Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies
Vol. 12, no. 2 (2022), pp. 369-392, doi : 10.18326/ijims.v12i2.369-392

Conceptualizing Muslim identity in the US, post-9/11

Maretha Dellarosa
The Ohio State University, Columbus, USA
E-mail: dellarosa.1@osu.edu

DOI:10.18326/ijims.v12i2. 369-392

Abstract

This article examines the conception of Muslim identity by Muslim teachers in the broader Islamophobic American social environment and the ways they support young Muslim children. To answer these questions, this article employs a qualitative case study by observing and interviewing Muslim teachers who teach kindergarteners in a Sunday school program. Drawing on identity, social identity, and intersectionality as theoretical frameworks, the findings from this study demonstrate that the interpretation of good Muslim and Islamic principles serve as an instrument to conceptualize Muslim teachers' identity.

Artikel ini mengkaji konsepsi identitas Muslim oleh para guru Muslim di lingkungan sosial Islamofobik Amerika yang lebih luas dan cara mereka mendukung anak-anak muda Muslim. Untuk menjawab pertanyaan-pertanyaan tersebut, artikel ini menggunakan studi kasus kualitatif dengan mengamati dan mewawancarai guru-guru Muslim yang mengajar anak-anak TK dalam program sekolah minggu. Dengan mengacu pada identitas, identitas sosial, dan interseksionalitas sebagai kerangka teoritis, temuan dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa interpretasi tentang prinsip-prinsip Islam dan menjadi Muslim yang baik berfungsi sebagai instrumen untuk mengkonseptualisasikan identitas guru Muslim.

Keywords: *Islamophobia; Religious identity; Muslims; Young Children; Teacher*

Introduction

"You cannot blame in term of the religion, all of religions is good...but basically it is more of propaganda, propaganda from the news..." according to Ms. Sarah's response, a Muslim teacher, when asked about the effect of 9/11 on her life and, specifically, how society discriminated against Muslims because of their religious identity that has been associated with terrorism and how such pressure still exists even nowadays. Many scholars, including those in the educational field, have been analyzing the global environment after the attack on the World Trade Centers on September 11th, 2001. People, on average, were not afraid of terrorists and terrorism prior to 9/11, even if they knew of their existence. Nevertheless, these days those terminologies and the concepts they represent are commonly discussed in various circumstances, including the academic settings[1].

Even though the quality of education on Islam could vary widely from state to state, research indicates that Islam is misrepresented in the US curriculum[2] resulting in the perpetuation of fear and discrimination[3]. For instance, the terms Islam and Muslim are associated with violence[4]. Muslims are recognized as only Arabs from Middle East[5]. In fact, not all

[1]Elora Halim Chowdhury, "Reading Hamid, Reading Coates: Juxtaposing Anti-Muslim and Anti-Black Racism in Current Times", *Feminist Formations*, Volume 30, Number 3 (2018), 63-78.

[2]Randa Elbih, "Teaching about Islam and Muslims While Countering Cultural Misrepresentations", *Social Studies*, Volume 106, Number 3 (2015), 112–116.

[3]Rod Gardner, Yasemin Karakaşoğlus, Sigrid Luchtenberg, "Islamophobia in the media: a response from multicultural education", *Intercultural Education*, Volume 19, Number 2 (2008), 119–136.

[4]Kazi Hossain, "Islamophobia: What Teachers Can Do to Reduce It in the Classroom", *Multicultural Education*, Volume 25, Number 1 (2017), 35–40.

[5]Özlem Sensoy, "Beyond Fearing the Savage: Responding to Islamophobia in the Classroom", in Ross EW (ed.), *Social Studies Curriculum, The, Fourth Edition: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities*, 4th edition, Albany: SUNY Press, 2014.

Muslims are Arabs[6]. Sensoy[7] argues that the complex conversation around identity should be engaged with students. This raises questions how Muslim teachers in Sunday school conceptualize their religious identity within a broader Islamophobic social environment and what classroom practices teachers emphasize to validate students' cultural well-being as a Muslim. I address these questions by observing and interviewing Muslim teachers who teach Islamic Studies and Quranic Studies to kindergarteners in Kautsar Mosque. Through analysis of observation and interviews with Muslim teachers, I argue that how Muslim teachers understand their religious identity shapes how they understand interlocking system of inequality, including Islamophobia.

This study draws upon multiple theories to examine the research question including identity theory, social identity theory, and intersectionality. The focus of the identity theory is how and by whom a certain identity is to be recognized[8]. For instance, a person can be recognized by society through four processes: nature-identity (a state), institution-identity (a position), discourse-identity (an individual trait), and affinity-identity (experiences)[9]. In the present study, Muslim teachers are an example of religious identity that is recognized through affinity-identity. Bringing discussion to another lens, "social identity theory helps understand how American Muslims, as a religious minority, respond to their low status as a group by reaffirming their Muslim identity."[10] Furthermore, the religious identity also intersects

[6]Alison Kysia "*Rethinking Schools* Rethinking Islamophobia", Available at: https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/rethinking-islamophobia/ (accessed 7 December 2020), (2017).

