and I understand that too… I think it’s more easier” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). For Shrien, she expressed “I think that for our family it’s very important to put that in our children while they’re small and while they are growing” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Shrien wants her children to value the importance of their belief from a young age.

Shrien also expressed that she is worried about the health curriculum. She further explained that the school sent a consent letter informing the parents that the class will be starting a new chapter that will focus on the human body and how it functions, and they need the parent’s consent for their child to attend the class or not. Shrien said that she “appreciate that… before giving any information to the kids they asked the parent’s… consent” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). For Shrien, she appreciated that as a parent she was given a choice of whether she wants her son to attend the classes during this chapter or not.

4.6.2. Shrien’s home and school encounters

In order to better understand the enablers and/or barriers that Muslim mothers experience in regard to the opportunities to interact with schools, I wanted to gain insight on Shrien’s experience and conceptualization of home-school relationships and encounters. At the start of the year, Shrien communicated with the teacher to tell her that “we are… in a partnership, we want to work together” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She expressed, “I trust the school during the day when… my son goes there… how do I say that? They’re professionalism… and I want the school to communicate with me, so I want to know what my son does at school” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She has found the communication bag (a zipper bag that the child takes
home and brings back to school daily, and the educator uses it to send notes or forms home with the child) “very important for me to know what they’re doing there” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Shrien also shared that her son’s teacher is open to having conversations either after school or through email, which she described as “crucial for me” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). In Shrien’s opinion, a strong relationship with the teacher requires strong communication skills. She expressed, “I’m open with them… I share and communicate… not afraid of… their judgement… that makes the whole big difference” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She shared that when she first started communicating with her child’s teacher, she was stressed and worried about what the teacher will say and if they will judge her. However, she said, “I took the first step, and I went, and I trust them… so I think the response came positive” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). To understand why Shrien felt stressed and worried, I asked her to further explain what she was concerned about or scared of. Shrien answered,

About their reaction, about their judgement… because like myself not about my kids, but myself, I faced a lot of discrimination… about my hijab and everything… that was not here… when I was in Paris… so maybe I have that in my subconscious a little bit. That makes me a little bit more cautious maybe. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

When I asked Shrien if she feels that her son’s identity is represented in the class, she responded by saying, “In general… I don’t think in the classroom. I never saw… a Muslim family picture or something like that” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). However, she remembers an incident, but she is not sure if it was at school or after school program, where the educator had a conversation about the different religions and celebrations. She explained that it was around Christmas time, and a number of the children did not participate, which led them to have this conversation about different celebrations. Shrien expressed that she always has to initiate the dialogue with the teacher when it comes to Eid or Ramadan. She said she would appreciate it if the educators would communicate with children about different celebrations. She said, “Not just for Muslims, but for every… culture and religion… for example, if there is Diwali… the teacher [can] say… this is happening today, and this is like a Hindu tradition… that would be ideal” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). For Shrien, continuous conversations with the educator are important. She also expressed that educators need to have conversations about other cultures and religions in the classroom.
4.6.3 Shrien conceptualization of racism and Islamophobia

The topic of racism and Islamophobia tapped into Shrien’s past experience when she was living in France. For Shrien, “It means like… you can’t… express yourself… like you don’t have the freedom. And when you do that… you’re judged and… sometimes… people… take advantage and people… force you… do things that go against your values” (audio recording, 2020-02-11).

To explain her understanding of racism, Shrien narrates the difficulties she faced when she travelled to France and started her studies. On her first day in business school, she was called into the principal’s office and was told that she could not attend unless she removed her hijab. She continued by saying,

It was my first time… being… in another country… I was born and raised in Madagascar… so it was… tough. That particular moment was already tough, and when he said that about my hijab, that was the only thing I had with me, my faith and my value… but then… I was not afraid… to speak up and tell them that this is who I am, I can’t take this off… at that time I had the courage to say it because my parents… didn’t hesitate… to put that strong values and faith in ourself when we were younger. That’s why for me it’s very important for my sons to have that too. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

When it comes to Shrien’s experience with racism in her son’s school in Ontario, she said, “I don’t see anything” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). However, she expressed that racism can be prevented, but how… maybe, you know, teachers having training… when you do your… teacher’s college or your… degree, then you can incorporate something about the racism and just because some of the… teacher just they just don’t know… sometimes it’s just because they don’t know… so giving them more information… giving them more knowledge about, uh, other religion and faith and traditions may help. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

Shrien explained that when things happen around the world,
there is a fear because… first of all, I know that my son will ask me questions, a lot of questions… for him… Muslim people are really good people… in his mind… so if something happens, I know that he will be the first one who will ask me question to just reassure him that this happens, but it’s not because someone did that… that your whole religion is like that… you don’t represent your religion… from those actions. But I know that media… how they cover those situations… that can affect the kids… if something happens, maybe the school can explain… in the class… for example, this event happened, but we do not agree with that. But at the same time, that doesn’t mean that every Muslim is like that… for me it’s… a duty for them [teachers]… that they’ll need to do… for all the kids to be reassured. (audio recording, 2020-02-11)

Shrien explained that Islamophobia exists; however, she has not seen it in her son’s school because he is still young. However, she feels like the news affects Islamophobia. She explained that “whenever… something happens, and it’s a Muslim, so it’s going to be everywhere. And I feel like when it’s someone else, it’s just like someone who… has mental issues” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She thinks this biased approach contributes to Islamophobia.

### 4.6.4 Shrien’s concluding thoughts

Concluding the interview, I offered Shrien the space to express any additional thoughts, concerns, or ideas that she thought would be beneficial or would support this study. Shrien suggested that schools and educators need to initiate conversations with Muslim parents regarding their celebrations instead of parents always innating those conversations. She expressed, “I’ll be happy if they [the school] asked me, can you come in the school and talk… to the kids about Eid… without me going to see them” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). Shrien shared that a year ago, she went to the public library and recommended some books representing Muslims, and the library followed through and bought books to add to their library shelves. She said that, “For my son, going to that library and seeing that books there, he was so happy… extremely happy” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She thinks that having books representing her son’s identity at school is “one way that the school can… integrate other faith and religion and tradition” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). She added, “When my son goes [to the library]… he see the same book… he’s so happy… and it feels like he belongs to that community” (audio
recording, 2020-02-11). Shrien suggested that teachers can ask “each kids to bring a book from home about your own religion or about your tradition… so that will encourage all the kids to bring something from home and then they can incorporate maybe that in the school” (audio recording, 2020-02-11). For Shrien, schools need to take that extra step to initiate conversations with Muslim parents to include their children’s celebrations and having books that represent the Muslim identity can make a child feel a sense of belonging.

4.7 Hind

Hind identified as a Muslim mother who wears the hijab. She graduated with a Master of Business Administration from Schulich and is a certified Chartered Professional Accountant (CPA). At the time of the interview, Hind lived in Ontario with her husband and two boys, aged 13 months and 5 years. At the time of the interview, she was still on maternity leave.

I asked Hind two questions to help me understand more about how she identifies herself and what it means for her to be a Muslim mother. When I asked her, Do you identify as a visible minority? She replied,

Yes… I’m of South Asian descent Pakistani… I’m also a visible Muslim, so I do don the hijab… I grew up… partially outside of Canada and then… mostly in Canada… I’ve always been visible… Muslim while I’m here… it’s part of my identity. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Then I asked Hind, What does it mean to be a Muslim mother? She said,

That’s a good question… I think being a Canadian Muslim mother, I want to raise my children the best value with the best of values of both Islam as well as Canada… growing up, I want them to be very comfortable with… knowing what some of the other people around them believe and how they live… culturally as well as religiously… I want them to know that there are differences, but we’re better for those difference… and then, there are more similarities than differences… when we talk about… the Canadian culture. Islamically, I want them to know what their values are, what our roots are. So, faith for us is a way of life… I want them to… see how our values… go hand in hand with the
Canadian values as well. Cause it’s very important for me to… raise my kids in a balanced manner… I want them to have a good understanding of their faith as well as the Canadian values (audio recording, 2020-02-07).

Hind explained that she was raised in a home that balanced Canadian and Islamic cultures and values; she wanted to do the same for her own children.

### 4.7.1 Hind and education

Hind defined education as the way in which a person learns how to socialize with others, learn about the world around them, and learns the values and skills needed in life. Hind expressed that this understanding of education emerged from her experiences in life. She said,

> I think education is both… a way for me to understand what’s right, what’s wrong, my morality, as well as, I think education helps me… understand how… things work and how to make my voice heard… how to be confident in… what I believe in… obviously, it [education] taught me the skills needed… in my profession… that was a very important factor… you understand how the world works in a very safe space… you can ask as many questions as you like. You can be very curious about things, and you can learn from people who are the best in their field… that’s how I derive the importance of education in my life. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

At the time of the interview, Hind’s son was attending an independent Islamic school. Prior to this, he had been attending an independent Islamic Montessori daycare. Concerning this choice, Hind shared that sending her child to a faith-based school meant that he would have that awareness in everything they do that there is a creator or like the basic tenets of Islam and nothing is being shoved down their throats, but at the same time, they’re just more aware of like the way of life and they see more people around them and they’re comfortable in their own skin. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

It also meant that “there are other kids… like him… who… live the lifestyle… and it’s completely normal.” The decision to send her child to a faith-based school was a mutual decision between her and her husband.
Hind’s decision to send her children to a faith-based school was also influenced by her own childhood. When Hind moved to Canada with her family, she attended public school. She narrated:

When I grew up here, I just thought that there was a disconnect. Obviously, at home… we lived a Muslim lifestyle, and we believed in certain things, and our parents kept us educated… but… at the same time, in schools, it [being a Muslim] was something that you have to hide. You had to… be careful that you don’t appear as too Muslim… also, it was just post 9/11… so you have to be very careful about what your views are. So, you basically were doing more damage control in public schooling system, where you just have to sort of explain yourself… even as a 15, 16 years old about these… huge issues… growing up, I did not like that part of growing up that I had to be very defensive about… my faith… so coming from that, I think when… I have kids here, I thought… they’re going to go to school right from the beginning… like at age one or two, we obviously have a lifestyle that, you know, we will say things like Asalamualikum [peace be upon you] when we meet someone and we will say Allhmudullah [thanks to God] after we finish our dinner… but all of these things I think we’re very aware of not to say these if we were out in the public… but the child doesn’t notice…sometimes in our society as a whole, what people don’t understand, they’re usually afraid of. So, if my kid goes up and says Asalamualikum to them, if they don’t know what that means, they might get a little… uncomfortable or offended, or they may see them/us as the others… at that early age… obviously they don’t have the knowledge yet…. They cannot defend themselves. I wanted them to have a safe space for them to express themselves… I think… age three, four, or five is probably not the appropriate age where they should be answering questions as to why they can’t eat the pepperoni pizza… on pizza day or why they have to be the one who’s more careful about labels… so, I think, I just wanted to avoid some of that. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Another reason that influenced Hind’s decision to choose a faith-based school is the changes in the curriculum regarding the health education. She feels that
some of the power was taken from the parents and placed into the hands of the teachers who already are overwhelmed by… this responsibility of dealing with questions of 30 kids on very sensitive topics. And I think it was just more of a political move rather than thinking about all the kids and what it means for the kids… I think a lot of times in public education, things that are done in schools are not always for the betterment of the students, a lot of it is also very politically based. Which is fine, but… I don’t really like that loss of power when it comes to my child’s education, especially early education… I want to have some input…I want my preference to be taken into account and for my child to be made comfortable in class… regardless of what their parent’s decision is… these decisions in education, even with… recent cuts… what I feel is it’s more political… who is in power, who want to vote, who wants to get voted in next… rather than actually thinking about kids’ education. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Hind thinks that parents should have an influence on what gets taught to their children. For Hind, she feels a “loss of control in the public education… I won’t be heard… my voice is insignificant” (audio recording, 2020-02-07). Hind explained that topics about sex and sex education “needs to be done in a manner where you talk about both the… pros and cons. And then for me, it’s also important to give it that Islamic perspective as well” (audio recording, 2020-02-07). Hind adds that “giving the responsibility to the teacher… for me was a bit too much, um, for my palette and I think it just kind of left me in this space where I didn’t want my kids to go” (audio recording, 2020-02-07). For Hind, it was important to send her child to a school that was conscious of God and taught things from an Islamic perspective.

