FROM HEADPHONES TO HIJABS:
CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES OF
SOMALI YOUTH IN U.S. SCHOOLS

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Using data from a two year qualitative study, this paper examines how East African Muslim immigrant youth experience and become shaped by the environments of U.S. mainstream schools as compared to a culturally specific charter high school. Results from this study reveal that East African Muslim immigrant youth are affected by religious and cultural discrimination in mainstream schools, and that attending a culturally specific charter school actually promotes positive intercultural competence where students are able to build a good self-concept and find comfort in who they are as East African immigrants, as Muslims, and as American citizens.

BACKGROUND

"They come from a war and now they are facing a new war," said a Somali elder about Somali youths' experiences in British schools (Arthur, 2004, p. 225). Sadly, most of the studies of Somali immigrant youth and other Muslim immigrant youth in western schools support this claim. Jasmin Zine (2000) calls schools in Canada "alienating" and says Muslim adolescents are "confused" and "dissonant." Kaye Haw (1998) describes British schools as "unfriendly," and "intimidating" and finds Muslim students "segregated" and "silent." Merry (2005) portrays schools in Belgium as excluding their Muslim youth and finds these youth "ostracized" and discriminated against, while Sarroub (2002) paints the picture of Yemeni immigrants in the United States as "depressed," "desperate," and "living in ambiguity." Gilbert (2004) summarizes these perspectives about the failing relationship between western schools and Muslim students by stating that "schools and teachers maintain a powerful prejudicial discourse, immersed in unequal power relationships, where [Muslim] students are, at best, misunderstood, and, at worst, deliberately discriminated against" (p. 253). What lies behind this distressing and shameful consensus?

A place to start answering this important question surrounds the nature of how Muslim youth find themselves in direct conflict with the dominant status quo culture within western society and schools. While rapidly changing student demographics have

challenged the relevance and efficacy of long standing administrative, curricular, instructional and evaluative practices, many of which were developed for monocultural, homogeneous nation-states (Luke, 1995), schools in the West continue to be predominantly oriented toward students who are White and Christian (Ajrouch, 2004; Gilbert, 2004). Based on western values, western schools expect that all students be treated equally, that all children be given the same mainstream curricula, and that all students will behave and respond to schools' practices in the same way—regardless of culture, religion or gender (Ajrouch, 2004; Gilbert, 2004). In this way, schools become key sites for the production of culture in American society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997)—a place where White, Christian dominant cultures and values are transmitted, and where the freedom to express and practice a non-dominant religion, like Islam, is resisted (Ajrouch, 2004; Gilbert, 2004; Haw, 1998).

Many Muslim immigrant groups locate their primary identities in their religion (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002; Collet, 2007; Merry, 2005; Berns McGown, 1999; Shah, 2006). While understanding that Muslim youth practice Islam to varying degrees, religious traditions are often strongly reinforced by the parents in the home, and youth are often raised to practice Islam as a *comprehensive way of life* (Zine, 2000). By practicing an Islamic faith-centered lifestyle, certain practices are expected, for example adhering to religious dress (for girls), prayer time, and fasting during Ramadan.[1] In their desire to live the "straight path" in accordance with the literal rules of the Qur'an, Muslim youth are often portrayed in the literature as conflicted about the social norms and culture of schools in the West (Ajrouch, 2004; Gilbert, 2004; Haw, 1998; Merry, 2005; Zine, 2000, 2001, 2006, 2007). Muslim youth— East African or not, first generation or second, in the U.S. or elsewhere in the West—have been found to be in a precarious position, where conforming to Muslim cultural values constitutes a deviation from dominant cultural norms in the West, yet conforming to dominant cultural norms challenges eastern cultural values. Surrounded by religious discrimination and ignorance, and struggling to deal with the perceptions of their peers, teachers, family, community and dominant society, as well as their own perceptions of themselves, Muslim youth often feel forced to compromise their Islamic values when confronted daily by the pressures to assimilate to western cultural norms and expectations. These norms and expectations that play out in dominant societal discourses at work in mainstream schools often leave Muslim youth feeling misunderstood and marginalized. As a result, school adjustment continues to be one of the greatest challenges for Muslim youth.

Examining how the religious culture of East African Muslim immigrant youth affects their experiences in school, I situate this study within the broader theoretical discourse on the education of immigrant youth. First, by investigating students' experiences in

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[1] During the month of Ramadan, otherwise known as *Sawm*, Muslims are to fast from dawn to dusk, express their gratitude and nearness to God, be mindful of their sins, and think of the needy.

mainstream schools, this study draws upon assimilation theory, making the argument that mainstream schools in the U.S. are key sites where assimilation into the dominant culture is promoted and where it is assumed that we will all become "the same" (Alba & Nee, 2003). The participants of my study paint a picture of U.S. mainstream schools as places where in order to succeed academically and socially one must fully learn to assimilate to western popular culture—or in their words, "become Americanized." To become Americanized, a process for which American schools have long been held responsible (Olneck, 2004), immigrant youth must take part in a "subtractive assimilation" process (Cummins, 1986; Gibson 1993; Valenzuela, 1999). Due to a lack of reinforcement in schools, immigrant youth must give up their native language skills for an English-only curriculum and rid themselves of their native cultural identity in order to conform to American culture (i.e., American fashion and lifestyle).