[7]Özlem Sensoy, "Beyond Fearing the Savage: Responding to Islamophobia in the Classroom", in Ross EW (ed.), *Social Studies Curriculum, The, Fourth Edition: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities*, 4th edition, Albany: SUNY Press, 2014.

[8]James Paul Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory & Method,* 1st edition, London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

[9]James Paul Gee, "Chapter 3: Identity as an Analytic Lens for Research in Education", *Review of Research in Education*, Volume 25, Number 1 (2000), 99–125.

[10]Danielle Zimmerman, "Young Muslim women in the United States: identities at the

with other social identities such as race and gender that may contribute to system of oppression[11]. Having an understanding how religious identity relates to other identities is crucial because[12]

> Each form of oppression has distinctive qualities and historical/social legacies that distinguish it from other forms of oppression, ... learning about the specific legacies and historical trajectories of different groups is critical for understanding the specific ways different forms of oppression operate.

The way Muslim teachers understand their religious identity influences how they understand the interlocking system of inequality, including Islamophobia. Adams, Bell, and Griffin[13] explain, "the more we know about the historical experiences and perspectives of diverse peoples, the more we are able to understand the interlocking systems that produce inequality." As such, understanding teachers' identity as Muslim and being able to identify their experience related to Islamophobia guide them to validate students' cultural well-being as a Muslim.

Islamophobia in the present day

Islamophobia is a form of racism and cultural intolerance toward Islam and Muslims.[14] Since the aftermath of the World Trade Center bombing in 2001, there has been an increased number of terror attacks.[15] The rise in

intersection of group membership and multiple individualities", *Social Identities*, Volume 20, Number 4–5 (2014), 299–313.

[11]Anna Carastathis, "The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory", *Philosophy Compass*, Volume 9, Number 5 (2014), 304–314.

[12]Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, Diane J Goodman, Khyati Y Joshi, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, Third edition, New York: Routledge, 2016, 25-50.

[13]Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, Diane J Goodman, Khyati Y Joshi, *Teaching for Diversity...*, 25-50.

[14]Farah Elahi, Omar Khan, "1 Introduction: What is Islamophobia? 12", in Elahi F and Khan O (ed.), *Islamophobia. Still a challenge to us all,* London: Runnymede Trust, 2017, 5-12.

[15]Kim Sadique, James Tangen, Anna Perowne , *The Importance of Narrative in Responding to Hate Incidents Following 'Trigger' Events*, UK: Leicester, 2018.

religious extremism has also led to an increase in crimes against the Muslim population in the US, which grew more than 50 percent from 2014 to 2015 and reached 91 percent at the beginning of 2017.[16] Arguably, 9/11 has raised negative tension for Muslims, which is referred to as Islamophobia. Wright[17] emphasizes the need to "trace and interpret the persistence of certain themes and tropes within American representations of Islam," which requires deeper analysis of terminologies, such as Islamophobia since it affects not only Muslims but also those who are Muslim-looking.

Both conservatives and extremists believe that Islam is a religion that raises concern about terrorism. Conservative political talk is more focused on Muslim extremism in ways that moderate , liberal media may not be. As a consequence, there have been a number of crimes committed against those who are Muslims and Muslim-looking due to their religious identity and appearance in various circumstances. For instance, Islamophobia has been affecting non-Muslim groups such as Sikh Americans. I present Sikh groups to demonstrate that violence towards Muslims is often racially motivated. Both Sikh children and adults have experienced discrimination, with their places of worship being sabotaged.[18] People have mistaken the Sikh's appearance for Muslims due to the traditional turban that they wear and the darker skin that they pose.[19]

Islamophobia remains prominent in American society and has entered a new phase in public discourse that perpetuates a fear of Islam and

[16]Alison Kysia "*Rethinking Schools* Rethinking Islamophobia", Available at: https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/rethinking-islamophobia/ (accessed 7 December 2020), (2017).

[17]Stephanie Wright, "Reproducing Fear: Islamophobia in the United States", in Pratt D and Woodlock R (ed.) *Fear of Muslims?* Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016.

[18]Haya El Nasser, "Sikh Americans are not Muslims, but they still suffer from Islamophobia" Available at: http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/12/29/sikh-americans-not-muslims-but-suffer-islamophobia.html (accessed 11 December 2020).

[19]Moni Basu, "15 Years after 9/11 Sikhs still victims of anti-Muslim hate crimes", Available at: www.cnn.com/2016/09/15/us/sikh-hate-crime-victims/index.html (accessed 11 December 2020), (2012).

targeting specific to Muslim and Muslim-looking groups. A policy called Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, issued in January 2017, targeted certain Muslim countries for entering the US and has made obvious that certain policies could permeate the atmosphere of hate toward Muslims and view Islam as a national threat.[20] Even though the policy intends to ban Muslims from other countries, Muslims currently residing in the US have also been implicitly affected.