4.7.2 Hind’s home and school encounters

To better understand the enablers and/or barriers that Muslim mothers experience in regard to the opportunities to interact with schools, I wanted to gain insight on Hind’s experience and conceptualization of home-school relationships and encounters. Hind expressed that she was “very satisfied with the communication that school have with us at the moment” (audio recording, 2020-02-07). However, she added,
I think parents have to be more proactive in terms of communication, at least in my experience… with the teacher… and whatnot. If you want to know, if you want to keep tabs on your kid or anything like that… the teachers do have a lot going on so you can’t be expected of them to update you every single day. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

When it comes to her child’s classroom, the teacher sends a weekly newsletter that specifies what the children will be learning about in the different subjects. The school also provides parents with a monthly newsletter that addresses everything that is happening in the school. Hind said “I’ve had positive experience in just reaching out or emailing the teachers and they’ll get back to you or just chat with them a little bit when you’re picking up the kids” (audio recording, 2020-02-07).

Hind described the ongoing conversation and connection with the school as “luxury,” which she does not always have because both she and her husband are working professionals that work long hours. She said,

When I’m at work, I don’t always have the time to be up-to-date with all of my kid’s… ongoings in class. I may not be there at pickup time or drop off time… I may not even see the teacher as often as I’d like. So, I think definitely for me, that’s another factor where I know that because they are in line with our values, there isn’t a lot of things that are going on right now that… would need my immediate attention… I trust them a little bit more as opposed to if I were in public school. I think I would have a lot more frequent touchpoints just to understand… if there’s anything that’s coming up… so, definitely, I think my relationship with the teachers is based on trust and knowing that their values are sort of like in line with… mine. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

For Hind, sending her son to a private Islamic school give her that sense of security.

4.7.3 Hind’s conceptualization of race and racism

Concerning race and racism and the questions I asked about them, Hind expressed that racism does exist, and the way to combat it is through open conversations. For Hind, racism is “when
we fail to see the individual... holistically for who they are” (audio recording, 2020-02-07). She also said,

Racism is seeing someone for just the colour of their skin or where they’re originated from or the way they speak... being denied any opportunities, not even just reacting differently but being denied any opportunities... if you are actually brainwashing the next generation to not bring their authentic self, to work or to school... I think those are some of the issues that sort of come to mind when I think of racism. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Then I asked Hind to further elaborate on what she meant by “brainwashing” people not to bring their authentic self. Hind replied:

I think... this stems more from my experience... where at a very young age, I had this very dangerous idea that if I had to be successful in the business world... I had to compromise my values. Like this was something that I sort of had internalized... my own experiences were... that people expect you to behave a certain way or to react a certain way... maybe less intelligent because you wear a hijab or because you’re a visible minority... that kind of prevented me from being my true self... so, if I were to speak to someone, I would hide certain parts of my identity. I would hide the food I eat. I would hide the fact that my parents came from a certain place... I would struggle really hard not or use words that are not native to Canada... just so that you don’t appear as other... preventing someone from bringing their true self can... inhibit their true potential. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Hind expressed that preventing racism

starts really from the beginning where you talk about, and I think we’re... in a much better place than we were maybe 10 years ago, where we talk about... an individual’s worth is not the way they look, not, and you shouldn’t really assume things. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Then Hind added,
Two things I would say… realize the potential of the individual based on their… entire self. Don’t just discount them because they look a certain way… or don’t just believe in any things that you see… don’t believe every single stereotypical statement that you’ve read… things that you’re watched in the media. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Instead, Hind proposed that people should

invest the time and talk to the person and… don’t come off as someone who’s trying to like judge, but just come from an understanding sort of point of view… so I think if we had that sort of instilled in our educational institutes right from the very beginning and…. If things like these come up to the teacher’s attention… or to the parent’s attention, really take the time to have the conversation with the kids. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Hind also suggested that schools can “send check-ins” to parents asking them if they had conversations with their children about the topics of race and racism. To help parents in this process, Hind had the idea of schools sending prepared kits that can support parents in discussing such issues. She explained,

So, if they [parents] come from… a mindset where they’re very racist, then obviously whatever your kid learns in school is going to be cancelled out at home. So, you definitely want to make sure that you go one step further, and you’re also addressing the root causes of the issue. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

She said that it is essential to involve the parents in the process so that it becomes “a regular part of the conversation” both at home and school.

Hind suggested that parents can help in two ways. The first way would be

for all parents to have those conversations with their kids. To really sit them down and talk about… what the race issues are and… how to prevent, you be a bully and then… if you’re being bullied, how to raise your voice and raise awareness around you. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)
The second way parents could help would be by becoming involved in the school. Hind noted that educators are overworked and laden with many responsibilities. When parents come into the class, it offers students “different perspectives”. Hind continued,

> It would be much more powerful… coming from an immigrant woman rather than… you reading about it in textbooks. The struggle of black… women have faced, or black men have faced… it would be great if it comes from them… same thing with… Muslims… it would be great if it comes authentically from some of the parents. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Hind also expressed that it is both the teacher and the parent’s responsibility to educate children on race and racism and for conversations to happen both at home and at school.

### 4.7.4 Hind’s conceptualization of Islamophobia

To better understand the anti-racist opportunities that the educational system in Ontario affords Muslim mothers, I asked Hind questions about Islamophobia in relation to education. Hind stated that Islamophobia stems from a lack of knowledge about Islam. She said,

> People are generally afraid of something that they don’t know of… lack of awareness and lack of knowledge is where some of it stems from. Some of it also is based on stereotypical knowledge, or they try to paint everyone with the same brush or… strong views from maybe an older generation or someone in their household was very vocal about this and… it’s filled with… hatred towards… things in life. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

In order to combat the stereotypes that feed Islamophobia, she argued that there needs to be “open conversation” (audio recording, 2020-02-07).

In Hind’s experiences, she felt there is a lot of othering when it comes to the Muslim individuals and families within educational settings. She shared two occasions that she encountered. The first encounter was in an early childhood education center while she was attending a paid eight-week program. Hind explained,
This was around December, so around the holidays and you know, just people are talking about what they are going to make… if their family was coming over and whether they were going to brunch… all of our kids are playing together… and we’re all there… having these conversations. So, obviously, people take turns talking about certain things… I would like pitch in, it’s not like I was quiet… and then I think they turned to me. The way people asked that questions, I felt so uncomfortable because obviously I’d spent eight weeks with there with my kids… with these people… I’ve considered them my friends or mommy friends… so you have that level of comfort… at that moment, like right on the eighth class, they were like, so what do you guys do for holidays? And I think I was like taken back for a second… I’m like, oh, it’s just the same… we have family coming over… but [another mother asked] you celebrate Christmas? I’m like, no, we don’t celebrate Christmas… so I think… the first sentence in itself was a little bit more… in the area where I was… a little offended. They would talk about, oh so what do you guys do?... which felt like… I was the other person. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

The second encounter was when Hind was a student at the university. Hind narrated:

Since my first year… I had this amazing professor… I used to attend all his office hours… I would be this overenthusiastic student who have questions about readings and the lectures… I had really great rapport with him… going into second year, I started working for him… I was teaching his students in a tutorial type setting… until fourth year… so for three years straight, I kind of worked for him and we used to see each other and socially talk… just within school… then in fourth year… he nominated me for an award… that someone from the graduating class gets from the entire university of Toronto. So just getting that nomination was a huge deal, and it was great… I had a chance to read the letter for a second… like was something that he was supposed to post or… handout. But there was another student, and they said, oh if you want me to take a quick peek, you can do that… I read that, and I think, where they said that coming from my background, it was kind of really hard for me to be the outspoken woman that I am… I think that made me take… a step back and think, hey, that’s what you think of me… were you judging me all this time based on my looks… I didn’t really understand what he meant by that background because I was raised by a family of very strong… outspoken
women… and my dad is like a super sweet, super nice guy. Always encouraging us to do the best we can and to be the best we can in any field that we choose… to read that on a piece of paper kind of… hit me really hard… this person had known me for four years… known him first year in a class of 500 students… we had this… mentor/mentee relationship that I loved and I really respected him for that… I just didn’t realize that… they still saw me as this other person… they still saw that my background was something that I had to overcome. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

In both encounters, Hind expressed frustration and the sense of othering just because she is a Muslim and looks different.

### 4.7.5 Hind’s concluding thoughts

Concluding the interview, I offered Hind the space to express any additional thoughts, concerns, or ideas that she thought would be beneficial or would support this study. Hind expressed that one of the reasons she participated in this research project was to “make sure that our voices are heard” (audio recording, 2020-02-07). She also said that she believes that “it’s an area that more intention needs to be paid towards” (audio recording, 2020-02-07). To understand better what Hind meant about the Muslim voices to be heard, I asked her to clarify what she meant. She said,

> When it comes to education… racism… and all of this in relationship to… the pedagogy… I don’t think we’re in the forefront of… policy making or education where these decisions are being made… or… the syllabus are being set in Ontario. And I do think it’s very important for everyone’s voice to be heard and to be… acknowledged. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Hind did suggest that having government-funded faith-based public schools can support and acknowledge the needs that different faiths need. She explained:

> We should have the option. I think our voices should be heard that we should have the option of having… school boards that are funded by our own property tax dollars to be able to have that freedom…similar to what Catholic school boards have right now… everyone can direct their property taxes… to it. I think only the Catholic residence can do
that right now. And I think I’m okay with that. I mean… someone in their communities that said, our faith is a big part of our life, and that’s how we want our kids to be educated… If all religions are the same… given Canadian values… if all Canadians are the same, then how come we’re giving preferential treatment to one faith over the other? So… what makes a Catholic faith superior to other faiths in Canada given that it is a secular county. (audio recording, 2020-02-07)

Hind concluded the interview by strongly voicing her opinion that Muslims should also have the option to send their children to a funded Islamic school as a way to offer Muslims a space that will represent them.

4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented a detailed description of the seven Muslim mothers’ cases. Thinking with each participant, I shared the findings concerning six foci 1. Self-identification; 2. Conceptualization of education; 3. Home and school encounters; 4. Conceptualization of race and racism in education; 5. Encounters as a Muslim mother in educational settings; 6. Conceptualization of Islamophobia in education. Here are some notable commonalities that emerged from the interviews. First, educators need to take the initiative to start conversations with Muslim parents and learn more about Islamic practices. Second, repeated features of the mothers’ definitions of the roots of racism and Islamophobia were ignorance, lack of contact with people who follow the Islamic religion, and lack of knowledge about the Islamic faith. Several mothers shared the concerns of feeling othered and judged because they are Muslim. Most mothers expressed that the representation of a Muslim child occurs within the classroom during Eid and Ramadan only, and most often, it is the parent contributing by coming into their child's classroom and reading a book about Eid and Ramadan. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings through a deductive and inductive thematic analysis and offer recommendations.
Chapter 5

5 About this chapter

This chapter discusses the study’s results through a deductive and inductive reading of the data in relation to the theoretical framework and the literature review. The five main deductive patterns discussed in this chapter are home-school partnerships, sense of belonging, mother’s conceptualization of education, the influence of media, and Islamophobia. The six inductive patterns discussed in this chapter are fear as an emergent feeling, mothers as ambassadors, celebrations as a barrier, secular education, health education, and decolonizing the curriculum. Furthermore, this chapter provides recommendations for how anti-racist pedagogies and the pedagogies of walking alongside families may be conceptualized and lived out within early elementary education. In addition, this chapter recommends further research to understand the perspective of educators in the public school and the implications of the programmatic and lived curriculum regarding Islamophobia. The recommendations are aimed at educational stakeholders, namely early childhood educators, early elementary school teachers, teacher education program coordinators, and curriculum writers.