Assimilation as a form of adaptation to one's host country has long been under critique by scholars who claim that the approach is not only ethnocentric and unsuccessful, but also produces economic and racial inequality (Gibson, 1988; Lee, 2005; Ogbu, 1991, 2001; Olsen, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; C. Suarez-Orozco & M. Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, assimilation theories are critiqued (see Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 2001) for not being able to capture the experience of a more culturally, racially, economically—and I would add—religiously diverse post-1965 immigrant population, such as the Black Muslim immigrant population central to this study. Finally, assimilation literature does not address the effects of caring and the role of school-based relationships (Valenzuela, 1999), an argument that underpins my explanation of the problematic experiences my participants face in mainstream schools. Nevertheless, with all of these arguments at hand, mainstream schools continue to be key sites for the practice of assimilation.

Educators in U.S. mainstream schools might respond to accusations that their schools are institutions that promote assimilation by saying that more accommodations and multicultural efforts are being made for immigrant youth like the East African Muslim youth of this study. Indeed, some schools are attending to the practical cultural concerns of their Muslim student population, such as modifying clothing requirements for girls (especially in physical education), allowing for prayer, curbing art and song requirements, and by recognizing "diversity" through multicultural events throughout the school year. While these efforts should be considered as a start in a positive direction, schools' efforts at providing Muslim youth with a truly inclusive school environment often remain superficial in nature (Ajrouch, 2004; Haw, 1998; Sarroub, 2002). Versions of multicultural education or school events like "diversity day" often run the risk of reifying culturally held stereotypes and marginalizing minority students as "other" (Banks, 1993;

Delpit, 1995). Due to these mono-cultural and excluding school practices, these youth developed apathetic and dissonant attitudes toward their education.

Studies that have focused on Black Muslim immigrant youth reveal an especially vulnerable population that faces even more difficult circumstances than Asian or Latino immigrants. While many immigrant populations are subjected to xenophobia (discrimination toward foreigners), due to the color of their skin, Black Muslim immigrants also face racism (Forman, 2002; Kusow, 2006; Ibrahim, 1999), and religious discrimination in the form of Islamophobia (Berns McGown, 1999; De Voe, 2002; Gilbert, 2004; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Merry, 2005; Vayas, 2004). These experiences of oppression can lead to feelings of pessimism that help shape students' views about school (Forman, 2002; Gilbert, 2004; Merry, 2005; Shah, 2006). As a form of coping, some youth lose faith in the existing school system (Suarez-Orozco, 2004) and construct an adversarial or oppositional identity to resist the unequal school practices and inferior educational institutions they witness firsthand (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 2003). Developing an oppositional identity involves rejecting education as a means of attaining social mobility (Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu, 1987), seeking a deviant means for empowerment that often leads to participation in negative or dangerous behavior such as delinquency, truancy, gang involvement, alcohol/drug abuse, and disinterest in furthering their education (Lee, 2005; McBrien, 2005; Um, 2003). This kind of identity change can result not only in rejection from one's own community, but also from the community the immigrant youth seek to emulate.

As a response to the academic discrimination, religious and cultural hostility, and racism experienced by Muslim youth in schools and in an effort to maintain one's religious and ethnic identity, Muslim immigrant communities have begun to create specialized schools (i.e., private Islamic or "culturally specific"[2] charter schools) that give attention to youths' culture, religion, language, and history (Azmi, 2001; Collet; 2007; Haw, 1998; Zine, 2007). The second school context of this study is a charter high school created by an East African community with the specific intention of serving East African Muslim youth. While examining students' experiences at this East African charter school, I draw from the work of Portes and Rumbaut (1996, 2001) and their theory of selective acculturation, revealing how students in this culturally-oriented charter school context are not only better able to maintain their culture, religion, language, and relationships with parents/community, but also slow down the often too rapid process of Americanization. With this form of acculturation, immigrant communities are able to adopt certain skills from the host society they deem as traits worth having, while also

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[2] I borrow the term "culturally specific" from Nathaniel Popper's Wall Street Week article exploring charter schools that target specific ethnic populations ("Chartering a New Course," August 31, 2007). Other terms found in the literature include "religiously supportive," "religiously sensitive," and "culturally oriented" (Weinberg, 2007).

tapping into the social capital of their native culture, language, religion and ties to their ethnic community—all of which has been found to promote upward social mobility and a more successful adaptation (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Qin, 2006; Zhou, 2003). Connecting the literature on immigrant adjustment to an understudied immigrant population in an understudied context of "culturally-specific" schools, this study aims to broaden our understanding of how East African Muslim immigrant students experience school in the U.S. I look at two aspects of their experience:

1. How do East African Muslim youth perceive they are accepted by students and teachers in mainstream U.S. schools?
2. How do their perceptions of acceptance differ when they compare their experiences in mainstream schools to an East African charter school?

METHOD

Research Context

Since the 1980's an increasing number of East African Muslim immigrants have resettled in the United States. In the state where this study takes place, the number has reached approximately 40,000. It is the largest Somali population in the country. As a site of secondary migration due to the draw of a large and now established co-ethnic community, a large majority of these East African immigrants reside in what I will call Allenberg[3]—the large, urban city where my dissertation research took place.

During the academic years of 2005-06 and 2006-07, I conducted a qualitative case study that investigated, at the time, the *only* culturally specific charter high school in Allenberg, what I will call "Kalsami" Charter High School. Kalsami was created by an East African community with the specific intentions of serving East African Muslim youth. In its third year of operation at the time of the study, the student population is 98% East African Muslim, among whom the majority are Somali. The school has a Somali-led school board, a Somali co-administrator and several East African-born teachers and educational assistants. Some of the religious accommodations Kalsami offered to its students were *halal* meals, gender segregated gym and health classes, prayer times and facilities, presence of community members and elders sitting in the hallways, and Arabic lessons.