Inaccurate media portrayals of Islam

Elbih[21] explains that the fear of Islam is caused by the following reasons. Initially, he argues that there are several cultural misinterpretations about Islam and Muslims. Douglass and Dunn[22] states, "Stereotypes and misrepresentations of Islam have been deeply ingrained American culture." Moreover, they explain that there is a mutually informative relationship between classroom and popular media regarding the ways Islam and Muslims are discussed and understood, which lacks critical examination. Media, such as CNN, Fox, News, and MSNBC continually stimulate and maintain the fears associated with Islamophobia for their audiences[23]. Furthermore, educators tend to avoid dialogue about religion in the classroom because they believe there will be sanctions given by

[20]Dodik Ariyanto, "Multilayered Approach on Islamophobia: A Contribution Toward Developing a Sustainable and Strategic Response", in Amina Easat-Daas (ed.), *Toward a Counter-Islamophobia Toolkit: Drawing on Best Practices in the European Union,* US: The Carter Center, 2018, 83-87.

[21]Randa Elbih, "Teaching about Islam and Muslims While Countering Cultural Misrepresentations", *Social Studies*, Volume 106, Number 3 (2015), 112–116.

[22]Susan L. Douglass, Ross E. Dunn, "Interpreting Islam in American Schools", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 588, No. 1 (2003), 52–72.

[23]Kazi Hossain, "Islamophobia: What Teachers Can Do to Reduce It in the Classroom", *Multicultural Education*, Volume 25, Number 1 (2017), 35–40.

school administration or disapproval from parents and guardians[24]. As a consequence, Ramarajan and Runell explain that misinterpreted ideas about Islam are perpetuated because there is no factual information to counter the incorrect information about Islam and Muslims. Furthermore, they emphasize that the lack of action to counter incorrect information about Islam leads to overdramatizing conception of Muslims in media that raise the Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments and incidents. Indeed, Islamophobia affects Muslim students. Hossain[25] claims that besides social and emotional development of the Muslim students, Islamophobia affects their academic progress. Research reveals that young Muslim students in America face great pressure and are likely to encounter both discrimination and bullying because of their faith.[26] The present study aims to contribute to the body of literature by examining the conceptualization of religious identity construction and ways to validate students' cultural well-being.

I wanted to investigate and study how Muslim teachers in Sunday school conceptualize their religious identity within a broader Islamophobic social environment and what classroom practices they may use to validate students' cultural well-being as Muslims. I created a qualitative case study to interactively construct and analyze data. I bound my case with religious identity construction as the main analysis and Sunday school as substances of analysis to understand specific rather than a general case.[27]

This study took place in the kindergarten classroom, Kautsar Mosque (pseudonym name), a metropolitan area in the Midwest United States. In

[24]Dhaya Ramarajan, Marcella Runell, "Confronting Islamophobia in education", *Intercultural Education*, Volume 18, Number 2 (2007), 87–97.

[25]Kazi Hossain, "Islamophobia: What Teachers Can Do to Reduce It in the Classroom", *Multicultural Education*, Volume 25, Number 1 (2017), 35–40.

[26]Jessica Winegar, "4 Ways to Make Schools Safer for Muslim Students - Northwestern Now", Available at: https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2016/01/opinion-huffpo-safe-schools/ (accessed 7 December 2020), (2016).

[27]Gary Thomas, *How to Do Your Case Study*, Second edition, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015.

order to obtain information about the social, historical, and philosophical context of the Sunday school, I did search and expanded the information of the site[28] by browsing the Kautsar Mosque's website, particularly on the Sunday school, and asking teachers. The program was designed for pre-kindergarten – 12th grade. Students learned several subjects including Islamic Studies, *Quranic* Studies, *Quranic* reading, and other activities. The objective of this program was to provide foundational ideas about Allah (Swt.), The Quran, Prophet Muhammad (Saw.), Past Prophets, Pillars of Islam, Islamic values in life including respect, cleanliness, forgiveness, and the day of Judgment. Furthermore, the focus of the Sunday school program was to teach Halal and Haram food habits, life of prophets and *Sahabas* (referred to companion, family and friends of the Islamic prophet), battles Muslim fought, Science in the Quran, social issues such as dating in Islam, the choice made as a Muslim, and peer pressures.

The participants of this study were two experienced Muslim teachers, Ms. Sarah and Ms. Megan, who taught around 30 kindergarteners every Sunday from 1.30 pm to 4.30 pm with the help of two teacher assistants. Ms. Sarah and Ms. Megan have taught Islamic studies and *Quranic* studies to kindergarteners for more than ten years. In terms of teaching experiences, both of my participants had extensive teaching experience outside of just teaching in this Sunday school program. Ms. Sarah was originally from Asia. She taught accounting at college level back in her country. Since living in the US, she also taught young children in Islamic school on weekdays. Similarly, Ms. Megan did not only teach in Sunday school on weekends but also in the US Islamic school. Ms. Megan added that she pursued her bachelor degree in civil engineering back in the Middle East. Both teachers had passion in teaching about Islam that