To ground this chapter, I return to the research questions:

1. What are Muslim mothers’ conceptualizations of race and racism, and how do they understand these to be related to their families’ relationship with public schools (or not)?

2. What do mothers say are the enablers and barriers to their families’ opportunities to interact with schools in ways that are anti-racist?

3. What might an anti-racist reading of Muslim mothers’ cases have to teach about promoting anti-racist education in early childhood classrooms?

5.1 Deductive themes

This research applied a deductive approach to data analysis by thinking with anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside families in conjunction with the research
questions and literature. The five main deductive patterns that I discuss in this section are: home-school partnerships, sense of belonging, mother’s conceptualizations of education, the influence of media, and Islamophobia

5.1.1 Home-school partnerships

The findings related to home-school partnerships highlight that the mothers perceived the relationship between home and school as vital. Some of the women specifically indicated that when educators engaged in informal conversation with them, it created a sense of comfort and connection. Many of the women highlighted that the responsibility of staying connected to the school also falls on the parents since the educators have many responsibilities. Additionally, the findings also implied that the relationship between home and school remains schoolcentric (Lawson, 2003) by prioritizing the school’s agenda when creating partnerships with parents. Some of the women also suggested that being a Muslim mother creates some barriers between them and the educators.

Regardless of whether they sent their child to a public or independent school, all the mothers perceived the relationship between school and home as vital to feeling connected and informed about the goings-on in their child’s classroom and their relationship with the educator. Shrien, for example, whose son attended a French-first-language public school, spoke with the educator at the beginning of the year, saying, “We are… in a partnership, we want to work together.” Fatima and Dina, who both sent their children to a public school, emphasized the importance of communicating with the teacher. Fatima said, “Me and the teacher work one-on-one the whole time.” Similarly, Megan, who sent her daughter to an independent Islamic school, described the relationship between educators and parents as a “team”. Zahra and Hind, who also sent their children to an independent Islamic school, discussed the importance of staying connected to the school. In one way or another, all the mothers communicated the importance of building a relationship with the educator for the sake of their children.

Fatima, Afra, Dina, and Shrien talked about informal conversations between the educator and the mothers as being valuable and as an opportunity to feel connected and heard. At the time of the study, all of their children attended a public school. They associated informal conversations and
interactions with a sense of feeling welcome. In Shrien’s opinion, a strong relationship with the teacher requires strong communication skills. This opinion is also present in the literature, such as Pushor’s (2015) work that emphasizes the importance of having informal conversations with parents. As the pedagogies of walking alongside families proposes, educators and parents need to grow accustomed to communicating with people who are different from them. Educators need to hold a safe space for parents to share their thoughts and feelings without having a prescribed goal that feeds the school’s agenda. Consequently, this two-way communication and attentiveness becomes a great opportunity for both to learn with and from each other (Pushor, 2015). All the women in this study indicated that the onus for maintaining strong communication with educators fell on them as parents since educators have a myriad of duties and responsibilities. For example, Hind said “I think parents have to be more proactive in term of communication, at least in my experience… the teachers do have a lot going on with them so you can’t expect them to update you every single day”.

Although the Ontario Ministry of Education’s programmatic curriculum (2016) states that “children, families, and educators… [are] at the heart of Ontario’s approach to pedagogy for the early years” (p. 9), this was not the perception of the mothers in the study. They felt that the schools did not seek to build relationships with their families through an understanding of who they are. Instead, it was a one-sided relationship privileging the school’s agenda. The question of “how can parents serve the school’s agenda?” (Pushor & Amendt, 2018, p. 206) remains at the forefront of parental involvement with the school, perpetuating the model of parent and school partnership that works on the basis of schools dictating to parents, rather than partnering with them (Wink, 2011). Dina expressed that there was a lack of access to her child’s classroom. She was invited into the classroom during student-led interviews which occur twice a year. However, Dina left the student-led meetings feeling more frustrated than satisfied because of the time restriction and her inability to ask and discuss everything she was hoping to. Dina was also invited into the class when the teacher needed her help in the reading program and when Dina communicated to the teacher that she wanted to read a story about Ramadan with the class. The encounters that Dina experienced point out to the fact that schools are seeking one-sided partnerships with parents.
The narrative of the good Muslim mothers (Saleh, 2017) who tries to perform extra duties by showing up and volunteering is a notable thread in the findings. Fatima indicated that she volunteered at the school to help out with “the milk program and… reading program… [and] just random things that they needed help with.” Fatima also communicated that she wanted the staff and the school to see that she was a contributing parent. In a way, Fatima could be seen to be trying to counter the narrative of a Muslim woman who is barbaric and dysfunctional through partnering up with the teacher and volunteering regularly. Fatima was not the only mother volunteering: Afra, Dina, and Shrien also indicated that they went into the classroom to read a story about Ramadan to their children’s classrooms. These are all examples of a partnership that highlights parental involvement, which focuses on the foundation of schools involving parents to reinforce the school’s agenda with parents and at home (Pushor, 2015). In addition, the parental involvement model places the educators at the top of the hierarchy as the experts, while controlling the role of the parents and viewing them as less-knowing (Pushor, 2015). Zahra, for example, who was involved with an independent Islamic school for the elementary grades and public school for the high school grades, communicated how important the parents’ role was when it comes to home and school partnerships. Zahra talked about her perception that the educators she interacted with within the public school system have underlying biases about Islam that influence their relationship with Muslim parents. This view is supported by the literature; for instance, although Amjad’s (2018) research was conducted alongside Muslim students in Canada, it echoed similar underlying biases about Muslims. The author asserted that, while many teachers are proactive about teaching against Islamophobia, “some Muslim students perceive most of their teachers not only as ineffective in combating racism, discrimination and Islamophobia, but also as promoting injustice through their teaching methods and curriculum” (p. 327). For Hind, who also sent her son to an independent Islamic school and is a full-time working mother, described the relationship between home and school as “luxury”. For her, sending her son to an Islamic school made her feel more comfortable because she trusted the Islamic school more than the public school since, in her opinion, the relationship is built on trust. After all, they were in line with her values.

The literature tells us that barriers that are built around Muslim parents in public schools’ stem from different sources including but not limited to, media, Islamophobia, and sovereign power (Bullock & Jafri, 2000; Saleh, 2018; Sensoy & Marshall, 2010; Sheth, 2009; Razack, 2008).
These barriers create fear (Ahmed, 2014) and separation rather than safety and connection. To break them down, educators need to start communicating and taking the initiative to learn about Muslims by interacting with them. Educators cannot ignore the fact that Muslim mothers are raising their children in this sociopolitical system and that schools are part of this system.

5.1.2 Sense of belonging

It is clear from the findings that public schools in Ontario have classrooms that house children who are culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse, yet not all cultures and religions are perceived in the same manner. Fatima described the class as “a big culture pot,” and Afra, Dina, and Shrien said that the classes are “very diverse” or consist of students representing different cultures. Despite the diversity on the class roster, the mothers indicated that the classrooms lacked the necessary resources to include Muslim student’s worldviews in the classroom curriculum. The interviews indicated that the only time Muslim students were represented in the public school classroom curriculum was during Ramadan and Eid. This exemplifies the heroes and holidays (Lee et al., 2002) and tourist approach (Derman-Sparks, 1989) to diversity, which functions to tokenize minoritized groups while maintaining the discourse of multiculturism. In addition, four mothers indicated that they had to initiate the talks with the school’s educators to include their child’s religious celebrations within the classroom curriculum. That the four mothers who sent their children to a public school needed to advocate for their own child’s celebration and inclusion tells us that educators might be, consciously or unconsciously, perpetuating the culture clash narrative that Islam is fundamentally alien to Canada’s accepted cultural values (Razack, 2008).

The early years programmatic curriculum, The Kindergarten Program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016), does not indicate that religious celebrations are part of the curriculum. In fact, the document states that the Kindergarten programs were traditionally structured around monthly themes related to seasonal events and celebrations, resource books supporting such themes have provided related activities that adults believed would appeal to early learners. Such planning models and associated resources, all based on adult perceptions of children’s interest and
learning, have been shown to have a negative effect on children’s engagement (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Wells, 2001). (p. 28).

Yet, the study’s findings indicate that celebrations are still part of the classroom curriculum. This discrepancy between the programmatic curriculum and the classroom curriculum warrants the questions: How are celebrations ending up in the classroom curriculum? What is the slippage between the programmatic curriculum and the classroom curriculum that is creating this discrepancy? What and whose knowledge and worldviews are being valued and produced in public schools? If religious celebrations are not part of the programmatic curriculum, how is Halloween, Christmas, Easter, etc. still a solid part of the classroom curriculum and yearly school events?

The women in this study expressed the need to advocate for their own religious celebrations since their funds of knowledge (Moll, et al, 1992) are not being included in the classroom curriculum. Dina, Fatima, and Shrien expressed that they are always pushing for their children to be included in the class. Afra indicated that the school took the initiative in sending an email to all parents informing them about the start of Ramadan; however, that was it. The mothers felt the need to inform the classroom curriculum so that their children’s worldviews are included. Ahmed (2021) discusses the importance of educators moving beyond the mere accommodation of providing prayer areas or celebrating different Islamic holidays. Instead, she advocates for educators to take the identity of a Muslim seriously, “however it is expressed. They [Muslims] long for spaces in their schools that are free of any pressure to fight for their faith” (p. 35). In other words, the funds of knowledge and funds of identity of a Muslim student should be included not only through celebrations; however, through regularly weaving their worldviews and funds of knowledge into the classroom curriculum.

The findings imply that a colorblind ideology is maintained in public schools which contributes to the perpetuation of racism, Othering, and silencing of contemporary Islamophobic incidents that occur nationally and internationally as well as Muslim funds of knowledge. Megan, for instance, highlights that the lack of discussion on racism and Islamophobia contributes to the sense of belonging. She said, “Racism and Islamophobia when it happens, no matter how big the issue is, it needs to be dealt with in the moment. Like the children really need to know that they
belong.” The literature indicates that a blind view of diversity, culture, race, and religion feeds into the ideology of colorblindness, muting issues of race and racism, and claiming that racism is not a problem that exists in our society today (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Hollingworth, 2009; Neville et al., 2013; Neville et al., 2000; Omi & Winant, 1994; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). None of the mothers indicated that they or their children have had conversations with the educators on topics, such as, racism or Islamophobia, which signals the maintenance of a colorblind approach in schools. Bank (2001) wrote about the consequences of educators’ maintaining a colourblind approach:

A statement such as ‘I don’t see color’ reveals a privileged position that refuses to legitimize racial identifications that are very important to people of color and that are often used to justify inaction and perpetuation of the status quo (p. 12).