In the state where this study takes place, support for charter schools has grown rapidly. Finn, Manno and Vanourek (2000) define a charter school as an "independent public

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[3] All names (cities, schools, students and staff) used in this article are pseudonyms.

school of choice, freed from the rules [of mainstream public schools] but [held] accountable for results" (p. 14). In other words, in exchange for having a great deal of curricular and structural independence, their charters may be revoked if they do not meet certain performance goals (that vary from state to state). Unlike most mainstream public schools, charter schools are typically created around a particular educational purpose (e.g., technology, medical careers, art), and often cater to the specific interests of a community. Charter schools, as public schools, are strictly bound to the Establishment Clause and thus cannot offer parents the choice of religious orientation in schooling. So while a charter school may call itself "religiously supportive," school administrators and teachers may *not* organize or encourage prayer exercises. That said, the Establishment Clause allows for the government, and therefore public schools, to "reasonably" accommodate religious beliefs (Board of Education v. Grumet, 1994, p. 706). For example, they may allow students to wear religious garb and/or pray during the school day when not engaged in school activities or instruction.

Today, Kalsami is one of the few but growing number of culturally specific charter schools for Muslim immigrants in the country (Popper, 2007, Aug. 31). Charter schools, in general, are a poorly studied form of educational reform (Greene, Forster, & Winters, 2003). Almost no research has been conducted in culturally specific charter schools.

Study Participants

Data was collected by observing and interviewing 19 students and 24 teachers/school administrators at Kalsami. The primary participants, the students, were purposefully selected, based on teacher recommendation and on age of arrival in the U.S. (before the age of eleven), English language abilities (English proficient), and the extent of their previous mainstream school experience. All participants, including school staff, had previously attended or worked at mainstream schools before coming to Kalsami. Of the 19 teachers at Kalsami High School, fifteen were White and U.S.-born, three teachers were Black and East African-born and one was Black and Nigerian-born.

Data Sources and Analysis

In conducting this study, I used multiple data sources for purposes of triangulation. The three main sources of data came from student and staff individual interviews, focus group interviews and classroom observations. Over the course of the study, I conducted 21 individual interviews with students and 24 individual interviews with Kalsami administrators and teachers. Nearly all students who interviewed individually also participated in one of two focus group interviews, which took place after the individual interviews took place. All interviews were audio taped and later transcribed for analysis. In addition to interviews, I observed two English classrooms between one

and three times per week throughout the 2006-07 school year. Observations lasted between three and five hours per day. Additionally, I attended parent-teacher conferences, staff meetings, and school board meetings. Throughout all observations, I wrote detailed field notes about these interactions that described student behavior, descriptions of events, my own activities and thoughts and reconstructions of conversations. Additional sources of data included a student questionnaire, student assignments, and other school documents.

An interdisciplinary approach was used for the on-going analysis of the data. I constructed categories from the interview data according to Merriam's (1998, p. 181) guidelines: by reading through one transcript and taking notes; grouping those notes together; and continuing with the next transcript. I then compared the categories, named them, and came up with a classification scheme. From that, I used multiple-source triangulation through mining the documents and re-examining notes from direct observations of the field site. These additional sources of data helped to refine and revise the categories identified from the research data.

In order to conduct careful and meaningful cross-cultural research it is critical to find a methodological framework that a) includes the voices of the study's participants, and b) involves reflexivity on the researcher's part. My overarching research goal was not to speak for my participants; rather, my research with East African youth was a place for *mutual* work. To establish credibility, I looked first and foremost for agreement from them. By restating, summarizing, and paraphrasing information received from a participant I was able to ensure that what I had previously heard was in fact correct. By gaining feedback on results from the participants, I added an assessment of the believability of the research findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

FINDINGS

Mainstream School Experiences

In mainstream schools, youth are exposed to the dominant, competing discourses and cultures of their new society. These schools become central places for youth to explore the meaning of their own identity. In the following, participants describe experiencing a lack of caring and acceptance in mainstream schools that, in many cases, led them to leave their schools for Kalsami. Additionally, they experienced cultural and religious prejudice by school staff and peers. These experiences led to youth feeling torn between maintaining or losing their religious and cultural identity. Students' perspectives about Kalsami will follow these perspectives about mainstream schools.
"Unwelcomed." Several East African students specifically pointed to their teachers' disinterest in "who they were" as the primary reason they chose to leave mainstream

schools for Kalsami High School. For example, even while Zayah, a Somali-American senior, was academically successful in her classes, the "unwelcoming" relationships with her teachers outweighed her scholastic achievements. When I probed Zayah about what she specifically needed from her teachers, she explained, "I felt unwelcomed… I wanted them to want to know about my life, my culture and my religion." Walid, a Somali-born male who had attended a large suburban high school, voiced similar complaints. When I asked whether his mainstream teachers knew much about him as a person, Walid responded dryly, "Some teachers thought I was African American the whole time… some asked me where I was from, but that's about it."

Teachers recognized their own lack of knowledge about their East African students' past/current experiences and their religious/cultural backgrounds. Anne found that having a classroom with students from so many different cultures made it difficult to gain in-depth knowledge of any one student:

> *Anne (White, female, teacher)*: At the middle school I worked at I never knew as much about one culture, nor could I accommodate their culture. There's all these different cultures in your classroom, so you learn a little bit about this one and a little about that one. I remember this girl talking about Ramadan to me. I just didn't have any concept about what she was trying to tell us… like she might be tired [because] she's not eating. Sometimes it's like a blanket that just covers the top of you. I can accommodate you in my little ways, but no more than that.