[28]Jan Bloommaert, Dong Jie, *Ethnographic fieldwork: A Beginner's guide, Multilingual Matters*, Bristol, UK: Tilburg University, 2010.

guided them to nurture young Muslims who live in the US to learn about Islamic values. Additionally, the teachers taught three different subjects, including Islamic Studies, Quranic Studies, and Arabic. For the purpose of this study, I only observed teachers when they taught Islamic Studies and Quranic Studies because these two subjects covered the history of Islam and life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

Data was collected through video and audio recording of in-class interactions, documents, and semi-structured interviews. I spent three months in the kindergarten classroom. I observed Ms. Sarah and Ms. Megan from January 2020 to March 2020 every Sunday from 1.30 pm to 2.30 pm. For each meeting, Ms. Sarah taught Islamic studies for 30 minutes while Ms. Megan taught *Quranic* Studies another 30 minutes. I took fieldnotes during the observation that lasted around one hour. In the first week of February, I had a semi-structured interview with Ms. Sarah and had another interview with Ms. Megan in the following week. The interview lasted around one hour for each participant. I audiotaped and transcribed the interview. I had additional interviews with them and asked follow-up questions when needed. Furthermore, starting in late March 2020 I postponed my classroom observation due to the COVID-19. Ms. Sarah informed me that there would be no Sunday school until further notice. Thus, in April 2020, I collected data through online communication, including text message. I let my participants chose the media that worked best for them because they might encounter difficult situations during the pandemic. The focus of collecting data through online communication was to clarify several points from the interview. Sometimes, it took several days to obtain their response. However, I was flexible because everyone encountered hard situations during the pandemic.

This study drew upon inductive analysis[29]. Dyson and Genishi explained

[29]Anne Haas Dyson, Celia Genishi, *On the Case: Approaches to Language and Literacy*

inductive analysis as "grounded in particular pieces of data that are sorted and interrelated in order to understand the dimensions and dynamics of some phenomenon as it is enacted by intentional social actors in some time and place." Thus, the data collected from observation, interview, and documentations were analyzed and reviewed in line with the research questions and compared with the relevant literature. After I completed the data, I coded the fieldnotes and transcribed interviews with several relevant themes. To gain validity in this study, I utilized triangulation and member check[30]. For instance, the results of observation and interview were examined in line with other documentations and fieldnotes. After writing the result of my observation and interview, I reported my data to the teacher to verify my observation and interview if there was any false information.

Scholars who are conducting qualitative research acknowledge that they have a subjective position as researchers and roles in constructing data.[31] My identity as a non-Muslim researcher influenced the portion of my understanding about Islam. For instance, I asked Ms. Sarah and Ms. Megan to define several terminologies in Islam and to check the spelling of Arabic words because some of them were new terminologies for me. I also acknowledged that during observation, Ms. Sarah seemed to question my understanding of her explanation. She said that I might not be familiar with the terminologies that she mentioned. However, both Ms. Sarah and Ms. Megan were helpful to explain the unfamiliar terminologies to me. My position in this study was as an observer, who looked at how Muslim

Research, Approaches to language and literacy research, New York: Teachers College Press/NCRLL, 2005, 1-18.

[30]Michael Quinn Patton, "Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis", *Health Services Research*, Volume 34, Number 5 Pt 2 (1999), 1189–1208.

[31]Shirley Brice Heath, Brian V. Street, On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research, Approaches to language and literacy research. New York: Teachers College Press : NCRLL/National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy, 2008.

teachers conceptualize their religious identity and how they helped their students to understand Islam.

Conceptualizing Muslim identity: a good Muslim = a good person

I had the first interview with Ms. Sarah on February 2nd, 2020 that took place in kindergarten classroom on the first floor. The interview with Ms. Sarah revealed that as a Muslim, a person must follow the five pillars of Islam: *Shahada*: Muslims witness that there is one God, Allah, and Muhhammad is the messenger of Allah. Ms. Sarah said, "We declare that we believe in Allah;" *Salah*: Muslims pray five times a day; Fasting: Do not eat or drink during Ramadan; Zakat: obligatory payment made annually under Islamic law; and Hajj: The Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca that takes place in the last month of the year, and that all Muslims are expected to make at least once during their lifetime.[32]

In order to provide relevant definitions, I was able to do a member check with Ms. Sarah in early March 2020. I clarified several points including the spelling, the concepts of five pillars, and the answer that she gave during the first interview. I brought two copies of the interview transcript and gave her one copy. I prepared my notes to ask several points that I wanted to clarify. I started the analysis by referring to the point where I needed more clarification. The discussion took longer when we talked about the definition of good Muslims because she gave very detailed answers. She explained to me that a good Muslim is a good person who has good morals.