Copper et al (2011) indicated that there are three underlying meanings behind educators enacting colourblind ideologies: teachers may not want to think about their own race and ethnicity, which comes from a place of privilege; teachers may be worried that they might be judged for taking the risk and standing against injustice; teachers may not feel comfortable talking about issues of race and racism because of their own lack of knowledge and understanding. The colorblind ideology widens the gap and maintains the prevailing racial stereotypes and injustices laced into the educational system and society’s fabric (Farago et al., 2015). The prevailing of such ideology will only maintain the white Eurocentric ways of doing and being in the public educational system. Hence, the anti-racist approach to education comes forward to push against the multicultural and colorblind ideologies, proposing a more nuanced and complex understanding of culture, racism, and religion, and advocating for enhanced social justice.

For Zahra and Hind, the Islamic school became a safe space for their family. Zahra expressed that her needs were met since her culture and religious needs were met. Her experience with visiting and interacting with the public school left her feeling uncomfortable and gave her the sense that the educators did not understand where Muslim children and families are coming from, in terms of their religious practices and diverse cultural practices; one might surmise there were no indications that Zahra’s family’s funds of knowledge would be included. Hind believed that by sending her son to an Islamic school rather than a public one, her children would feel
“comfortable with their own skin” and it would be a “safe space to express themselves.” Megan sent her daughter to an Islamic school to prevent her from encountering Islamophobia; however, her daughter was still faced with racism because of her biracial identity. This reveals that both public schools and independent schools need to adopt anti-racist pedagogies.

5.1.3 Mother’s conceptualizations of education

The women in this study shared similar conceptualizations of education. They all expressed that the purpose of education should be about more than academic success, prioritizing, for instance the ethics of living. Megan, for instance, proposed that education should focus on social justice, providing children with the opportunity to learn “how to be empathetic, to be in other people’s shoes.” In her opinion, learning to be empathetic was more important than writing a book report. For Zahra, education was tied to learning how to be a contributing member of society and to “make a difference for humanity.” Dina included the importance of learning about people who come from different cultures. Afra added the importance of teamwork and group projects. Fatima expressed that education is about “preparing the child as a whole… a thinker, a contributor… emotionally and socially… a positive citizen.” Shrien talked about life skills. Hind talked about how education should teach children to voice their opinion and make their “voice heard… how to be confident in… what [they] believe in.” In all, the woman spoke of education as needing to attend to the subjectivities it was making possible and helping to produce ethical citizens.

Thinking with the women’s conceptualization of education, new questions emerged from the study, such as: What subjectivities do early childhood education produce? What are the ethics and the origins of these ethics for the programmatic, hidden, and classroom curricula? What is the relationship between these curricula and the funds of knowledge and ontologies of the mothers? Zahra argued that early childhood education in the public school system failed to equip children with the tools and motivation to give back to humanity. For Hind, public schools are political spaces with political agendas; it is her belief that children’s worldviews are not their main priority.

5.1.4 The influence of media
The misguided image of Islam and Muslims in the media can feed the ever-growing wall built between Muslims and public schools. As Megan noted in her interview, incidences of Islamophobia in media streams are usually met with silence in school spheres. Shrien indicated that the media coverage on topics pertaining to Muslims and Islam affects her children. She expressed that

if something happens, maybe the school can explain… in the class… for example, this event happened, but we do not agree with that. But at the same time, that doesn’t mean that every Muslim is like that… for me it’s… a duty for them [teachers]… that they’ll need to do… for all the kids to be reassured.

Since media is one of the major contributors that influence the identity of a Muslim (Moore, 1995), it becomes problematic for educators to stay silent in schools when issues relevant to Muslims occur outside school spaces, as this null curriculum preserves the dehumanization of the Muslim body. It frames Muslims as deserving of such violence and maintains the image of the unruly Other since the sovereign power has justified such violence against them. This is why it is problematic for schools and educators to focus on heroes and holidays while completely ignoring discussions about the misguided image of Islam and Muslims in media. Sensoy et. al. (2010) explains that “this approach trivializes the overall experiences, contributions, struggles, and voices of non-dominant group members. In this way, curriculum fails to validate the cultural identities of students and does little to challenge dominant curriculum norms” (p. 5). In other words, this approach maintains the negative narratives that the media portrays about Muslims and reinforces the injustice and inequalities that exist in today’s society.

The literature reminds us that the fear-based discourses about Muslims stem from negative narratives portrayed by the media (Ahmed, 2021; Amjad, 2018; Elbih, 2021; Elijai, 2021; Hogarth & Fletcher, 2018). This resonates with the findings of this study: Zahra, Afra, Hind, and Shrien all expressed a direct link between Islamophobia and the negative representation of Muslims in media. Hind proposed that educators should not “believe every single stereotypical statement that [they]’ve read… things that [they]’ve watched in the media.” Zahra expressed that Islamophobia thrives because people take what they hear, see, and read about Islam and Muslims in mainstream media without thinking critically about it. Elijai (2021) reminds us that “[t]he
harmful media stereotypes reinforced a new dominant narrative of Muslims, as deficit and dangerous” (p. 10). Elbih (2021) argues “that the news media present a lopsided dialectic about current events when certain voices are excluded from the conversation” (p. 49). Ahmed (2021) asserts that “the media portrays Muslims as terrorists and they make it sound like Muslims actually believe in terrorist agendas and support terrorism acts” (p. 37).

In her study, Amjad (2018) reported that Muslims are Othered based on how the media portrays them. One of the students that Amjad (2018) listened to said, “I tried to explain the difference between terrorists and Muslims, but people have different views which are wrapped around their head by media” (p.325). According to Sensoy and Stonebanks (2009), media becomes the main source of information about the Other when personal experience with those groups is lacking. This begs the questions: When educators see a Muslim mother wearing the hijab, what do they make of that? What are their first impressions? Will it be an image of an oppressed woman, or a woman who is docile or shy? Or will be the image of a woman who was forced to wear the hijab? If you ask a Muslim woman about how she feels about her hijab, the answer would be quite the contrary to what the media implies. The hijab for them can be a sign of courage, empowerment, and freedom.

5.1.5 Islamophobia

Islamophobic encounters are a reality for many Muslims. Interestingly, some of the women indicated that it is not something they have encountered directly in public elementary school spaces because their children are still young. The women conceptualized Islamophobia using the words “fearmongering,” “fear-based,” “force,” “no freedom,” and “anger”, all of which resonate with Beydoun’s (2016) explanation of Islamophobia. For Megan, public school was not an option due to her belief that independent schools would protect her children from Islamophobia. Megan has personally experienced Islamophobic hate in front of her children in public spaces. Megan’s skin colour and her European ancestry did not protect her from Islamophobic hate; instead, it was the hijab and niqab that prompted the act of Othering. Her choice of Islamic dress caused her identity to be perceived as ‘unruly’. For Megan, Islamophobia is rooted in ignorance and anger and is something she encounters often in public.
Connecting Islamophobia to her experience with the education system, Shrien guessed that the reason she had not encountered Islamophobia at school was because her son is still young. Similarly, Afra repeatedly used the word “yet” as a way to explain that she had not encountered Islamophobia at school yet because her children are young and do not yet require any religious accommodations. Her continuous use of the word yet indicates her expectation of resistance or pushback as her children get older and start needing religious accommodation. This is not surprising since the literature indicates that, despite the fact that Canadian classrooms are culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse, the educational system continues to maintain Eurocentric ideologies (Childs et al., 2010; Kempf, 2011; Ryan et al., 2009; Solomona et al., 2005) and a multiculturalism discourse in education policies (Srivastava, 2007). Zahra and her children, however, did experience Islamophobia in the public high school her children attended. She believes that Islamophobia exists in schools and is rooted in “uneducation and fear”.

As discussed in chapter 2, the discourse of multiculturism is a movement towards including students and families who are culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse; however, the notion of multiculturalism belies a shallow understanding of culture, race, and religion (Derman-sparks, 1989; Kailin, 2002; Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2002; Sensoy et al., 2010;). Raza (2014) stated that “schools are structured on the logic of Whiteness, and they aim to indoctrinate this logic upon all students. Multiculturalism works within this colonial system” (p. 146). It is a way of maintaining that utopian – but misleading – image of “diversity without oppression” (Sensoy et al., 2010).

The everyday reality of many Muslims is very different than what the educational system teaches children about their lived experiences. When there is a null curriculum about the Islamophobia and racist encounters that families and children might be experiencing in the public sphere, a gap is created and maintained. What message is the null curriculum communicating? What hidden curriculum is maintained? And what is the prescribed curriculum telling us about these issues? Islamophobia affects a person’s daily life; Islamophobia is real (Ahmed, 2021; Amjad, 2018; Elbih, 2021; Eljaji, 2021; Saleh, 2021). For example, after the horrific event that happened to the Afzal family in London, Ontario on June 6th, 2021, many Muslims and especially Muslim women who wear the hijab have become extra cautious and even scared to go outside for a walk. In a news article, Raza (2021) writes that the attack in London, Ontario was “the third deadly
anti-Muslim attack in Canada in four years, the incident has renewed feelings of fear, anger, hopelessness and exhaustion among Canada’s Muslims”. Muslim families are genuinely fearful “for their safety and the safety of other Muslims following the attack” (Raza, 2021). Although the story of the Afzal’s family received a lot of media coverage, this is not the case for most Islamophobic encounters. Further contributing to the preservation of Islamophobia are government laws such as Bill C51, Bill 21-Quebec, Barbaric Cultural Practises Act, and Anti-Muslim political and media rhetoric (Kanji, 2020). Kanji (2020) writes “[s]uch laws and policies claiming to ‘save’ Muslim women have extensive negative impacts on Muslim women and their families – including social exclusion, economic marginalization, and psychological effects such as anxiety, fear, depression, and frustration” (p. 11). Lack of knowledge, awareness and education seems to be the root problem of Islamophobia, yet the findings show that public schools remain silent about this topic.

5.2 Inductive themes that emerged

This research study used an inductive approach to allow codes and themes to emerge from the data itself. The six inductive patterns discussed in this section are: fear as an emergent feeling, Muslim mothers as ambassadors, celebrations as a barrier, secular education, health education, and decolonizing the curriculum.

5.2.1 Fear as an emergent feeling

The study identified fear as a key emergent theme that some of the women experienced. For instance, I noticed fear surfacing in my conversations with Megan, Zahra, and Shrien. They all used the word “fear” in our conversations about early childhood education and their experiences being a Muslim mother. Megan, who was homeschooling her daughter at the time of the interview, explained that the silence surrounding Islamophobic events in schools that occurred nationally and internationally caused her to feel a sense of fear. The absence of critical discussions about Muslims and Islam in public schools perpetuates the null curriculum (Eisner, 1994). The null curriculum refers to what is not included in curricula and whose absence has an effect (Eisner, 1994). In this study, the findings show that students in public schools are not
taught to or expected to question, critically examine, and call out racist or Islamophobic encounters or language in mainstream media, news, or books. As a result, students learn that it is not essential for them to engage in pointing out injustices in school and the society at large. Milner (2017) asserts that “what is absent or not included in the curriculum can actually be immensely present in what students are learning” (p. 88). Also, the null curriculum maintains racialization by preserving the narrative of a Muslim as unruly, dehumanized and deserving of violence; the silence of the sovereign power justifies such violence against this Other (Sheth, 2009). The avoidance of difficult topics can create a powerful aura of fear which can further alienate the victimized parties since educators are not supporting the family and students in their classrooms to “heal and work through difficult situations that result in pain, anxiety, frustration, and confusion” (Milner, 2017, p. 88). Milner (2017) asserts that “when we teach through the null, we are complicit in maintaining the status quo, including the continuation of racial injustice” (p. 89).