Anne's analogy with the word "blanket" is well stated. While she can safely cover the basic needs of her students, the blanket only touches the surface of her students' lives. Like most teachers' responses, Anne knew little of her students' needs. In return, participants described that they never came to feel totally welcomed and safe enough to share their cultural and religious identities in school. In fact, students were more likely to encounter, to borrow Valenzuela's (1999) term, "subtractive" processes at work in mainstream schools—processes that actually served to remove cultural and linguistic resources from immigrant youth.

Even in mainstream schools where there were greater concentrations of East African youth and many adults from the East African cultural community, opportunities were minimal for teachers to engage students in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Of the nineteen students I interviewed individually, only two could recall an assignment where they were asked to explore their personal history or cultural and religious backgrounds in depth.

For the majority of students and teachers interviewed, the widely held "Multicultural Day" celebration or a specific unit on African history was the only event in school where students could share their culture. This version of multiculturalism focuses on "traditional" practices such as celebrations, customs, and food and serves to both magnify student differences and trivialize the immigrant experience as a whole (Banks, 1993). Such practices do little to recognize and confront the very serious experiences of racism, inequality and power differentials that face immigrant youth (Ngo, 2004; Fraser, 1997).

At the time of this study none of the mainstream schools offered courses in the students' home language. Nusaybah, who attended a mainstream middle school with a large population of East African youth, saw her school experience as divesting her of her native language:

> *Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior)*: We're learning other people's languages…French, Spanish, German. What about Somali, Oromo, and Arabic? So the language back home, the culture back home is lost. It's like the elders and youth won't even be able to communicate.

For immigrant populations like the East African community, who often live in large co-ethnic communities where many aspects of daily life are conducted in their native language, native language instruction can serve as a bridge for developing better communication within their community. By offering Somali or Oromo language classes in schools, students would have the opportunity to feel their native language and cultural heritage is being valued.

Finally and importantly, beyond the required history unit on Islam, participants could not recall mainstream school experiences where their religion was acknowledged or discussed in the curricula. For East African youth whose culture is often seen as an extension of their religion, a multicultural education that ignores their religious identity is incomplete in nature.

Youth experience cultural and religious prejudice. In addition to feeling that their culture, religion and language were undervalued by teachers, every student I interviewed shared stories of experiencing cultural and religious prejudice. In fact, Abdullah, founder of Kalsami Charter High School, shared that one of the primary reasons the East African community was eager to enroll their children in a school like Kalsami was due to the social hostility and discrimination they saw their children experience as Muslim students in mainstream schools. Youth shed light on two kinds of discrimination and social hostility, that of overt, religious discrimination, namely

"Islamophobia," and the on-going, less overt religious and cultural barriers presented in schools, such as resistance by school staff to allow Muslim youth the right to pray or wear the *hijab*.

After the September 11th terrorist attacks, when Islam became known by western media as a faith imposing terrorism, negative stereotypes and Islamophobia heightened in intensity and besieged Muslim youth in western schools (Haw, 1998; Vayas, 2004). Each student interviewed had stories to tell about the fear, distrust, and rejection they experienced immediately after the September 11th attacks. Youth recalled how their fathers lost their jobs and could not get rehired, how their non-Muslim peers claimed they were hiding bombs in their lockers or under their *hijabs*, and how certain schools were known to "hate Muslims." Asha describes how the suspicion and rejection she faced in schools after 9-11 made her feel as if she had lost her childhood:

> *Asha (Somali-American, female, freshman)*: It's like you were having the best time, you were just being a kid, and bam! You're an adult now. I went from being a fourth grader and wondering where I would buy some candy, to having to watch [my] every step. You couldn't say "bomb"[4] in front of White people… even the term, "This is the bomb!" They'd look at you and say, "What did you say?"

Asha's experience immediately following 9-11 is an experience we might characterize as a loss of innocence. But even seven years after September 11th, East African participants continued to feel disparaged as Muslims due to the continued culture of fear that associates all Muslims with terrorists. In elementary school, Ubah, a Somali-American junior, remembered how "the other kids never wanted to sit with [the Somalis.]" She connected the lunchroom segregation directly to the "hatred" felt towards Muslims by her American-born peers and their parents. She shared, "Before [9-11] everyone was friends, but after that we were different; [I remember] this kid, like on the first day [of school] was like, "I hate you Muslims."

I came to observe the Islamophobia my participants faced first-hand when I joined the Kalsami Achieve High (AH) class on a field trip to Kennedy High School, a large, suburban high school with a mostly White, middle to upper class student population. Kalsami students had been invited to Kennedy to participate in a AH book club exchange. The book discussions between the two AH classes were a success, but at break, when the *hijab*-clad Kalsami students walked through the hallways to use the bathrooms, they heard a student yell from a nearby Mathematics class, "Look, there go

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[4] "Bomb" is current slang for very good, excellent, the best, cool, or awesome.. Common expressions include: 'This place is the bomb.' or 'She's the bomb.'

the little terrorists!" The Kalsami students and some Kennedy AH students observed several people in the math class laugh loudly at the comment, including the math teacher.

Several days after the field trip, an Achieve High supervisor from the university also played a role in the religious scrutiny of the Kalsami students. She wrote to the AH teachers expressing her concern about how some of the Kalsami students had publicly prayed in the classroom and whether the practice was "legal in schools." The supervisor's reaction reveals how little some in the field of education understand students' right to practice their religion. The experience also exposes how dominant society envisions "multiculturalism" as having nothing to do with religion.