> "... you believe that you have *iman* (faith) so I think a good Muslim is that ... you have good *akhlak* (morals) and you know how you interact with neighbor how you interact with family something like that I thing these are the best things that we can do as a good Muslim...".[33]

[32]Fieldnotes (16Feb20FN)

[33]Interview (2Feb20TranscriptInterviewSarah, line 17-24)

She kept telling me that the five pillars were a foundation for Muslim, signaling how pivotal these pillars for them. Besides, Ms. Sarah explained that Muslims believed in the pillars of Faith: *Shahada,* Angels, Books: Quran, Prophet, The day of Judgment, *Qadar* (fate).[34]

The way Ms. Sarah defined a good Muslim as one who speaks to the issue of religious identity construction within the Islamophobic social environment. Ms. Sarah defined a good Muslim as a good person according to the principles of Islam by relating to the five pillars. She acknowledged that there was pressure in society on being a Muslim due to the appearance. For instance, people might look at Muslims as part of a religion that was associated with terror from the Islamic dress code like hijab. Nevertheless, she responded to what happened to Muslims positively by relating what they experienced to the Islamic tenets.

The two pillars, pillars of Islam and pillars of Faith, have become a foundation for Muslims to behave and respond to what happened to them. According to Ms. Sarah, Shahada was one of the most important pillars and listed in the first of components of both pillars. Interestingly, Ms. Sarah did not only explain what it meant to be a good Muslim but also gave a specific example from her life experience. Going back in 1995, Ms. Sarah told me the moment when she came for the first time in the US. She had a Muslim community and a house to pray together. One day, unknown people burned that house. Responding to such an incident, it can be seen from line 94 to 96 (interview script below) that she acknowledged what happened to her as a blessing.

> "Yeah but at that time of course we sad and then we just basically the community was just we focus about it ok this happen this happen that's fine and you know…"[35]

[34]Fieldnotes (16Feb20FN)

[35]Interview (2Feb20TranscriptInterviewSarah, line 94 - 96)

Moving to the previous questions, I asked her whether people burnt the house because it relates to religion.

Maretha : Did you see it because of religious...?

Ms. Sarah: we believe so but we didn't highlighted whether the police catch the
one who did it ..., we don't know so and then *Alhamdulillah*
after that we can build the masjid (mosque), I mean the community, it's not that
big but *Alhamdulillah* you know it's better, it's bigger you know better than
before. So that's why we just think that as a Muslim basically we think that everything happen is the blessing or *hikmah* behind it.[36]

As a Muslim, Ms. Sarah believed that if something bad happened, there would be a blessing behind it. The concept of blessing behind something negative happened could be a complex analysis because people had different perspectives in responding to specific events. Nevertheless, religious people, like Ms. Sarah, tended to view events positively even when they encountered difficulties. Ms. Sarah told me that such difficulties were signals, could be positive or negative, from God of what they had been doing. The signals indicated that people had to return to God's words. Additionally, Ms. Sarah believed that God would give a better house for the community when the initial house was burned. Even though I was not the one who was involved in the tragedy, listening to the tragic story of the burning house was really painful to me. I could imagine how much effort people put to build the house. All of the sudden, people came and burnt it. Everything was gone in a second.

Ms. Megan

I also gained the similar definition of being a good Muslim according to Ms. Megan, who taught *Quranic* studies to kindergarteners every Sunday

[36]Interview (2Feb20TranscriptInterviewSarah, line 66 – 74)

from 01.30 PM to 02.00 PM. She guides students to recite several verses in the Quran and sometimes translate the words from Arabic to English.

I met Ms. Megan during the first time I observed the classroom. I saw her sitting on a chair, getting ready to teach the Quran. She greeted me and asked if I was a student. I explained to her that I was conducting research about Muslim identity. She responded to me by saying "Masyaallah.[1]" Then, the conversation continued with the back-and-forth questions between us. For instance, I asked her how she learnt Arabic. She explained to me that it was her original language. She spoke Arabic and it encouraged her to teach the Quran in Sunday school. I explained to her my study and started inviting her to be my participant. She said, "yes, I am willing to participate."

I also invited her for an interview, which she agreed to have in early February. Before the interview started, I remember that Ms. Megan apologized for her English. I responded that it was totally fine. Ms. Megan explained what a good Muslim was according to her.

> *Good Muslim, actually... as a person right, a human, is a good Muslim that's a good a good person, have a good relationship between where anyone around you at work at home with your neighbor anyone anywhere. Good Muslim good person.*[37]

The interview with Ms. Megan lasted about 30 minutes. The biggest challenge during the interview was how to keep the conversation going. Even though I prepared a handout consisting of questions, I did not strictly follow them. The handout served as a guideline for me. The main reason was because I did not want to limit my participants' answers. Instead, I wanted to give my participants more times to share what they want to share[38] and I was open to receive any responses from her. One crucial thing that I did during the interview was I asked follow- up questions to Ms.

[37]Interview (9Feb20InterviewMegan, line 74-78)

[38]Jan Blommaert, "Ethnography and democracy: Hymes's political theory of language", *Text & Talk*; Volume 29, Issue 3 (2009), 257-273.

Megan as one of ways to build a dialogue. People produce dialogue when there is mutual participation and recognition.[39] Thus, I tried to create a natural conversation by giving her more opportunity to talk.