In this study, both Dina and Shrien, who send their children to a public school, noticed the null curriculum, the not teaching or discussing the underlying realities of Muslims and Islam that is perpetuated in the media —especially during times when a tragic event happens, and Muslims become the target. Additionally, Megan, Dina, and Shrien all pointed out to the importance of offering a moment of acknowledgement or having a conversation within the class when anti-Muslim hate bombards the news as a result of a national or international incident. This is especially pertinent because media coverage often diminishes violent acts against Muslims. Shrien explained that this is crucial because “whenever… something happens, and it’s a Muslim, so it’s going to be everywhere… when it’s someone else, it’s just like someone who… has mental issues.” This resonates with Bullock’s (2018) findings that the word terrorism is amplified in the media when the offender is a Muslim; however, if a similar incident involves a non-Muslim, there is a higher chance that no one will even know about it. Raising the example of the Mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, Megan noted that that incident “deserves a moment”. Similarly, Elbih (2021) argued that educators should “embrace current events, such as 9/11, as opportunities to address the pain, ignorance, and grief resulting from miseducation that impacts many of our most vulnerable students” (p. 52). In schools, incidents such as the shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, could serve as an excellent opportunity for educators to disrupt the null curriculum and guide students to become more socially conscious.
Zahra sent all her children to an independent Islamic school during their elementary school years because she did not feel a sense of comfort and she was afraid that events outside of school spheres could influence her children’s experience at school. Zahra also explained that her decision to send their children to a faith-based schools, a decision that many other Muslim parents’ make as well, is not solely based on religious needs but also due to the fear that their children will get bullied. Zahra sent her children to a public school for the high school years, and when she was present in that space, she often felt judged because of how she was dressed. Shrien also expressed similar feelings of judgment and fear. Shrien used the word *fear* to describe her feelings when she first put her son into the public school system. She worried about how the school, or the educators would perceive her and her son because they are Muslims. However, for Shrien, fear stems from her own encounter with racism as a student in France. This *stranger stranger* narrative that Ahmed (2000) talks about surfaces here as these women express how the feeling of being seen as strange and unassimilable by the educator caused them to feel discomfort as they interacted with the educator. It becomes vital to understand how educators perceive and interact with Muslim mothers since the narratives that educators hold of Muslim mothers become tangled into the relationship.

Zahra pointed out that the lack of knowledge about Muslims and Islam greatly contributes to the fear that educators in public schools hold against Muslim parents. It might also be intermingled with the unconscious biases that some educators might hold against Muslims because of the negative media that presents Islam as a violent religion and a threat to Western values (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005). School/mother relationships become not only about education and schooling but are also characterized by a sense of discomfort. As Zahra put it, “People have been fear-mongering into believing that this religion… has no goodness in it… that women are suppressed… it’s a very subservient religion… it’s a very sad religion.” Zahra continued to explain that *fear* is what creates an immediate divide between educators and Muslim mothers. Zahra wished, “If we could just take fear out of the equation, we would be able to thrive a lot more, especially in the public system”. Zahra described an incident where she requested a prayer room for her children who attend the public high school. She was baffled by the negative response she received from the administrators. The questions that come to my mind are, *would it be perceived differently if Zahra asked for a meditation room instead of a prayer room? How can educators accommodate students if they don’t recognize their funds of knowledge or*
ontologies? How can schools and educators offer spaces that allow children to feel a sense of belonging if the first thought that comes to mind when parents request a prayer room is negative? For many Muslims, prayer time is a time to slow down and connect with the divine.

Thinking with the word *fear*, I was reminded of Ahmed (2014) saying:

> Fear envelops the bodies that feel it, as well as constructs such bodies as enveloped, as contained by it, as if it comes from outside and moves inward. And yet fear does not bring the bodies together, as a form of shared or fellow feeling. (p. 72)

The study suggests that some mothers felt a distance between themselves and the educators, specifically in the public school system, due to what the mothers expressed as fear of the Muslim other. This distance that is caused by fear instigates Islamophobia to be more visible. According to the women, fear that the educators might hold against Muslims might continue to distance them from Muslim parents because of their lack of understanding and education about Muslims and Islam. Fear will lead to more distance and alienation, instead of understanding, cooperation, and engagement.

Counter to fear, an anti-racist approach to early childhood education, according to the literature and the study, invites early childhood educators to reflect and re-examine their own biases, privileges, and perspectives (MacNevin & Berman, 2017). As Rios (2018) put it, “Racism is taught, learned, nurtured, and perpetuated in every aspect of society” (p. 36); until education unearths its premises, it will perpetuate racism and injustice. In other words, becoming conscious of one’s unconscious biases is critical in establishing justice and adopting an anti-racist way of being and doing in the educational system.

### 5.2.2 Muslim mothers as ambassadors

The women who sent their children to a public school indicated the need for them to be involved with the school by volunteering and showing up for their children at school specifically because they follow the Islamic religion. For example, Dina, Fatima, and Shrien were active in staying connected with educators and volunteered often. Fatima specifically stated that “being a Muslim mother definitely played a role in me going to volunteer.” As mentioned in an earlier section in
this chapter, Fatima precisely stated, “I am a Muslim mom, and I need to show that we are… contributing members of the school community.” Shrien echoed similar thoughts by saying that she needed to “make… extra effort… to… show myself as… a Muslim mom.”

The efforts of the Muslim mothers in this study reflect a larger trend in their commitment to engage with their children’s school. van Es (2019), who conducted her research with Muslim women in Dutch society, explained that Muslim “women turn themselves into ‘ambassadors’ of their religion. In representing themselves as modern and emancipated women… to change the dominant image of Islam” (p. 375). In other words, these women are working against the narrative of a veiled oriental woman who is seen as mysterious and exotic (Zine, 2006) by showing up and getting involved in their children’s schooling. The women that went the extra mile to engage with their children’s public school with the intention of portraying Muslims in a positive way took the role of being an ambassador of their religion (van Es, 2019, p. 375). In Zahra’s case, she took on the role of an ambassador when her children attended high school in the public school system. She educated herself and joined the school council board. Zahra explained that as a Muslim mother she needed “to make that extra strive” and “take an extra step to justify” because, as she said, Muslims “have that extra layer.” In a way, these mothers were trying to challenge the stereotypes associated with Muslim women as backwards, pitiable, and isolated (Saleh, 2018; van Es, 2019) by engaging with their children’s schools and representing themselves as good and acceptable Muslims (Kassam, 2018).

5.2.3 Celebrations as a barrier

According to Shrien, Afra, Dina, and Fatima, Eurocentric celebrations are overrepresented in the public schools. They shared that Christmas, Halloween, and Valentine’s Day are greatly emphasized in schools and constitute a part of the lived curriculum and yearly fixed events. Afra explained that “these other celebrations kind of take a whole new life of their own.” She contended that it is “a struggle for us [Muslims] in the public-school system,” referring to her children as being “left out”. Dina also pointed out that educators have resources and materials to share regarding other celebrations like Hanukkah and the Chinese New Year. However, when it comes to Ramadan and Eid, educators do not have any resources, which, according to Dina, “is kind of like shocking.”
As mentioned in an earlier section in this chapter, religious celebrations are not part of the programmatic curriculum in Ontario; yet, as the findings indicate, celebrations are a significant part of the classroom curriculum. Islamic celebrations on the other hand do not receive the same treatment compared to other celebrations according to the findings. This type of Othering of Islamic celebrations abnormalizes Islamic celebrations (Ahmed 2000) and perpetuates the Eurocentric discourses within the educational system (Kempf, 2011). In addition, to teach diversity solely through celebration maintains the discourse of multiculturalism which works to maintain the utopian narrative of “diversity without oppression” (Sensoy et al., 2010) in schools and classrooms. As mentioned earlier, Fatima, Shrien, Afra, and Dina have indicated that they were the ones who took the leadership initiative in conversing with the teacher, expressing their interest in coming to class and reading a story about Ramadan and Eid for the students, and the teachers were welcoming. However, the participating mothers communicated that they would like to see the teachers taking more lead.

Addressing their perspectives towards celebrations within the public school system, Shrien, Dina, Afra, and Fatima expressed the existence of a disparity in how different celebrations are included in the classroom curriculum. The mothers indicated that the only time they see their child represented in the classroom curriculum was during Ramadan and Eid, and again, it was mostly because the mothers initiated a related conversation or activity. The overrepresentation of Christmas, Halloween, and Valentine’s Day was something that the participants have brought up during the interviews. The mothers added that although their children’s classrooms are very culturally and religiously diverse, there is a lack of diverse learning resources, particularly those that pertain to Muslim children and families. Some mothers noted that although some schools claim not to be affiliated with any religion, they still celebrate Christmas, Halloween, Valentine’s Day, and Easter. The over representation of Christian-based celebrations in public schools warrants the question, Are public schools in Ontario really secular?

Weaving together what the mothers said about inclusion of the Muslim body in the classroom curriculum solely during Ramadan and Eid events and the above section on fear, I argue that fear against Muslims will continue to seep into early childhood curricular spaces, and the racialization of the Muslim body will continue since all levels of curriculum continue to exclude the pressing political and global inequality towards Muslims that currently exists. Curricula must
change. Research that focuses on teaching against Islamophobia (Ahmed, 2021; Amjad, 2018; Elbih, 2021; Eljaji, 2021; Saleh, 2021) suggests that educators can be a catalyst for change, urging them to intentionally work towards supporting and including Muslim students and families. Ahmed (2021) writes that “[e]ducators must move beyond just providing prayer areas, celebrating different Muslim cultures, and offering accommodations for taking time off for Eid holidays” (p. 34). Instead, what Muslim families and children need is for them to feel a sense of belonging, “that their identity is taken seriously, however it is expressed” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 34), and that they do not need to continuously fight or defend their multiple identities, as both Muslim and Canadian.

5.2.4 Secular education

In the Canadian context, integrating religion into the public school system “undermines the kind of secularism required for liberal democracy and the espoused separation between church and state; and the problem of choosing which religions to teach or not to teach is itself a considerable threat” (Anwaruddin & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015, p. 147). Above I asked, Are schools in Ontario really secular? According to the findings, public schools are not secular spaces since various religiously-based celebrations are included in classroom curricula, especially those that were Eurocentric and Christian. Additionally, during the interview with Dina, she explained that her child’s classroom was well equipped with materials to celebrate Chinese New Year and Hanukkah; however, the class had no materials for Islamic celebrations. The null curriculum of Islamic celebrations is an example of the “wall” (Khattar et al, 2019) built around racialized children and families creating an unequal representation between Muslim students and everyone else. Dina communicated that this is something that she finds challenging; she said, “I feel like I am the one pushing, always kind of trying to… have the school be inclusive towards… my son”. Dina explained that,

I understand it’s like… secular… there’s no religion… but it’s good to still teach kids about that there are different religions out there… the same way they teach the kids about… Chinese New Year… there’s like lunar calendar and different kinds of things… okay, well, also Islam has that… Muslims follow the Lunar calendar as well.
According to Neuhaus (2010), there is danger in eliminating opportunities for curricula that can promote basic understandings of different religions and belief systems since “the entrance of religion into the public arena would seem to be a formula for open-ended conflict and possible anarchy” (p. 79). Neuhaus states that a “democratically legitimate” (p. 80) public ethos cannot be established without engaging in discussions about religion since religion is a primary source of values for many members of any society. In the case of the women in this study, they called for including Islamic celebration in the classroom curriculum in the same way other celebrations are included. Null curricula or surface celebratory activities related to Muslim students continue to maintain the “Othering” of the Muslim body (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009).