While youth struggled over these hostile experiences with Islamophobia, perhaps more challenging were the on-going, subtle barriers to students' religious and cultural practices. In mainstream schools this was primarily manifested in their lack of access and restricted liberty to pray and wear the *hijab*.

When I asked participants if they prayed in their mainstream schools, responses varied. Several students complained that their mainstream schools did not provide them with an appropriate space in which to pray. Muna, a Somali-American who attended an urban high school, remembered having to take turns praying during her lunch break in an overcrowded choir room. She recalled how this process resulted in having "less than five minutes" to eat her lunch. Other participants recalled how groups of Muslim friends found random places to pray such as "between classrooms, in the hallways, in the music hall… anywhere we could find a place." Even in schools with large East African Muslim student populations, participants described their frustration at continually having to explain their prayer needs to their "annoyed" teachers. Some students responded to the classroom scrutiny by not praying at all. Babatunde, an African-born teacher who taught in an urban high school where at least forty percent of the students were East African, concurred, "Very few teachers allowed students to pray."

In addition to facing barriers toward the practice of prayer, East African Muslim girls described the agonizing experience of wearing the *hijab* in mainstream schools. In the following excerpt, Nusaybah describes the angst she felt in school between wanting to wear the *hijab* yet wanting desperately to fit in and be seen as "normal":

> *Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior)*: You feel like an outsider, cause you're the only one wearing the *hijab* and everyone's always asking you about it and teasing you about it. So your main concern is I wanna fit in with the group. I don't wanna be isolated. I don't want everyone to

think I'm weird just because I'm here wearing a *hijab* and covered up. I
want to be seen as a normal girl.

Nusaybah's efforts to justify wearing the *hijab* made her feel vulnerable and
disrespected. Similarly, Asha, a Somali-American freshman, alluded to how the
incessant questioning made her feel self-conscious, "In a group of people, I felt like I
was the hideous one 'cause I had to wear this big thing… they all had nice styles and I
had to explain myself all the time." Like many of the girls interviewed, Asha revealed
feeling both frustration at being continually scrutinized by peers, as well as resignation
in her on-going efforts to defend wearing the *hijab*.

Qin-Hillard's (2003) research reveals that the maintenance of one's cultural and ethnic
identity plays an important role in the academic success and attitudes of students. Like
the youth interviewed, several teachers also observed that the "Americanized" East
African students were far more likely to be disrespectful in classes, get in trouble both
inside and outside of school, and perform poorly in their academics. Mary, a high
school counselor, concluded, "The longer they've been Americanized and in our school
system, the wilder they get… a sad scenario."

In fact, East African youth described feeling some of the greatest pressure to lose their
religious and cultural identity by their "Americanized" co-ethnic peers. Nusaybah, a
Somali-American who had lived in the US for the majority of her life, described the
judgment she faced from her fellow East African peers due to her decision to wear the
hijab (see quote on p.19 . She shared, "There are a lot of Somalis who, like, in two or
three months throw away their *hijabs*… it's not cool in America, so they take it off. By
choosing to continue to wear the *hijab*, Nusaybah felt alienated from these
Americanized co-ethnic peers. Similarly, Ladan, who wore the *hijab* and spoke her
native language at times in school, recalled feeling rejected by what she called
"Americanized" East African youth. She recalled, "The Americanized Somali girls spoke
English really well and wouldn't speak Somali to me because they were used to the
habits of having White friends… they judged people and I was scared and felt like they
were [better than me.]"

Both Ladan and Nusaybah describe facing a hostile social attitude by their
Americanized co-ethnic peers. They describe feeling fear, shame and embarrassment
to speak their native language and pressure to dress and act in certain ways.
Thandeka (2002) indicates that the more "Americanized" group is battling with the
societal pressures of trying to become White, resulting in feelings of self-hatred about
ethnic origin, cultural heritage, and feelings of being different. This co-ethnic strife is
both the product of a school environment that does not welcome diversity and

multiculturalism and yet another way East African youth come to feel pressure to rapidly rid themselves of their language and culture and re-identify as "Americans" as quickly as possible.

In summary, the East African Muslim youth of this study experienced hostile mainstream school environments that neither welcomed nor supported their religious and cultural practices. Some participants were resilient in their efforts to maintain their religious and cultural identity while attending mainstream schools. Yet their resiliency often came at the cost of exclusion and isolation from other Muslim and non-Muslim peers. Instead of "fitting in" or being seen as "cool," youth who maintained their Muslim identity risked taking on negative associations to terrorism and extremism, as Nusaybah reveals in the following quote:

> *Nusaybah (Somali-American, female, junior)*: And nowadays Muslims, Somalis, all of us, we're like very pessimistic about our own opportunities in this country. There's like a lot of fear that if you practice your religion openly, [you'll] be [thought of as] a terrorist. We don't feel like we're being accepted as much. We want to fit in with the society, so a lot of us, instead of teaching people about our life, about our religion, we hide that.

Participants did not perceive themselves to be engaging in a multiplicity of identities while in mainstream schools. Rather, youth described these difficult experiences with a "torn between two worlds" discourse.

Kalsami Experiences

Experiences were quite different for East African youth at Kalsami. Students perceived themselves not only cared for by their teachers, but also culturally and religiously understood. In an environment where they felt free to practice their religion, youth revealed a reinvigorated cultural and religious pride.