However, I felt that languages had power between my participants and I. Ms. Megan spoke Arabic as her mother language and English as her second language. Similarly, English became my second language. When Ms. Megan apologized for her English, I implicitly felt the same way. I felt that there was a moment where I could not find specific words or phrases to describe what I wanted to say. Compared to Ms. Sarah who shared the first language with me, it was easier for Ms. Sarah and me to just switch the language from English to Bahasa (vice versa), for instance, when we were stuck using English to explain something. Talking about language in general, I did agree that, "As vehicle**,** language is considered the means by which we transmit what we know and think."[40] Nevertheless, I also encountered barriers in utilizing language to convey meanings.

The analysis revealed how Ms. Sarah and Ms. Megan's response fits into the conversation about their religious identity as part of a minority group. Understanding their identity as Muslims and women who wear hijab guides them to respond to their low social position[41] that encourage them to demonstrate a positive image of Muslims. Even though they may not have significant discriminative experience due their identity as Muslims, examining their personal and other people's experiences could bring their

[39]Helen Owton, Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson, "Close But Not Too Close: Friendship as Method(ology) in Ethnographic Research Encounters", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Volume 43, Number 3 (2014), 283–305.

[40]Shirley Brice Heath, Brian V. Street, *On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research, Approaches to language and literacy research*, New York: Teachers College Press, NCRLL/ National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy, 2008.

[41]Danielle Zimmerman, "Young Muslim women in the United States: identities at the intersection of group membership and multiple individualities", *Social Identities*, Volume 20, Number 4–5 (2014), 299–313.

awareness of issues around identity that may produce inequality.[42]

Supporting young Muslim children through classroom routines

Before the class started, students were invited to sing a song.

"... Allah is the one, Allah is the one. Allah is the mighty one..."[43]

This was a part of the lyrics that I heard from students who sang a song almost every week when I observed the kindergarten classroom. Students sang this song, as an instance of other songs, before starting the activity. Once students finished singing, they said Islamic greeting (*Assalamu'alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh*) as a whole class. Then Ms. Megan would guide students to review last week's lesson before reciting several verses in Quran. The reciting of several verses in Quran lasted for 30 minutes. Ms. Megan asked students what they remembered of the verses that they read last week then they repeated the verses before adding another verse to be recited. I saw that Ms. Megan only guided students verbally without giving any activity sheets that asked them to write. When I asked her why students only recited the Quran verbally, she explained that students were too young to write in a complete Arabic sentence. Thus, Ms. Megan argued that at their age level, they only needed to get familiar with the Arabic sounds by reciting the verses. Similarly, Ms. Sarah claimed that students might learn Islamic principles from the simple examples. I heard that Ms. Sarah said to Ms. Megan, "*ayat* (verses) may be hard to remember." During my observation on January 26th, 2020, Ms. Sarah said that reciting was the best way to at least introduce the *ayat*. Knowing that it was difficult for young children to remember *ayat*, sometimes Ms. Sarah asked Ms. Megan to do (recite) *ayat* one more time because sometimes students found it

[42]Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, Diane J Goodman, Khyati Y Joshi, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice,* Third edition, New York; Routledge, 2016, 25-50.

[43]Fieldnotes (February 16th, 2020)

difficult to recite specific verses.

In response to the Islamophobia, both Ms. Sarah and Ms. Megan told me that they never addressed specific topic related to the hate or intolerance toward Islam to their students. They argued that kindergarten students were too young too understand the concept of discrimination. Nevertheless, they tried to build a strong foundation to students as a Muslim by introducing the principles of Islam through simple examples. My interview with Ms. Sarah revealed that as a teacher, "you have to teach them that you have to be strong in our faith ..."[44] I interpreted it as part of building a strong foundation for Muslims from an early age. Students might learn the Islamic principles from basic to more complex, depending on their grade levels. Ms. Sarah gave an example when, for instance, her students were bullied due to the hijab that covered their head as part of their religious enactment. Ms. Sarah said,

> "I tell them that we are special we have our own! that we have to keep it ok that we have to follow it and we have to be proud of it I always encourage my children that we are special you know we are special everybody special really special don't worry about the other... They are (referring to students) special, ... for example they wear hijab ... while other do not wear hijab and then somebody is teasing them ... and I said it's ok".[45]

I asked Ms. Megan how she taught her students to be a good Muslim.

> **Ms. Megan:** teach them how to not throw the trash from table to another table and we cannot help anyone, any neighbor any friends with throwing the trash against him or under his table or if he cannot see me, Allah SWT will see them. I told them about the story. The woman when she was praying, fasting was doing like this. And she has one thing is symbol
> but it was she was happy to have neighbors. She throwing the ... trash

[44]Interview (February 16th, 2020)
[45]Interview (2Feb20TranscriptInterviewSarah)

at their door so it is not acceptable in Islam[46].

I also asked Ms. Megan an example of how she taught her students to be a good Muslim. Ms. Megan relates Islamic values to the daily life.