While early childhood education serves children who come from homes that engage in religious practices, topics of religion continue to be considered taboo and part of the null curricula in the public-school sphere (Keller et al., 2017). Although religious celebrations are visible in educational spaces, as the mothers mentioned during the interviews, none indicated that their child’s classroom engaged in discussions about different religious practices. The focus was only on celebrations and not on recognizing funds of knowledge or ontologies related to religion. The women suggest that negating religion in curricula reflects the message that religion is a private matter and should not be discussed in schools (Rorty, 1999). This fails to acknowledge that students embody their faith as they walk into the classrooms (Anwaruddin & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015). According to Keller et al. (2017), creating a “culture of silencing of religious identity as well as silencing of learning about other religions creates a climate of religious illiteracy” (p. 29). Aown (2011) warned “that religious illiteracy can lead to increased discrimination and prejudiced viewpoints of students of faith” (p. 5). Therefore, maintaining a secular understanding of education, which supports the exclusion of faith from education and the inability to address tensions and contradictions related to religious pluralism in schools, can only lead to further “masking the marginalization of religious minority groups” (Anwaruddin & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015, p. 149).

Hind and Zahra, who both chose to send their children to Islamic schools, questioned the public school system’s authenticity when it claims to be secular. Hind asked,
If all religions are the same… given Canadian values… if all Canadians are the same, then how come we’re giving preferential treatment to one faith over the other? So… what makes Catholic faith superior to other faiths in Canada given that it is a secular country?

Zahra points out that if schools are truly secular, they need to state it clearly and not elevate one religion over others. She said, “When… you’re saying we’re all inclusive then actually be all inclusive.” For Hind, Zahra, and Megan, Islamic schools seemed to be a much safer space for their children. For them, sending their children to an Islamic school meant providing a sense of belonging, validation, and representation. In Megan’s case, she ended up homeschooling – which she had intended to start later – a bit earlier because of racist encounters her daughter faced at the Islamic school. Megan had never considered public school for her daughter because she wanted to protect her daughter from racism and Islamophobia. Public schools in Zahra, Hind, and Megan opinion are not spaces that practice secularism yet at the same time, they are not inclusive of all religions, specifically Islam.

In Afra’s case, she never spoke to the school concerning her feelings about their treatment of other celebrations compared to Islamic celebrations because she felt she did not know what to say. She added, “I didn’t have any solutions to offer them. So, I didn’t think it was my place [to say anything]”. She followed that by saying, “I didn’t think they cared… I don’t think they’re bothered with why I’m keeping them [children] home… they never asked”. The word trust emerged here as I listened and read about Afra’s feelings. This evokes the question of whether schools offer spaces that are ‘relational’ and allow for ‘openness’ when it comes to Muslim mothers and their children.

The findings reveal that early childhood education, though it is the nexus between home and the outside world, does not provide the space and time to discuss complex topics like religion. One may say that public institutions are not mean to discuss religion, although argue that some religious celebrations do make it into the classroom curriculum. It follows, then, that the message sent to Muslim children from an early age is that their religious identity is not welcome (Khan, 2019), and that their religious practices should remain private. Furthermore, to be included and accepted, children learn that they need to embody the narrative of the acceptable Muslim by keeping their religious practices and beliefs private and away from the public’s eye (Kassam,
2018). The continuous Othering of the Islamic faith in public schools perpetuates this image of Islam and Muslims as a foreign and exotic religion. Green and Oldendorf (2005) remind us that “if we want children to feel safe and cared for at school and if we want to respect their families’ hopes and beliefs, it is important that we know about their deepest convictions and values” (p. 210). Thus, to disrupt the Othering of Islam in schools, educators need to “represent Islam as it exists in the life of most Muslims, as only one part of their multi layered identity; because what is excluded is often as telling as what is included” (Elijai, 2021, p. 14).

Let us be reminded that public schools house religiously diverse students. This is apparent in many spaces and interactions in Ontario public schools, for example, on school grounds where religious dress and symbols are worn (i.e. hijab, kippah, dastar, and cross), in parents’ requests for food that accommodates their children’s religious needs (i.e. Halal, kosher, and vegetarian), and in moments where some parents opt out of holiday celebrations or health education (Khan, 2019). In fact, the health education curriculum was an issue that all the mothers in this study communicated discomfort or hesitation about. Although schools in Ontario strive to be secular and, theoretically, all religious identities are welcome in the public sphere, some religious identities continue to be ignored, silenced, and tabooed (White, 2009). Despite the stated intentions of the curriculum, schools are spaces that reproduce and perpetuate Eurocentric norms and values. They also prescribe Western culture and ideologies as the set expectations for what is typically accepted knowledge (Young, 2009).

5.2.5 Health education

The study found other curricular tensions in the women’s experiences interfacing with early childhood education: namely concerning the Ontario health education curriculum. This curriculum was released by the previous government in 2019 to reflect public feedback, research and advice from experts, as a result of the province’s largest consultation on education that took place fall of 2018 (Government of Ontario, 2019). This updated Health and Physical Education (2019) curriculum includes new and updated learning about mental health, body image, consent, online safety, concussions, and age-appropriate sexual health education. All seven mothers named their understanding of this curriculum as a source of stress in their relationship with public education. More specifically, the mothers acknowledged the importance of talking to
children about health education; however, they were concerned that some details, such as sex and sexuality, might be introduced to their children at too young an age. Hind and Afra were very specific. They expressed that they understood that there was a health curriculum written by the province in which there was an absence of the Islamic perspective towards sexual activities and relationships between genders.

Although the women each raised the topic of the health education curriculum in public schools and expressed their concerns regarding the health curriculum, specifically sexual practices, the programmatic curriculum in the early years does not actually include sex education. This discrepancy between the mother’s perception of what is included in the programmatic kindergarten curriculum and what is actually included in the programmatic curriculum creates tension. The nexus between home and public education and the tensions surrounding the health curriculum in early years warrants questions such as: How is the programmatic curriculum in early childhood education developed and shared amongst stakeholders including families, children, the government, and educators? Are diverse opinions, knowledges, values, ethics, and ontologies negotiated in curricular development and conversations? What is the responsibility of public education when disagreements arise?

The Health and Physical Education document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019) states that teachers have the responsibility to “follow the school board’s policy that allows for students to be exempted, at their parents’ request, from instructions related to the Grade 1 to 8 human development and sexual health expectations in strand D” (p. 17). Shrien communicated that she appreciated the consent form sent to parents to inform them about the health unit that their children will learn about. Megan also expressed that it is good that the schools ask for parents’ consent; however, she still thinks that some topics will be introduced to her child at an age that she perceives to be too young. The question that comes to mind is it enough to send a consent form giving the parents the choice of whether they want their children to attend the health class or not? The health curriculum document also states that:

In an environment based on the principles of inclusive education, all students, parents, caregivers, and other members of the school community — regardless of ancestry, culture,
ethnicity, sex, physical or intellectual ability, race, religion, creed, gender identity, gender expression, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or other factors – are welcomed, included, treated fairly, and respected… all students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the boarder environment, so that they can feel engaged in and empowered by their learning experiences (p. 75).

The findings suggest that the health curriculum is where much tension exists. Further inquiry is needed to understand the health curriculum and how it is enacted in the classroom and lived curriculum and explore Muslim parents’ perception of the health curriculum. Some of the questions that will need further exploration are: How are children and families who practice the Islamic faith included in the health curriculum? How does the programmatic and classroom curriculum reflecting students who practice the Islamic faith? Are religious practices included in the programmatic and classroom curriculum?

5.2.6 Decolonizing the curriculum

Education about Islamophobia and colonization in the Canadian classroom works hand in hand to rebuke stereotypes and raise awareness. Megan, a Canadian settler, spoke about her concerns regarding the “sugar-coated explanation of colonialism and Indigenous people” in the curriculum. She explained that since her daughter attended a private school, they had more control over the curriculum; however, that shallow understanding of the Canadian colonial history made her feel uncomfortable. Megan acknowledged that public schools are becoming more aware, yet a lot needs to be done.

Megan expressed that it is critical that every Canadian knows, acknowledges, and learns about the dark side of the Canadian history and how it shaped Canadian identity and the positioning of Canadians globally. Teaching about the historical and current injustices inflicted on and the oppression of Indigenous people of Canada, the brutal and violent history of residential schools, and colonization serves as a great defence for challenging Eurocentric ideologies, knowledge, and ways of being and doing in schools and the society at large. Without this, schools perpetuate the oppressor’s hidden curriculum even as they adhere to curriculum documents that supposedly
teach Canadian history and celebrate multiculturalism. De Lissovoy (2012) eloquently describes power by writing,

Power ceaselessly raises up and tears down, alternately developing economies, identities, and social meanings and then laying them low through abandonment or active destruction. Power forces possibility into its material forms and then breaks them, in a ferocious energy of destitution. Power demands production and articulation, and then fractures these without mercy into mute fragments. Power orders the agony of growth so that it can be doubled with the agony of stagnation. (p. 464-465)

De Lissovoy (2012) continues to explain that education and schooling are sites that ignite a set of practices that “aim to train, construct, and normalize students according to the requirement of the powerful” (p. 469). The hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968) becomes the vehicle which sustains power, privilege, and Eurocentric ideologies in schools and classrooms. Apple (2004) describes the hidden curriculum as “the tacit teaching to students of norms, values, and dispositions that goes on simply by their living in and coping with the institutional expectations and routines of schools day in and day out for a number of years” (p. 13). The rationale behind the logic of the hidden curriculum is to preserve the social structure and hegemony (McLaren, 2007).

Weaving some of the other inductive themes that emerged from the data, such as celebrations and secular education, it is evident that the perpetuation of Eurocentric ideologies is part of the hidden curriculum fabric. Decolonizing the programmatic and lived curriculum becomes key to dismantle Eurocentric ideologies and ways of being and doing within education. Given that this research is located in the Canadian context, decolonization needs to start by bringing in Canadian Indigenous knowledge and educating students about the historical and present colonial structure that continuously influences Indigenous lives. In addition, understanding the complexities of world history can be one of the most vivid paths to justice, how the world works and interacts, and how individuals can collectively make a difference. It is equally significant to teach historical narratives through multiple lenses and ensure that diverse students’ identities do not become buried or camouflaged. If, in an attempt to decolonize the Canadian curriculum, racialization and the effect of colonialism at a global level are ignored, then the curriculum
clearly reinforces the Eurocentric understanding of the diverse population that makes up the Canadian classroom and society large.

5.3 Recommendations

I present the following recommendations in relation to the study findings that educational stakeholders may use to infuse anti-racist pedagogy and the pedagogies of walking alongside families within current educational practices, including but not limited to early childhood educators, elementary school educators, policy and curriculum writers.

5.3.1 Recommendations that can inform the early childhood classroom curriculum

Classroom environments and the lived curricula are the places where educators can integrate anti-racist pedagogies to promote change in and through early childhood education. This means conversations about race and racism need to happen in the classroom curriculum while ensuring that everyone in the classroom has support and a sense of belonging (Ministry of Education, 2016). Afra, Fatima, Dina, and Shrien, who sent their children to a public school, stated that the only time they felt the funds of knowledge and realities of their children were included in the classroom curriculum was during Ramadan and Eid. The mothers decided to take the initiative and go into the classroom to read a story about Ramadan. As stated earlier in this chapter, it is problematic when curricula include or discuss topics pertaining to minorities only at a specific period (cultural events and festivals) and then completely ignore or eschew more pressing and critical conversations that pertain to their sense of belonging and well-being as religious minorities for the rest of the year (Farago et al., 2015). With this in mind, I bring forth some of the recommendations that emerged from a synthesis of the findings:

- Include in the classroom curriculum diversity-oriented resources representing the Muslim body, such as books containing images of Muslim children and families.