Cared for by teachers. In nearly every interview with youth, students' described how impressed they were with the relationships they had developed with their White Kalsami teachers. Beyond academic support, teachers at Kalsami appeared to serve East African youth as advisors, mentors, and even "second parents." For example, Ali, a Somali-American sophomore, shared, "Here the teachers seem to be more involved with their students… they spend more time with you… they seem to care more." Hussein, a Somali-American senior, said, "At Kalsami, teachers want to learn from you."

At a school where 98% of students were East African and all students were Muslim, some teachers believed that an in-depth understanding of students' culture and religion was inevitable. Ted, a White teacher who was finishing his first year of teaching at Kalsami (after four years of teaching in mainstream schools), shared how much he had learned from his students, "Now when I talk to family and friends, I'm always clarifying things for them or trying to break apart stereotypes that they may have, and maybe I had in the past…I've learned a lot from these students." Suzi described students as "very supportive, open and eager to talk about themselves and answer the many questions" she had about their culture and religion. This eagerness by students was initially surprising for several Kalsami staff who remembered East African youth in mainstream schools as far less open and willing to share their cultural and religious backgrounds with others. Andrea theorized:

> *Andrea (White, female, administrator):* At Kalsami, students are able to feel safe and secure because they understand each other's culture. Students can come out of their shell, ask questions, speak in front of others, skills that they need to use in the future. In other schools I think they are scared to do this. They become more outgoing here. You get to see the real student.

But curriculum does not reflect students' shared identity. While students at Kalsami were in an environment where they shared a similar common ethnic background, school staff admitted that little about students' culture, religion or native language was explicitly addressed in the curriculum. Jane shared, "The curriculum [at Kalsami] isn't about the kids…their culture, religion and language is acknowledged during lunch, the hallways, the conversations... It's about having friends who are like you, whose parents understand where your parents come from, not about what we're teaching."

Jane and other White staff theorized about reasons for why Kalsami's curriculum did not better reflect students' cultural and religious heritage and native language. Some complained of limited curriculum materials to choose from, while others admitted feeling a lack of confidence and "cultural know-how" to teach about authors and topics of which they had little previous experience. For example, in her efforts to use classroom texts written by Muslim authors, Jane took a university course on Arabic literature. Jane admitted that she left the course still feeling insecure about her abilities to teach the material and therefore rarely taught the texts in her classroom. Similarly, a White social studies teacher acknowledged that while he wanted to have classroom discussions about the current political situation in Somalia and Ethiopia, he worried that students might feel sensitive and angry about America's involvement with war and they would

label him as a representative American. This resistance by Kalsami teachers to teach or talk to students in culturally responsive ways is not unlike how student-participants viewed teachers' resistance in mainstream schools.

Free to practice religion. Immersed in an environment where all students were Muslim, students were free to openly practice their religious and cultural traditions. The school provided its students with a daily schedule that included breaks for prayer, designated prayer rooms, *halal* meals, and gender-segregated gym and health classes. While participating in prayer was understood to be an option and not a mandatory practice enforced by school staff, the overwhelming majority of students prayed on a daily basis. An unwritten dress code—enforced by both East African staff and peers—resulted in all female students wearing the *hijab* and all male students wearing long pants and long-sleeved shirts. Additionally, the presence of East African elders sitting in chairs in the hallway, sipping tea and observing students' behavior provided a watchful environment. Elders[5] reported back to the administration, and inevitably to parents, any "inappropriate" school behavior they observed, such as when students engaged in "boyfriend-girlfriend relations,"[6] wore improper clothing,[7] or participated in prohibited activities such as fighting, skipping class or tardiness.

Students shared a sense of relief for the more welcoming environment at Kalsami. Consider the way youth describe their newfound autonomy to participate freely in the practice of prayer:

> *Hamdi (Somali-American, female, freshman)*: What I like about this school is that no one has to remind teachers of things like prayer time. You see the girls rushing to the bathroom and we all know what they're about to do. In other schools you're embarrassing yourself with wet feet[8] and looking like a psycho… they're just going to make fun of you.

Similarly, girls voiced a sense of relief being in an environment where they could wear the *hijab* without scrutiny. Ladan admitted, "I don't have to worry about the way I'm dressed here… I don't stand out anymore."

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[5] When I asked Kalsami staff about the specific responsibilities of the elders, responses were vague. Most staff assumed their primary role was to provide an adult presence in the hallways between and during class. It was widely known that the school paid some elders, while others were considered visitors and not paid.

[6] "Boyfriend/girlfriend relations," a phrase used by Kalsami's parent liaison, included touching, kissing, and dating. The school also mandated that lunchrooms be gender-segregated.

[7] Inappropriate clothing for boys meant wearing shorts, low-riding or baggy pants and clothes with gang symbols. For girls, "loose" headscarves, "form-fitting" clothing, shorts, short skirts, pants and clothes with gang symbols were considered inappropriate.

[8] Hamdi is referring to the ritual washing required of Muslims as they prepare themselves for prayer.

Kalsami also offered a learning environment where students could freely talk about religion. Zuhuur admitted, "You can express your opinions about religion in this school and be who you are…in other schools, you don't want to talk about religion 'cause some people will be offended, so you keep everything to yourself." Similar to Mica Pollock's (2004) observations that people in schools choose to speak as though race does not matter, Zuhuur's experiences reveal a common social phenomenon in mainstream schools where religious and cultural differences are also muted. In an environment where teachers and peers feel hesitant or reluctant to talk about issues of religion or culture, important topics, such as politics and religion, remain un-debated and subsequently misunderstood and unexamined.