> **Ms. Megan:** Good Muslim is not only praying or fasting. So you have to do what's right. If something hurt you, you have to thank and accept one another. Okay.[47]

Muslim teachers validate students' cultural well-being by emphasizing the tenets of Islam through classroom routine (sang a song, said Islamic greeting, and recited verses). My interpretation of the lyric emphasized that as Muslims, students needed to learn who Allah was and what principles did Allah teach to Muslims. Furthermore, students said Islamic greetings at the beginning of the class to welcome classmates. Finally, students learnt Arabic sounds by reciting verses every week with the guidance of their teachers. These activities were an example of how students learned to implement Islamic principle through classroom routines and how teachers supported young Muslim students in a Muslim community.

Conclusion

This paper explores religious identity construction and classroom practices to validate students' cultural well-being. Findings indicated that teachers conceptualize their religious identity within a broader Islamophobic social environment by defining what it meant to be a good Muslim and relating what they experience to Islamic principles. For instance, Ms. Sarah relates the definition of a good Muslim to a good person. A good Muslim is a person who understands both the five pillars of Islam and Faith embeds those values in daily life. Besides, Ms. Sarah and Ms. Megan define a good person as someone who has good morals in which she or he knows how

[46]Interview (9Feb20InterviewMegan, line 248 – 258)
[47]Interview (9Feb20InterviewMegan, line 269 – 271)

to respect family members and other people in his or her community. Furthermore, Muslim teachers develop their awareness of how and by whom their religious identity is to be acknowledged[48] by unpacking the "interconnected structures of inequality."[49] Their responses toward religious identity construction influence the way they understand discrimination toward Islam and Muslim. Ms. Sarah, especially, acknowledges that the hate toward Islam exists even nowadays and operates in various ways. Similarly, Ms. Megan admits that Muslims experience discrimination due to their religious identity. Nevertheless, both teachers view such negative experience positively by emphasizing that God's blessings go far beyond every circumstance, including discrimination that they experience. Such compassion guides them to be kind to other people including the oppressor.

In an educational setting, Muslim teachers validate students' cultural well-being as a Muslim through classroom routines. Ms. Sarah and Ms. Megan foster Islamic values to students through daily activities such as greeting other people whom students meet. Additionally, they engage students in a fun learning activity such as singing a song that describes the mighty God. Lastly, the teachers invite students to recite the Quran as one of ways to get familiar with verses. Though teachers do not address specific issues related to any discrimination toward Islam, the activities that teachers emphasized in Sunday school can be an example on how they infuse religious, specifically Islamic, values to young Muslim students. This finding also speaks to the objective of the Sunday school, as it provides foundational concept of Islam and its values implemented in daily life. Through their work, Ms. Sarah and Ms. Megan participate in critical tasks

[48]James Paul Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis...*

[49]Bonnie Thornton Dill, Ruth Enid Zambrana, "Critical thinking about inequality", in Dill BT, Zambrana RE, Collins P, et. al. (eds), *Emerging Intersections: Race, Class, and Gender in Theory, Policy, and Practice*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009, 1-19.

on how they prepare young Muslim children to enter in society.

For non-Muslim teachers, this study sheds light on the importance of understanding religious identity from the perspective of a minority group, Muslim. Sensoy[50] argues that teachers, regardless of their cultural or religious backgrounds, have to increase their consciousness of how their own identities inform the knowledge they obtain and present. It is expected that they can support their Muslim students to develop a more positive identity that will also influence students' academic achievement. Since Muslim teachers in this study exemplify teachers who teach Muslim students that have various cultural backgrounds, future research might explore how teachers deal with the complexity of Islamic principles validated by Muslims from various Muslim countries. Research reveals that there is lack of critical implementation on teaching the diversity of Muslim in the content about Islam taught in US education because not all Muslims are Arabs[51]. Thus, researchers need to examine how teachers deal with diverse Muslim population as it offers not only the uniqueness of content, values, and ideas but also the complexity of social worlds.[52]

Funding

I would like to extend my appreciation to the Indonesia endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) for supporting my doctoral study at the Ohio State University, U.S.A. I completed this article during my study.

[50]Özlem Sensoy, "Beyond Fearing the Savage: Responding to Islamophobia in the Classroom", in Ross EW (ed.) *Social Studies Curriculum…*

[51]Alison Kysia "*Rethinking Schools* Rethinking Islamophobia", Available at: https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/rethinking-islamophobia/ (accessed 7 December 2020), (2017).

[52]Natasha Hakimali Merchant, "Responses to Islam in the Classroom: A Case of Muslim Girls from Minority Communities of Interpretation", *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, Volume 18, Number 1 (2016), 183–199.

Bibliography

Adams, Maurianne, Lee Anne Bell, Diane J Goodman, Khyati Y Joshi. *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice.* Third edition. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Alison Kysia "*Rethinking Schools* Rethinking Islamophobia", Available at: https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/rethinking-islamophobia/ (accessed 7 December 2020), (2017).

Anna Carastathis, "The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory", *Philosophy Compass,* Volume 9, Number 5 (2014): 304–314.

Anne Haas Dyson, Celia Genishi. *On the Case: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research, Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York: Teachers College Press/NCRLL, 2005: 1-18.

Basu,Moni, "15 Years after 9/11 Sikhs still victims of anti-Muslim hate crimes", Available at: www.cnn.com/2016/09/15/us/sikh-hate-crime-victims/index.html (accessed 11 December 2020), (2012).

Blommaert, Jan. *Ethnography and democracy: Hymes's political theory of language*. Text & Talk; 2009, 257-273.

Bloommaert, Jan, Dong Jie. *Ethnographic fieldwork: A Beginner's guide, Multilingual Matters*. Bristol, UK: Tilburg Universiyty; 2010.

Bonnie Thornton Dill, Ruth Enid Zambrana, "Critical thinking about inequality", in Dill BT, Zambrana RE, Collins P, et. al. (ed), *Emerging Intersections: Race, Class, and Gender in Theory, Policy, and Practice*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009: 1-19.

Danielle Zimmerman, "Young Muslim women in the United States: identities at the intersection of group membership and multiple individualities", *Social Identities*, Volume 20, Number 4–5 (2014): 299–313.

Dhaya Ramarajan, Marcella Runell, "Confronting Islamophobia in education", *Intercultural Education,* Volume 18, Number 2 (2007):

87–97.

Dodik Ariyanto, "Multilayered Approach on Islamophobia: A Contribution Toward Developing a Sustainable and Strategic Response", in Amina Easat-Daas (ed.), *Toward a Counter-Islamophobia Toolkit: Drawing on Best Practices in the European Union*. US: The Carter Center, 2018: 83-87.

Douglass, Susan L., Ross E. Dunn, "Interpreting Islam in American Schools", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 588, No. 1 (2003): 52–72.

Elbih, Randa, "Teaching about Islam and Muslims While Countering Cultural Misrepresentations", *Social Studies*, Volume 106, Number 3 (2015): 112–116.

Elora Halim Chowdhury, "Reading Hamid, Reading Coates: Juxtaposing Anti-Muslim and Anti-Black Racism in Current Times", *Feminist Formations*, Volume 30, Number 3 (2018): 63-78.

Farah Elahi, Omar Khan, "1 Introduction: What is Islamophobia? 12", in Elahi F and Khan O (ed.). *Islamophobia Still a challenge to us all*. London: Runnymede Trust, 2017: 5-12.

Gardner, Rod, Yasemin Karakaşoğlus, Sigrid Luchtenberg, "Islamophobia in the media: a response from multicultural education", *Intercultural Education*, Volume 19, Number 2 (2008): 119–136.

Gary, Thomas. *How to Do Your Case Study*. Second edition. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015.

Gee, James Paul, "Chapter 3 : Identity as an Analytic Lens for Research in Education", *Review of Research in Education*, Volume 25, Number 1 (2000): 99–125.

Gee, James Paul. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory & Method*. 1st edition. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.Housee, Shirin, "What's the point? Anti-racism and students' voices against Islamophobia", *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Volume 15, Number 1

(2012): 101–120.

Haya El Nasser, "Sikh Americans are not Muslims, but they still suffer from Islamophobia" Available at: http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/12/29/sikh-americans-not-muslims-but-suffer-islamophobia.html (accessed 11 December 2020).

Heath, Shirley Brice, Brian V. Street. *On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research, Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York: Teachers College Press NCRLL/National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy, 2008.

Helen Owton, Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson, "Close But Not Too Close: Friendship as Method(ology) in Ethnographic Research Encounters", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Volume 43, Number 3 (2014): 283–305.

Hossain, Kazi, "Islamophobia: What Teachers Can Do to Reduce It in the Classroom", *Multicultural Education*, Volume 25, Number 1 (2017): 35–40.

Merchant, Natasha Hakimali, "Responses to Islam in the Classroom: A Case of Muslim Girls from Minority Communities of Interpretation", *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, Volume 18, Number 1 (2016): 183–199.

Patton, Michael Quinn, "Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis", *Health Services Research*, Volume 34, Number 5 Pt 2 (1999): 1189–1208.

Sadique, Kim, James Tangen, Anna Perowne . *The Importance of Narrative in Responding to Hate Incidents Following 'Trigger' Events*. UK: Leicester, 2018.

Sensoy, Özlem, "Beyond Fearing the Savage: Responding to Islamophobia in the Classroom", in Ross EW (ed.). *Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities*. 4th edition. Albany: SUNY Press, 2014.

Wright, Stephanie, "Reproducing Fear: Islamophobia in the United States", in Pratt D and Woodlock R (ed.) *Fear of Muslims?* Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016.

Winegar, Jessica, "4 Ways to Make Schools Safer for Muslim Students - Northwestern Now", Available at: https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2016/01/opinion-huffpo-safe-schools/ (accessed 7 December 2020), (2016).