- Create opportunities for Muslim children and families to be curricular-informants (Harste & Manning, 2001) such they are part of the institutional, programmatic, and classroom
curricular development processes. Further, educators may learn from and with families and children and their ways of being and doing, so that their funds of knowledge might be part of the classroom curriculum in on an ongoing basis.

- All levels of curricula should plan for anti-racist pedagogies and the countering of Islamophobia. Moreover, children, educators, families, and the like must have opportunities to learn about and from the funds of knowledge and ontologies that make up the diversity of peoples living in Canada.

- A curriculum of/for families and educators can be offered in parallel to the programmatic early childhood education curriculum such that schools host informal events that allow educators and families to engage in open conversations and interactions and create connections and understandings.

- Offer compulsory curricula that focus on Islamophobia as part of pre-service teacher education program and continuous education for in-service teachers. These curricula should focus on anti-racist pedagogies with anti-Islamophobia woven within. The curricula should aim to problematize race and racism while moving away from multicultural ideologies and colorblindness. Educators must be invited to think critically about the complex relationships between education, diversity, equity, inclusion.

5.3.2 Recommendations for early childhood education directed towards anti-Islamophobia

Some of the mothers in this study perceived that educators lack knowledge pertaining to Muslim families and cultures and lack awareness of the impacts of Islamophobia on Muslim families. This lack of knowledge and null curriculum breeds and sustains Islamophobia in early childhood education. The responsibility to help dismantle Islamophobic narratives and stereotypes that stem from media fall on education and educators and not the Muslim family or children. Educators further have the responsibility to create a safe space for children and families where they feel a sense of belonging. Below are recommendations that are adopted from Ahmed (2021) on ways that curricula and educators can create opportunities to counteract Islamophobia:
• Educators need to examine and reflect on their own biases and those of the curricula about Muslims and Islam: Ríos (2018) says that racist ideas have been part of our collective consciousness as a society for a long time. Similarly, the association between Islam/Muslims and terrorism has been very strong in popular media. Questions must be asked of curricula and educators about stereotypes, Islam, and Muslims.

• Muslims are diverse and plural: every aspect of early childhood education, from educators and policy to curricula must promote understanding of the diversity and plurality of Muslims. The Muslim population makes up about 24% of the world’s population, or about 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide (Lipka, 2015). Muslims are “as diverse as humanity itself” (Gregorian, 2011, p. 2). Muslim cultures, beliefs, opinions, thoughts, experiences, educational backgrounds, cuisines, dress codes, and so on, vary greatly (Lipka, 2015). Conscious or unconscious general remarks about Muslims can lead to discrimination and negative stereotypes. The culture and practices of Muslims can lead immensely among individuals and families.

• Early childhood education needs to identify and challenge the colonial narrative. The field might review textbooks or classroom curriculum materials (e.g., articles, videos, poetry, literacy books, etc.) for negative stereotypes of Muslims. Abukhattala (2004) searched Canadian textbooks and found that “their portrayal of Islam contains erroneous factual claims, questionable assertions and omissions that reinforce negative stereotypes” (p. 164). Educators might ask questions of curricular constituents like: “How do you think the way Muslims are portrayed in this text shapes our perception of Muslims in the world? How are Muslims dehumanized or “Othered,” or undermined in this portrayal? Who is benefiting from negatively stereotyping Muslims?” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 34).

• Educators and curricula need to offer children alternative and counter narratives of Muslims: The single story narrative of Muslims in different mainstream media perpetuates prejudice. Educators can show alternative and counter narratives and positive images of Muslims and Islam so that negative stereotypes are broken down, and positive ones are cultivated. Furthermore, knowledge of Muslims and their contributions may act as a healthy barrier against fear, racism, and discrimination. Additionally, in Canada, Eurocentric knowledge continues to be the starting point for all sciences, social sciences, and literature in the curriculum (Dei et al., 2002; Guo, 2012). Children can benefit from
other worldviews and ways of knowing as they challenge the dominant Western paradigm and expand children’s horizons beyond that which is familiar to them (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998).

5.3.3 Recommendations for intentional anti-racist family engagement in early childhood education

Responding to the experiences of the Muslim mothers whom I interviewed during this research and drawing on my own experiences as a Muslim mother, I propose that creating more peace in this world is collective work, and educators play a significant role in it. To enact change, educators and families need to walk the path of growing comfortable with communicating with people who look, act, dress, and think differently from themselves. Educators need to hold a safe space for families to express their thoughts and feelings without having a prescribed goal that feeds the school’s agenda. Consequently, this two-way communication and attentiveness can become a great opportunity for both to learn with and from each other (Pushor, 2015).

As the literature indicates and the women in this study confirmed, the media play a role in presenting a negative image of a Muslim, which leads to the continuous mistreatment and suspicion of the Muslim body (Hogarth & Fletcher, 2018). According to Arshad et al. (2015), “57% of headlines containing the words Islam/Muslims were scored negatively [out of three categories, positive, neutral, negative]. Only 8% of the headlines were scored positively” (p. 3). Consequently, it is not surprising that the mothers in this study mentioned media as one factor contributing to Islamophobia. In addition, Razack (2008) and Sheth (2009) have reminded us that the narratives of Muslims are often wrapped up with the notions of being uncivilized, which helps to justify racist actions against them.

As my first recommendation, I propose the need for educators to be intentional when engaging with Muslim families while enacting anti-racist pedagogies. In the case of this dissertation, this means a critical engagement in understanding Islamophobia and working towards dismantling it in parent/school interactions, lived curricula, and within the educator. Anti-racist pedagogies complexify the political inequalities and entanglement in Canadian and international contexts. Through anti-racist pedagogies, educators will gain a deeper understanding of Islamophobia. The
active engagement of educators in anti-racist pedagogies and learning about Islamophobia will dismantle the notion that anyone who identifies as a Muslim is naturally violent and uncivilized. The word engagement is purposefully selected to signify “a conscious step away from the well-known and well-rehearsed story of parent involvement which is taken-for-granted on many school landscapes, a story of hierarchy in which parents are asked to serve the agenda of teachers and schools” (Pushor, 2015, p. 235). Pushor (2015) further explained that family engagement is a relationship between parents and educators that is “side-by-side and reciprocal” (p. 235). Anti-racist pedagogies and the pedagogies of walking alongside families go hand-in-hand with awakening educators’ consciousness of their own biases towards families from culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse backgrounds. On the one hand, anti-racist pedagogies invite educators to unpack the complexity of race and racism concerning social power and privileges (Dei, 1996). On the other hand, walking alongside families invites educators to take the time to come to know parents, to value and learn with and from parents (Pushor, 2015). The pedagogies of walking alongside families shift the Eurocentric ideology of an educational system based on a hierarchical and unidirectional relationship between educators and parents to one that values the input of both educators and parents (Pushor, 2015).

My second recommendation is for teacher education programs to mandate curricula that focuses on curriculum of parents (Pushor, 2011, 2013). The curriculum of parents is a curriculum that focuses on “the lives of the teacher, children, and the significant people in the child’s life, all [of whom] are central in and inform, the teaching and learning” (Pushor, 2013, p. 8). The aims and objectives of this course are to invite “teacher candidates to consciously engage with thinking and practices intended to shape their future work with parents and families” (Pushor, 2015, p. 238). This course needs to focus on partnering up with parents and families who come from culturally and religiously diverse backgrounds.

5.4 Implications for Future Research

The present study focused on exploring and understanding the perspective of Ontarian Muslim mothers in relation to their children’s education in the early years. Research that focuses on understanding and exploring the perspectives of Muslim mothers and families in general is much
needed due to the large gap in the literature in this area (Amjad, 2018; Saleh, 2021). Attention to anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside families and how these are situated in the early years’ classroom curriculum is worthy of exploring in future research. Also, more research is needed to examine the position of the educators and their conceptualization of anti-racist pedagogies and pedagogies of walking alongside families. Moreover, exploring the lived curriculum in teacher preparation programs is needed. Understanding how pre-service and in-service teachers are professionally developed regarding racism and parental engagement in education is undoubtedly significant.

5.5 Conclusion

This qualitative multiple case study was set out to explore and understand Muslim mothers’ perspectives and experiences in relation to their children’s education in Ontario early years’ classrooms. All mothers who participated in this research have expressed the importance of building partnerships with their child’s educator through regular communication and active engagement. No single study can do everything. While this research has listened to the perspectives of seven Muslim mothers and has highlighted several barriers that these mothers have faced in regard to their children’s education in Ontario and offered recommendations, there is still a lot more work to be done. Looking through the lens of pedagogies of walking alongside parents, schools maintain a schoolcentric approach (Lawson, 2003) to curriculum and pedagogy, in which schools tend to circumscribe what parental involvement in schools entails (Pushor, 2011).

To start breaking this ever-growing wall (Khattar et al., 2019) between Muslim families and educators, this research invites educators to begin looking ‘inwards’ (Pushor, 2011) and unpack their own “beliefs and assumptions and how they may be, consciously or unconsciously” (Pushor, 2015, p. 249) constructed. Pushor (2015) reminded educators that “‘caring for’ and ‘caring-about’ families requires humility and compassion… a deep sense of knowing the biases and stereotypes they may carry, and where their hearts are” (p. 249). The narrative of the Muslim body continues to be Othered and represented through the essentialist and orientalist lens
(Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009). The binary persists, placing Muslims on one side and non-Muslims on the other (Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009).

This research study shows that fear lingers between Muslim mothers and educators. Some of the mothers in this study expressed a sense of fear of being Othered and judged. Some mothers perceived that a lack of understanding and knowledge about the Muslim family in the Ontario classrooms remains. As many scholars have expressed, racial inequalities, among other inequities, are entrenched in the complex school system (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Sullivan, Artiles, & Hernandez-Saca, 2015). Ingrained in this complex school system are predominantly white and monolingual educators, although the student population is increasingly becoming more diverse and multilingual (Haworth, 2015). It might be challenging for educators to step out of their comfort zone. Nevertheless, they need to start looking ‘inwards’ and challenging their orientation and perceptions towards Muslim children and their families. In this regard, Delpit (1998) said,

We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment and that is not easy .... It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (p. 46-47)

To tap into the possibilities to dismantle the racial injustice and inequities in the educational system, both educators and parents need to act together. Schools need to move away from the schoolcentric (Lawson, 2003) interactions prescribed through 15-minute parent-teacher conferences and other schoolcentric (Lawson, 2003) opportunities for parental involvement. Instead, inviting parents into school spaces and walking alongside them, learning together and building on each other’s differences and strengths. When educators and parents come together and grow collectively, new possibilities and new ways of doing and being starts to emerge. The walls built will start to collapse, and fear of the Other will begin to be dismantled. I echo the words of Pushor (2012):

I look forward to the day when teachers’ understanding of their role as professional educators includes the notion of being in relationship with and working alongside parents and families, and their teacher education coursework provides them with opportunities to
develop the beliefs and practices that enable them to live out this notion of professionalism with confidence, capability, and a moral commitment to children and families. (p. 477)

I conclude by stating that the early childhood education field needs to (re)think anti-racist pedagogies and engagement with families, specifically Muslim families. This is by examining and reflecting on unconscious biases, assumptions, and judgements towards Muslims. Engaging and communicating with Muslim parents to understand and incorporate their funds of knowledge into classroom curricula can optimize a thriving environment where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

5.6 Epilogue: It is just the beginning

Four years ago, when I was writing the final chapter for my Master’s thesis (Ghannoum, 2017), I was shaken by the frightening news of a Quebec mosque shooting that resulted in six deaths and eight injuries (“Quebec City mosque shooting: six killed, eight wounded”, 2017). The motive was rooted in Islamophobia. As I was finalizing the last chapter of this dissertation, I was horrified by the news of the murder of a Muslim family in London Ontario: a white 20-year-old male targeted the Afzal family, a family of five, because of their faith (“Muslim family in Canada killed in ‘premediated’ truck attack”, 2021). This time, the murders were in my home city. Four of the family members were killed simply because they were Muslim. The sole surviving member of the family is a nine-year-old boy who will have to hear a story that no nine-year-old should ever have to hear. I am a Muslim. I have a family of five. That could have been my family. We could have been the victims. Islamophobia is real.