Perhaps as a result of being in an environment where youth felt accepted and understood, several participants described a strengthened knowledge about their country, culture and religion. For example, students shared that they had learned about the tribalism and the politics in East Africa, and more about the specific Islamic traditions practiced in various cultures. Sumaya shared, "From my friends at Kalsami, I've gotten to know more about my religion and it's helping my faith." Little about students' culture or religion was explicitly taught at Kalsami. Through the school's cultural milieu, students gained a strengthened identity and knowledge about their cultural and religious roots.

Kalsami teachers, who previously taught East African youth in mainstream schools, witnessed a similar change in students' attitude toward their religious and cultural identities:

> *Jane (White, female, teacher)*: It's too easy to lose your culture and your parents' culture in public high schools where other cultures are more dominant. Here kids don't have to hide [their culture] or take on cultural things that they don't want to. They're just accepted and don't have to explain themselves all the time. They can just kind of be.

Jane nicely summarizes the perceptions held by the student participants of this study. At Kalsami, youth no longer felt pressure to choose between their home culture and the more dominant culture in mainstream schools. Instead, youth appeared better able to create new identities that drew on a more positive view of their religion and culture, as well as upon their current experiences and perceptions of life in the United States. ***Negative reactions to an (overly) protective environment.*** While all participants expressed an appreciation for the religiously and culturally welcoming environment of Kalsami, some expressed frustration that the environment of Kalsami could, at times,

feel overly protective. For example, several students resented the fact that East African administrators and elders sat in the hallways between classes "looking for [us to get into] trouble." Perceiving these elders as quick to report "deviant" student behavior to administration and parents, some students likened the experience to being "under lock down… it's like jail here."

The "Make-up Girls,"[9] a focus group of four Kalsami freshman girls who many teachers and students viewed as some of the most "Americanized" kids in the school, were the most disgruntled and vocal about Kalsami's "restrictive" environment. The girls frequently challenged the school's policies. For example, one Make-up Girl, Sumaya, resisted the unwritten school dress code policy and wore pants to school one day. Her parents were called, but no disciplinary action occurred and she was allowed to continue wearing the pants. Nevertheless, when I talked to her later that day, she had changed back into her *hijab* (which, interestingly, she had brought to school "just in case"). Angrily, she told me, "The [American] culture is telling you to express yourself, while [the director of Kalsami] is saying don't express yourself."

Beyond dress, other students complained about Kalsami rules they deemed overly "strict." Abdi, a Somali-American senior, described his frustration with East African staff after trying to sit next to a girl at lunch. He was especially upset with the reason he was given, recalling, "They told me not to sit by her because it is against our religion… I don't believe our religion says that." Abdi saw this scolding as narrow-minded and unfair, and shared his desire to have friends that are girls "like in other cultures." Like other youth, Abdi appeared to be forging a new identity at Kalsami—one influenced by his parents and East African community, but also affected by the everyday encounters with American society.

Kalsami peers also played an important role in the scrutiny that these youth describe. Ali, a Somali-American sophomore, described how "conservative students" spread rumors about any male youth "that gets caught within ten feet of a girl." He said that "every little thing is told to the parents… no matter what you do here, they will find out." In fact, several participants noted that this kind of communication and protective environment was precisely the reason parents enrolled their children at Kalsami. But for some youth who had been schooled for years in mainstream schools, Kalsami's controlled environment felt confining and repressive—a big change from the anonymity they felt in their former mainstream schools.

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[9] A term used by several teachers to describe a small group of girls who wore facial make-up (the large majority of the female students at Kalsami did not).

Positive sentiment toward a protective environment. Interestingly, since conducting an earlier study that focused specifically on the White staff of Kalsami (Basford, Hick, & Bigelow, 2007), several teachers who had originally expressed some concern about Kalsami's culturally protective environment had come to see that it had benefits. Andrea had come to a personal decision that it was not her role to play cultural agent, "[The East African founders and staff] get to work out these [issues of dress and behavior] for the next thirty, forty, or fifty years… my job is to make sure that kids can read and fend for themselves."   Empathetically, Anne said, "When I start to judge elders for saying certain things to students, I think about how this is their community looking out for them… it reminds me of my grandparents who would be all over kids today to cover up and pull up their pants..." Jane admitted she had gone "back and forth" about whether Kalsami was too restrictive or not, "I certainly feel less worried about it than I did before… now I get what their concerns are, at least a little more."

At Kalsami, it was the "traditional" kids who were held up as models of what you are supposed to be, the same role that rebellious kids sometimes play in mainstream schools. And while some staff may view the protective nature of Kalsami as un-representative of life in U.S., these same staff also admitted that Kalsami was a far safer environment for kids than the environment of mainstream schools. Don, a White administrator, revealed that there was little to no school graffiti, very few instances of kids skipping school, no kids dressing like "gang-bangers" and no one involved in gangs or criminal behavior that he was aware of.

Even the Make-up Girls, who had initially complained of Kalsami's restrictive school environment, revealed that they had grown more appreciative of Kalsami's learning environment over time. After our first interview, Nadifa transferred to a large, mostly White, suburban high school due to a change in her father's work. About six months after collecting data at Kalsami, Nadifa called me, requesting another interview. She expressed that she missed going to school at Kalsami and that she felt "horrible" about all of the "mean" things she had said about the school's protective environment. After spending almost an entire semester at her suburban high school and feeling scrutinized and "like an outcast" for being one of the few *hijab*-clad East Africans in the school, she realized, "how much easier it was to be Somali at Kalsami."

Kalsami appeared to serve as a kind of buffer zone—a school where youth can better fend off the powerful, rapid and (some would say) inevitable "de-culturing" experiences of U.S. society while at the same time maintain, improve and even repair their sense of self as East African Muslim beings. Jane revealed, "We [at Kalsami] want these kids to feel powerful in two cultures." Evidence of youth "walking in both cultures" came through in students' talk and behavior. Their newfound empowerment, self-confidence,

and sense of belonging—gained from being in an environment where their cultural and religious identities were embraced and understood—allowed youth to push back and redefine their identities in less static, binary ways. Participants' talk revealed a more hybridized identity, as can be seen in the following representative quotes:

> *Abdi (Somali-American, male, sophomore)*: I've matured. Back at Washington [HS], I was pretty-much all Americanized. Now I feel like I have more balance. I haven't lost anything. I've just added some American culture. I've learned not to isolate yourself and not to forsake your culture.

> *Najima (Somali-American, female, sophomore)*: I'm like half American, half-Somali… in the middle. I like the middle. I think you can have your culture and your religion and language and have the other culture too. You can do both.

In these quotes, Abdi and Najima do not see just one culture as something they are required to embody. Instead, they can engage in a multiplicity of identities, in an on-going process of embracing, disavowing, belonging, contesting and competing identities (Yon, 2000). We can observe this process especially in the participants that voiced resistance to Kalsami's protective environment. Simply by questioning their school environment, these youth are in the process of engaging in multiple and perhaps competing identifications, resisting the idea that they must embody only their East African Muslim or American cultural roots. Even teachers' talk reflected a "blended persona" discourse. Jane shared that as a Kalsami teacher, "You're not entirely in East Africa and you're not entirely in White suburbs…you're learning to embrace that magical and powerful third space between cultures."

In summary, Kalsami offered students a refuge from unwelcoming mainstream school environments where they had come to feel fear, shame, and embarrassment about being East African Muslim immigrants. Instead of describing their identities in mainstream schools as "a clash of cultures" with America's dominant cultures, students perceived their identities at Kalsami as far more confident, hopeful and empowered. As Jane (White, female teacher) perceived, youth at Kalsami were better able to:

> [find] a greater sense of peace, become better able to make decisions and to be open minded about other people. When you aren't constantly trying to defend yourself and when you have pride in who you are and who your family is and still have the sense that there is opportunity out there for you then… you can do anything. Eventually we all move away from our

homes, in varying degrees, but if you know who you are and are pretty OK with who you are before you go, you can handle whatever life throws at you with a little more grace.

DISCUSSION

Some might assume that attending an East African charter high school such as Kalsami High School, where 98 percent of the students share a similar ethnic, religious and racial background, might be detrimental to East African adolescents' identity development. It might be presumed that attending such a "sheltered" school would cultivate a narrow-minded, naïve student population, unprepared socially and perhaps academically for the "real world" outside the school walls. Concern might surround the idea that "culturally specific" schools "Balkanize" or "ghettoize" youth, isolating them from important experiences of diversity in mainstream public schools—schools thought to be representative of larger society.

Contrary to the negative accusations surrounding the "Balkanization" or "ghettoization" of students, data from this study reveals that Kalsami High School promoted positive socialization where students were able to build a good self-concept and find comfort in who they are as East African immigrants, as Muslims, and as American citizens. By attending a school that was supportive of and sensitive to students' cultural and religious practices and where students were among others who shared a common identity, youth at Kalsami were able to maintain their faith and moral values, their ties to their family and community, *and* develop confidence in their abilities to become full and equal members of U.S. society. In other words, the school appeared to serve as a kind of buffer between the values, beliefs and practices of their culture and the once-overwhelming process of trying to fit in with the dominant society. This buffer served to slow down the pressure on youth to rapidly assimilate into the more dominant culture of mainstream schools. Youth came to feel confident and better able to challenge and assert themselves in U.S. society.

Ultimately, mainstream schools, acting as cultural agents, appeared to *change* behaviors of East African youth to the behaviors and values of dominant culture. In expecting these youth to fully assimilate to the dominant culture, these schools participated in a subtractive process (Valenzuela, 1999) that transformed East African youth into marginalized, monolingual English-speaking, ethnic minorities—neither identified with East Africa or Islam nor equipped to function competently in America's mainstream.

Kalsami offered youth a school environment that was both supportive of and sensitive to students' cultural and religious practices and where students were among others who shared a common background, thus acting as a *bridge* to help youth develop behaviors and skills necessary in both their home culture and in the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1996). As mentioned earlier, while all participants expressed an appreciation for the religiously and culturally welcoming environment of Kalsami, some expressed frustration that the environment of Kalsami could, at times, feel overly protective in matters of dress, interactions between girls and boys, and not being allowed to act somewhat like Americans. But the majority were happy with the school environment and with the fact that they were able to acquire new skills—like learning English and participating in the American process—but on their own terms and at their own pace.

While we cannot generalize that all culturally specific schools will produce the same outcomes as Kalsami, these findings suggest that educators should give more consideration to these kinds of schools. These schools can provide a space where youth can develop a strong *bicultural* identity, where they can maintain their cultural and religious identity, and at the same time explore American culture and acquire the skills they need to function successfully in society. In the end, the success of schools should be judged first and foremost on the character of the human being that they help to produce. By embracing an "additive" educational approach that builds on the interests of the community they serve, culturally specific schools have the potential to help students achieve a better sense of self, purpose and identity with which to make the right choices both inside and outside of school.

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