Grieving and feeling sick to my stomach, I was responsible for informing my children what had happened to the Afzal family. As we sat together discussing what had happened, tears rolled down my cheeks, and my heart was racing. My eight-year-old child asked, “But, why? Why would someone do that?” I knew that question was going to be asked. I paused for a moment, trying to collect my thoughts and calm my body down. My answer is pretty straightforward; it is because of hatred, which grows from a distorted sense of self-glorification when people believe
that they are inherently better, more civilized, and worthy of living. Those people can’t fathom that the Other has chosen not to be like them. Ignorance makes the person feel threatened by the Other’s choices. The hunger to dominate the Other and erase them becomes the drive. This is not new to Canada since this country was built on the destruction, elimination, assimilation, and genocide of Indigenous peoples (Barker, 2009; Lowman & Barker, 2015; Morgensen, 2011; Wolfe, 2006). A country that was founded on genocide cannot suddenly be a bastion of equity, inclusion, diversity, and peace. Baldwin et al. (2011) assert that “the normative vision of Canada as a white man’s country is still pervasive” (p. 4). Hatred, colonialism, and white supremacy are part of the essence of this nation.

When a single perspective dominates the narrative about a person, group of people, or places, it is easy for one story to become the only story (Adichie, 2009). In her TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story”, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argued, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (12:49). The single story told about Muslims becomes the catalyst for Islamophobia. Ahmed (2021) asserted that “much of the research involving Islam and Muslims make evident that Islam is the most misunderstood religion in the world” (p. 31). This study of Muslim mothers and education hopes to disrupt, challenge, and multiply the stories told about Muslims.

It is not enough for early childhood education to approach racism through the lens of colorblindness or with the belief that racism is not a concern in today’s society (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). Instead, as a start, educators need to consciously engage in (Husband, 2012) and embody anti-racist pedagogies. Engaging in such pedagogies becomes the wave that disrupts and interrupts (Verna & Apple, 2021) hate, racism, and white Eurocentric privilege in the world, communities, educational systems, curricula, and parent-teacher encounters. Verna and Apple (2021) put it beautifully:

[E]ducational institutions, processes, and movements are not after-thoughts in social transformation. They are not simply reflections of that abstraction called ‘the larger society’ that has no power until the larger society changes. Instead, educational institutions and processes are key sites in struggles over employment, the power of the
state, identity, memory, what and whose knowledge is to be counted as important, what values the institution and its people represent, and so much more… But this does not happen automatically. It requires creative and real efforts in our daily lives in schools and in other cultural arenas and communities (p. 225).

This dissertation invites its readers to disrupt hate (Verna & Apple, 2021) and racism through love (hooks, 2011) and connection. hooks (2011) explains that love is the ingredient needed to disrupt social injustice in today’s world. This dissertation is an endeavour of love that came together through connections, confusions, and complexities. As hooks (2011) writes, “Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us. This is the heart of the matter” (p. 103). As Baldwin’s (1963) assertion of the power of love, he writes, “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within” (p. 109).

Through love, I suggested that educators and parents work hand in hand to disrupt hate and racism in our schools and communities. This dissertation is an invitation to educators and parents to open their minds and hearts, to dare to grow through walking alongside each other. My aim is for early childhood educators to utilize the stories and information shared in this dissertation to disrupt and challenge the single story of the Muslim body. Elbih (2021) reminds us that “[t]eachers are given a unique opportunity in our society. Their classrooms bring together unique groups of students that might otherwise never spend time together” (p. 52). This dissertation is just the beginning. Much more research needs to be done to disrupt Islamophobia in Ontario and beyond.
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Admissions.


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Appendix A

Date: 22 August 2019
To Dr. Rachel Heydon

Project ID: 114360

Study Title: (Re)Thinking Anti-Racist Pedagogy: The Voices of Muslim Mothers and Early Years Educators

Short Title: (Re)Thinking Anti-Racist Pedagogy

Application Type: NMREB Initial Application

Review Type: Delegated

Full Board Reporting Date: 06/Sep/2019

Date Approval Issued: 22/Aug/2019 17:33

REB Approval Expiry Date: 22/Aug/2020

Dear Dr. Rachel Heydon

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

Documents Approved:

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No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCP2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Katelyn Harris, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).
Appendix B

Are you interested in sharing your view and experience about your child’s education in Ontario?

1. Are you a Muslim Mother who lives in Ontario, Canada?
2. Do you have a child/children who are between the age of 4-8?
3. Would like to share your experience about your child’s education?

Amazing! DM me or email me at [________] for more information

Take a screenshot of the next story and share it on your page if you think someone might be interested.

Make sure you tag me [________] or email me at [________] for more information.
Appendix C

Letter of Information and Consent

Project Title
(Re)Thinking Anti-Racist Pedagogy: The Voices of Muslim Mothers and Early Years’ Educators

Document Title
Letter of Information and Consent – Muslim mother

Principal Investigator
Dr. Rachel Heydon, PhD, Education.
Western University.

Co-Investigator
Hanaa Ghannoum, PhD Candidate, Education
Western University.

Invitation to Participate
You are being invited to participate in this research study about kindergarten educators and their conceptualization of race and racism and about Muslim mothers’ experiences and perspectives on their child/children’s education. You are being invited because you are a Muslim mother who has a child or children that are between the ages of 4 and 8 and live in Ontario, Canada. Please note that participating in this project is voluntary and all your information and data will be kept confidential.

Why is this study being done?
To listen to the voices of Muslim mothers and their experiences and perspectives on their child/children’s education in Ontario. The reason why I am focusing specifically on Muslim mothers is to address the current gap that exists in the literature with regards to the voices of Muslims amid troubling times (Islamophobia). There is a call in the literature that seeks to listen to the voices of Muslim mothers and their experiences with race and racism in Ontario.
The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are Muslim’s mothers’ conceptualizations of race and racism and how do they understand these to be related (or not) to their families’ interactions with schools?
collected will be stored electronically. Only the Principal Investigator and the Co-Investigator will have access to the data collected. Data collected that contains identifiable information such as the Signed Letter of Information and Consent forms will be kept in a locked bag while they are in transit from the study site with the Co-Investigator. Audio Recordings collected at the interviews will be kept securely on Owl Sakai. After transcribing the audio recordings, the transcripts will be stored securely on OWL Sakai. All transcripts will be given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Seven years following data collection, the digital data including the audio files and the electronic format of the transcripts stored on OWL Sakai will be deleted.

Please note that representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to the study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. In addition, although all information collected during this study will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside the study, we may need to report data collected if required by law. The Co-Investigator will keep any personal information about you, particularly, the Signed Letter of Information and Consent Form in a password protected file on their hard drive for seven years. The researcher might wish to use full quotations from the interviews to offer the readers a clear picture of participants experiences; however, your name will not be used instead it will be replaced with a pseudonyms.

Are participants compensated to be in this study?

You will be offered a $10 Starbucks gift card for your participation in this study. If you withdraw from the study after the interview and do not wish to reply to the follow-up email, you will still be provided with the incentive.

What are the rights of participants?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on your employment status. We will give you new information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study. You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form.

Whom do participants contact for questions?

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact:

**Principal Investigator:**
Rachel Heydon, Ph. D.
Professor
Faculty of Education, Western University
Email address: [redacted]
Telephone number: [redacted]

Co-Investigator:
Hanaa Ghannoum, Ph. D. Candidate
Faculty of Education, Western University
Email address: [redacted]
Telephone number: [redacted]

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics [redacted] email: [redacted]

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.
Consent Form

Project Title
(Re)Thinking Anti-Racist Pedagogy: The Voices of Muslim Mothers and Early Years’ Educators

Document Title
Letter of Information and Consent – Muslim mother

Principal Investigator
Rachel Heydon, Ph. D.
Faculty of Education, Western University
Email address: [Redacted]
Telephone number: [Redacted]

Co-Investigator
Hanaa Ghannoum, PhD Candidate, Education
Western University
Email address: [Redacted]

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research

☐ YES ☐ NO

Print Name of Participant  Signature  Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

Hanaa
Print Name of Person Obtaining Consent  Signature  Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

03-02-2020

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Appendix D

Recruitment Questioner

These questions will help me in recruiting participants that best suit this study.

Please answer the following questions:

1. I identify as a Muslim mother □ YES □ NO

2. I am living in Ontario □ YES □ NO

3. I am comfortable conducting this interview in English □ YES □ NO

Thank you!
Appendix E

Interview Guide: Muslim mothers

The interview with the mothers are designed to be semi-structured. The following categories will guide the interview session and the questions are just examples.

1. Background understanding
   e.g. How many children do you have?
   What are the ages of your children?
   Living location (Urban or rural)
   Family structure (single, married, or long distance)
   History of coming to Canada
   What is your highest level of education? Field?
   What is your work status?

2. Children's education
   e.g. Tell me about your child/children’s education.
   Tell me the story about who decided what type of education is best for your children.
   Tell me the story behind choosing an alternative type of education for your child/children (if applicable).
   How do you feel about the public school system in Ontario?
   Do you face any challenges or barriers in regards to your child’s education?

3. Mother’s conceptualization of education/schooling
   e.g. tell more about what does education mean to you?
   What does schools mean to you?

4. Mother’s relationship with schools in Ontario
   e.g. Tell me about your understanding of home-school relationship.
   Tell me about your experience with communicating with your child’s school.
   Tell me about your relationship with your child’s teacher.
   What would strengthen your relationship with your child’s teacher?
   What would strengthen your relationship with your child’s school?
   What would make you feel welcomed?
   Tell me about your challenges when communicating with your child’s teacher/school.
   How does your child feel about school?

5. Muslim mother’s identity
   e.g. do you identify as a visible minority, tell me about it?
   What does it mean to be a Muslim mother?
What is your definition of racism?
How do you think racism can be prevented in education settings?
Tell me about your experience as a Muslim mother in relations to your child’s education.
Tell me about your understanding of Islamophobia.
Do you feel that Islamophobia exists in your child’s educational setting? Tell me more about that?

6. Reflections
   e.g. why did you participate in this study?

7. Additional questions and comments
   e.g. The participant is welcome to add anything that they think is relevant to the research.
Curriculum Vitae

Name: Hanaa Ghannoum

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:
- Conestoga College, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada
  2004-2006 Diploma
- University of Waterloo
  Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
  2007-2010 B.A.
- University of Western London, Ontario, Canada
  2015-2017 M.A.
- University of Western London, Ontario, Canada
  2017-2021 Ph.D.

Honours and Awards:
- AER Graduate Scholarship for Literacy Studies in Education
  2015-2016, 2016-2017
- Joan Pedersen Memorial Award
  2017
- Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), Western University
  2019-2020

Related Work Experience:
- Teaching Assistant
  University of Western
  2020
- College Instructor
  Fanshawe College
  2019
- Kindergarten Teacher
  Emirates National School
  2008-2014

Publications:
