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Moving Beyond the "Mosqueteria:" A Critical Analysis of the Media's Coverage of Religious Accommodation at an Ontario Public School

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Education

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Abstract

This qualitative case study considers the weekly congregational Muslim prayers held at an Ontario public middle school and the widespread media and public reaction to them. Drawing primarily from the work of Said (1997, 2003), this research questions how and why the prayers became the source of controversy nearly four years after they commenced, and what, if any, impact this media and public reaction has had on the school community. Eight interviews were conducted, along with a critical analysis of the news coverage of the prayers. The results reveal the persistence of post-colonial discourse and prejudice towards Muslims and Islam in media and public perspectives, as well as a startling disconnect between the school community's positive views of religious accommodation, and the public's negative perceptions of them, particularly when Muslim students are involved.

Keywords: Islam, Muslim, education, equity, media, Orientalism, anti-racism, religious accommodation, Islamophobia

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wonderful, generous, patient, and understanding parents who have always shown me nothing but unconditional love and support. You taught me to have faith in God and to always strive to do my best. This thesis, and everything leading up to it, would not be possible without you. JazakAllah khair. I love you.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Introduction

In June 2011, the congregational Islamic prayers taking place at Pine Grove Middle School[1] (PGMS), located in one of Ontario's most religiously and ethnically diverse regions, became the subject of widespread and intense nationwide media coverage and public debate. Referred to as the "Mosqueteria" by some media outlets (Teitel, 2011, para. 4), the prayers had been taking place for four years without incident or complaint within the school community, and have continued, in spite of the controversy. This study considers the contentious issue of religion in public schools, particularly the religious accommodation of Muslim students. It also explores how Muslims and Islam are portrayed in the news media, and the way in which these depictions can influence and affect attitudes towards the inclusion and accommodation of Muslims in the West. The specific aim of this thesis is to examine why the prayers being held at PGMS became the focus of such considerable media and public attention, and to examine what, if any impact the controversy has had on the school administration and the Muslim students at the school who were attending the prayers. Finally, this thesis considers the need to address the issue of religious accommodation in Ontario's public schools, particularly given the province's changing demographics and increasingly diverse population.

The Rationale for this Research Study

The PGMS prayers, and the reaction to them, are just one of many cases in recent years where the accommodation of religious minorities, particularly Muslim students, has become

[1] Pseudonym has been used. Pseudonyms have also been used for all individuals named in this thesis, including the research participants in this study, in order to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. All of the participants are aware however, that due to the extensive media coverage of the prayers, they, and/or the school, may be identifiable, regardless of the fact that pseudonyms have been used throughout this thesis

subject to debate and opposition. However, the media and public debate and scrutiny surrounding the "mosqueteria" over the last several months has been particularly intense, and it seems that Muslim (or Middle Eastern) students, particularly those requesting and/or being granted accommodation, are considered to be a problem, especially after 9/11. In the words of Moustafa Bayoumi (2009)

> [o]ne could say that in the dawning years of the twenty-first century, when Arabs are the new chic and Islam is all the rage, Muslims and Arabs have become essentially a nagging problem to solve, one way or another. And being a problem is a strange experience-frustrating, even (p. 6).

As a Canadian Muslim woman and educator, I am deeply concerned about this view of Muslim students as a "nagging problem," as it is increasingly played out not only in schools across North America, but also in the media. I am particularly troubled about the potential impact that this media coverage has on both Muslim and non-Muslim students (as well as the greater public). This research was initiated with the goals of investigating the "problem discourse" noted above, and examining how and why it is that the accommodation of religious minorities in public schools, specifically Muslim students, has continued to encounter so much opposition, particularly in news media outlets such as newspapers, magazines, and television news coverage.

Considering the Existing Literature

A significant number of literatures exist on the themes of anti-racism education, religious accommodation, and the media's depiction of Islam and Muslims. Research examining the experiences of Muslim students in public schools in the West, and Islamophobia, has also become increasingly more common, particularly after 9/11. However, there is an evident lack of literature linking these themes and considering the interplay between how media coverage and subsequent public scrutiny can in turn impact students not only personally, but also on a larger

scale in terms of how religious accommodations are implemented, and viewed, in public schools across Ontario. This research study aims to contribute to the field by considering how the media's coverage of Islam and the religious accommodation of Muslims in public schools can become intertwined, and discover what this means for Ontario's public education system.

A qualitative case study of Pine Grove Middle School (PGMS) has been conducted in order to examine the implications and role that the media's coverage of specific groups has had in cases of accommodation involving Muslim students, specifically the weekly prayers held at PGMS. The central purpose of this study has been to investigate the experiences of Muslim students within an anti-racism framework. The media coverage and response to the prayers at PMGS has been closely examined and situated in the context of the current media debate and discourse which surrounds religious accommodation and the experiences of Muslim students in Ontario's public education system. Throughout the course of this study, a key research question was to consider *why* there has been such extensive and ongoing news media coverage of the prayers at PGMS, particularly because, as noted above, the prayers have been taking place for four years without incident or complaints from parents, staff, students, or any other members of the school community (M. Anderson, personal communication, November 15th, 2011).

The Research Questions:

1. Why and how have the prayers at PGMS become the subject of so much media and public attention, and why now, four years after the prayers first commenced?
2. What do the students attending the prayers at PGMS think about the media coverage of the prayers at their school, and how does this coverage affect them?
3. How is PGMS administration affected by the media coverage of the prayers at their school?

4. Have Muslim students and parents noticed a shift in the opinion and perception of others in the school community towards the prayer services?

Theoretical Framework

> Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe," a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more skeptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter. (Said, 2003, p. 7)

My research is informed by postcolonial theory and anti-racism education. The theoretical framework of this study draws primarily from the work of Edward Said, most notably the groundbreaking text *Orientalism* (1979, 2003), quoted above, and one of his later works, *Covering Islam* (1997). In *Orientalism* (2003), Said argues that, "[i]n a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (p. 3). This superiority continues to manifest itself in many, if not all aspects of Western society, including but not limited to, all levels of government, domestic and foreign policy, public institutions such as schools, popular culture, and the media. It is the media which I will be focusing on for the purpose of my research, specifically the news media's perpetuation of the stereotypical backwards Muslim "other," a monolithic representation which is in direct contrast and opposition to perceived Western norms and ideals of advancement, modernity, freedom, and liberation (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2006, p. 4).

The first edition of Said's book *Covering Islam* (1981) was published in the immediate aftermath of the release of fifty-two American hostages from the American Embassy in Iran,

where they were held prisoner for 444 days (Said, 1981, p. xx). In *Covering Islam*, Said focuses on the extensive media coverage of the crisis, from when it began to well after the release of the hostages in 1981, and he reflects that, "the occasions for public discussions of Islam, by experts or by nonexperts, have almost always been provided by political crises" (Said, 1997, p. 15). Nearly twenty years after Said first wrote those words, they still proved to be true when the tragic events of 9/11[2] took place. Suddenly the Orientalist discourse in the media became much more prevalent, and it seems more accepted as well. Zine (2003), whose work is also heavily influenced by Said, notes that

> [s]ince 9/11, renewed "Orientalist" constructions of difference have permeated the representation of Muslims in media and popular culture. Images of fanatical terrorists and burqa-clad women are seen as the primary markers of the Muslim world...Critically examining the destructive impact of how these images create the social and ideological divide between "us" and "them" is important in unravelling the ways that power operates through the politics of representation (Zine, 2003, para. 24)

Similar to Zine's assertion, I believe that "critically examining" the negative effects of the media's coverage of Islam, and the divisions which are created as a result, is of paramount importance. It is through my research that I aim to conduct this critical examination. The media coverage of the prayers at PGMS has overwhelmingly been from an Orientalist perspective, focusing, for example, on the perceived inequality and subjugation of female Muslim students (Kheiriddin, 2011; Mallick, 2011; Tetiel, 2011) or the threat and imposition of "Islamist" values and practices (Kheiriddin, 2011; Mallick, 2011a, 2011b; Selley, 2011a, 2011b) in Canadian public schools. Thus I will examine this Orientalist discourse as it plays out in the media, specifically as it has presented itself in the media's coverage of the PGMS prayers and the

[2] The term "9/11" has been used here, and throughout this thesis, to refer to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon which took place on September 11th, 2001 in the United States. I have chosen "9/11" as it is commonly used in the media and public discourse, and has become synonymous with the tragic events which took place on that day.

accommodation of Muslim students.

I will also be using a critical multicultural, anti-racism framework as a theoretical basis for my research. Dei (1996), who has written extensively on the subject of anti-racism education, writes that "[a]nti-racism education may be defined as an action-oriented strategy for institutional, systemic change to address racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression" (Dei, 1996, p. 25). Dei stresses that anti-racism education "extends beyond the view that skin colour is the only signifier of difference" (Dei, p. 25) and instead should be focused on institutionalized and societal power structures which marginalize and oppress based not only on race but also on other aspects of "social difference" (Dei, 1996, p. 55) such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, language and religion (Dei, p. 55). May and Sleeter (2010) echo this sentiment, asserting that "while efforts for social change must address centrally the needs of communities of color, they cannot end there" (p. 8) and they argue that

> [a]n obvious example of these "new racisms" is the construction of Muslims and Islam, post 9/11, as a homogeneous collective threat to western nations and, individually, as representing and/or practicing an antediluvian, illiberal, religious identity. This reductionist construction of Muslims may simply talk of cultural or religious differences (and not mention color at all), but it is clearly racialized nonetheless (Modood, 2007, as cited in May and Sleeter, 2010, p. 8)

As Dei (1996) and May and Sleeter (2010) note, anti-racism frameworks do not focus solely on racial and/or cultural differences, but rather on multiple signifiers of difference which can be, and often are, used as means and justification for oppression and marginalization. The goal of anti-racism and critical multicultural research and education then is to challenge dominant power structures which perpetuate and enforce the dominance of one group over another. Dei (1996) writes that

> the political and academic project of anti-racism is seeking to rupture how social power and knowledge is shared in contemporary Canadian society. It ought to be asked why the norms, values, ideas, perspectives, and traditions of one social group should be adopted as standard by the institutions of society (Dei, p. 26)

I believe that the media is the most powerful and influential means of sharing and enabling the "social power and knowledge" which reinforces the norms, values, and traditions of one group to the exclusion of, or aversion to, those of any other. This is particularly concerning given the ease with which one can now almost instantaneously access any form of media, entertainment, or information, the vast majority of which is now available digitally. Dei and Howard (2008) state that the media has the power to "domesticate, control, or brainwash" (p. 2) and argue that "[p]eople make their own meanings from mass communication, but often not within hermeneutical contexts that they either select or control, but rather under conditions laid out by a scriptwriter's agenda within inequitable socio-political climates" (Dei & Howard, 2008, p. 2). Given that today's post 9/11 socio-political climate is marked by the "war on terror" and increasing animosity towards Muslims and Islam (Bayoumi, 2009, Said, 2003; Zine, 2003), it is not of much surprise that the news media plays such a significant role in both reflecting and influencing the public's perception of Islam, Muslims, and the accommodation of Muslims in the West.

Therefore I will be studying the media's coverage of, and reaction to the PGMS prayers through an anti-racism lens, while also examining how this media coverage reflects the "Occident's" imperialist and colonial views of the "Orient" (in this case specifically the Muslim community at PGMS) as the inferior other.

Context

The Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) reports that, "Ontario's visible minority population increased more than four times faster than the population as a whole" (excluding self-identified Aboriginals) and "by 2017, about one-fifth of our population will be members of diverse faith communities including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism, in addition to a growing number of individuals without a religious affiliation" (Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 8). Additionally, the 2001 Canadian Census (the most recent Census data available on religious affiliation) found that there are 579,640 Muslims in Canada and that 352,530 (nearly 61%) live in Ontario (Census Canada, 2001).

Yet it seems that as the number of religious (and cultural) minorities in Ontario has steadily grown and become increasingly apparent, so too has the uneasiness over their presence and the role that they play in Canadian society. Over the past several years "there has been an increase in reported incidents of anti-Black racism, antisemitisim, and Islamophobia in Canada" (Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 7). Crimes against religious minorities have also increased, as evidenced by Statistics Canada's recent findings that reported hate crimes increased by 42% from 2008 to 2009, and that the largest increase was among religiously motivated crimes (Statistics Canada, 2011).

This thesis is specifically focused on the increasing animosity towards Muslims and Islam in the West. The events of 9/11 and the media's increasingly negative portrayal of Muslims and Arabs (Bayoumi 2008; Haque, 2004; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004; et. al)[3] have greatly exacerbated these concerns. As a result, the debate over assimilation versus the

[3] Bayoumi, 2009; Haque, 2004; Imam, 2009; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, Marshall and Sensoy, 2009; Rizvi, 2005; Said, 1997, 2003; Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009; Shaheen, 1984, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2008; Skalli, 2004; Steinberg, 2010; Watt, 2008

accommodation of religious and cultural minorities (particularly of religious symbols and/or clothing such as the Islamic *hijab* and *niqab* and the Sikh turban and *kirpan*) is becoming more heated, and is often played out in Ontario's public education system. The extensive media coverage of, and recent backlash against the PGMS prayers is very indicative of this, particularly in online (and mostly anonymous) comments which have been left by readers on news outlets' websites in response to articles related to the prayers at the school. The vast majority of the comments are extremely disturbing due to what they say about Muslims and Islam, and many reflect bigoted and racist attitudes.

The extensive media attention centred on the religious accommodations being made at PGMS, and the ensuing public furore and debate about such activities taking place in taxpayer funded schools (Kheiriddin, 2011; Yuen, 2011b; Talbot, 2011a), may also place additional pressure on school administrators and school boards to reconsider the accommodation of religious minorities, particularly Muslims. Already school administrators have had to release statements and/or speak to media outlets (Macdonald, 2011), and even provincial politicians have become involved, with one MPP and party leader stating that the prayers at PGMS are "blurring the separation between church and state" (Artuso, 2011). Administrators cannot, and do not simply give in or pander to every demand, complaint, and protest they receive from the media or the general public. The *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009), or Policy/program Memorandum No. 119 (PPM No. 119) which is now being implemented by the Ministry of Education, includes measures which are meant to ensure that comprehensive and relevant religious accommodation policies are present in all of Ontario's schools. One of the mandates of PPM No. 119 is to define and implement policies which are reasonable, fair, and address the changing religious demographics of Ontario's student population, and this is a

positive and much needed directive for school boards and administrators across the province. However public sentiment can certainly heavily influence the decisions made in schools, particularly when it comes to the elections of school board trustees and of course, the Ontario provincial elections held every four years. In fact, several of the PGMS prayers' more prominent detractors, including Arnie Lemaire, the author of the popular blog *Blazing Cat Fur* and the coalition of religious groups who organized the protests against the TDSB "vowed to make prayer in school an election issue" (Godfrey, 2011a, para.11) in the Fall 2011 Ontario provincial elections.

Given the ongoing (although waning) media and public debate over the PGMS prayers, the overwhelming opposition (judging by the extensive media coverage, opinion pieces, and online comments) to the accommodation of Muslim students in public schools, school administrators and politicians may feel pressured to alter, or at least reconsider their stance on the accommodation of Muslim students in the future. Indeed, Selley (2011c) of *The National Post* urged his fellow columnists who were also opposed to the prayers at PGMS to "keep writing about it until the adults involved realize, in a moment of horror, the insane situation their good intentions have created" (Selley, 2011c, para. 1). Selley (2011c) then stated that "[i]f you saw a golden lab puppy on fire, you'd be utterly desperate to put it out. That's roughly the sort of motivation school administrators should be feeling right now to ensure this doesn't start happening again in September" (Selley, 2011c, para. 1).

Despite the opposition and debate to the PGMS prayers however, school boards and administrators have seemingly continued to support and implement religious accommodations, choosing to overlook the controversy, or wait until it inevitably receives less media and public attention. This is likely due to a number of factors, primarily the fact that under PPM No. 119

(2009b), Ontario schools and boards are legally required to adopt religious accommodation policies which take into consideration the needs and requests of a number of religious groups. Furthermore, as the number of Muslim students, and other non-dominant groups, in public schools continues to increase, many educators are likely acting accordingly to ensure that they adapt to, and consider these changing circumstances as they see fit (Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011). This is particularly the case for administrators at PGMS, where the student population has long been predominantly Muslim.

Although the PGMS administration has reiterated their support for the prayers at the school, and has allowed for them to continue, Muslim students and parents at PGMS may be more deeply affected by the controversy, particularly the negative media coverage and ensuing public protests. This is particularly concerning as much as the coverage has focused on the students and their religious beliefs just as much as, if not more than on the issue of religious accommodation.

Interestingly, as of early 2012, very few articles involve the input of PGMS students themselves. Thus, instead of taking into account the students' own experiences and opinions, most journalists covering the prayers have simply spoken on their behalf. The overwhelming amount of media attention given to the prayers, and the lack of student input and contribution motivated this research study, and these factors are what make it so timely and necessary. This study is a critical analysis of the media's coverage of the prayers at PGMS, but it has also been motivated by an interest in hearing from members of the PGMS community who are involved in, and/or attending the prayers, with the intention of gauging their reaction to the media coverage, and also allowing them to express their own opinions, beliefs, and experiences, rather than having others speak for them.

Muslim Students in the West

My own experiences as a Muslim student who attended public schools in Ontario from Kindergarten through to OAC (Grade 13) have made me much more passionate and aware of the need to investigate situations such as the prayers at PGMS. The events of 9/11 and my decision to pursue a teaching career, and now graduate studies in education, have only furthered my interest in the experiences of Muslim students in the West. Growing up as a visible minority (cultural and religious) in a small, predominantly White, Anglo-Saxon community, I was often exposed to misunderstanding and misconceptions surrounding my faith, and experienced incidents of discrimination throughout my educational experiences in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions.

While there have been changes made in recent years, most notably PPM No. 119 initiated by the Ontario Ministry of Education, religious accommodation in schools can present challenges and may, as already demonstrated, invoke debate. Furthermore, based on my own personal experiences, as well as more recent events (Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011), even when there are policies in place to address religious accommodation, teachers and administrators are often unsure of how to deal with cases as they may arise. This may be due to a number of factors, including a smaller population of students in the board who are members of non-dominant religious groups, or as is the case at PGMS, the measures that are taken to accommodate students' needs are challenged, or may even come under attack.

Additionally, many teachers may rely on outside sources, such as the media, to form (consciously or not) their knowledge and perceptions of Muslim students, their religious practices, and Islam in general (Imam, 2009; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, Steinberg, et al., 2010;

et al.[4]). Teachers may also use textbooks and other resources which portray and reinforce stereotypes about Islam and Muslims (Abukhattala, 2004; Imam, 2009; Kincheloe, 2004; Sensoy, 2009; Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2011), or they dismiss students' concerns and expect (and even pressure) them to take part in activities which may compromise their religious beliefs and convictions (Imam, 2009; Zine, 2001, 2008).

Furthermore, I have long been perturbed by the media's depictions of Muslims and Islam, particularly after 9/11, and the stereotypical and even discriminatory attitudes towards Muslims which arise, or are reinforced, as a result of these depictions. As Said (2003) notes of his own life experiences:

> The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening. There exists here an almost unanimous consensus that politically he does not exist, and when it is allowed that he does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental. The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed...(Said, 2003, p. 27)

Although Said's work did not ever consider gender issues in any depth, as a Muslim woman of Pakistani descent who wears the hijab, Said's words and experiences resonate with me on many levels. It was these concerns regarding being Muslim in North America, and the way in which Muslims are depicted and perceived, that drove me to address issues such as the media's coverage of Muslims and Islam, and the experiences of Muslim students in the West, through my research.

Finally, this research has been inspired by the belief that the debate, controversy, discussion, media coverage, and public response to the prayers at PGMS should be investigated, particularly as the opinions expressed in both the media and public domain have been overwhelmingly negative. While the reaction to the prayers may be in part due to the media's

[4] Imam, 2009; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, Steinberg, et al., 2010, Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009, Shaheen, 1984, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2008

tendency to sensationalize certain stories or events, or capitalize on them once they pique public interest, it is clear from the extensive news coverage and public comment on the PGMS prayers (which I have been following closely since July of 2011, due to my own personal and professional interest in the story), that the seemingly innocuous prayers held at one school have now ignited a much broader debate about the accommodation of Muslim students in the province's public schools. My hope is that this study has provided an outlet for even a small sample of PGMS students and community members to share the impact that this extensive media coverage has had on them. Furthermore, I have aimed to examine and raise questions about how the media can, and has, either served to help, or hinder, efforts being made to accommodate students belonging to non-dominant religious groups, and create public schools which practice and celebrate pluralism and promote respect and understanding.

Chapter Summary

This research study is focused on the religious accommodation of Muslim students in Ontario's public schools, particularly at Pine Grove Middle School (PGMS). The research questions seek to understand the intense media and public reaction to the prayers which have been held at the school for several years, and how and why they became the subject of such a high degree of scrutiny and debate.

While there is an extensive body of literature addressing the media's depiction of Muslims and Islam, and an increasing amount of research, particularly after 9/11, examining the experiences of Muslim students in the West, the amount of literature considering the interplay between the religious accommodation of Muslim students and the news media's coverage of such events (and of Muslims and Islam in general) is highly insufficient and this research aims to help fill that void.

The motivation for this study lies in both my own personal experiences as a Muslim student, and now educator, in Ontario, as well as recent events involving Muslims and Islam as they play out in the news media.

Through a qualitative case study involving both an extensive review of the news media coverage of the PGMS prayers, and eight semi-structured research interviews, the aim of this study is to seek to understand the prayers, and the effects of the media coverage from the point of view of PGMS students and school community members who are involved in the prayers. This is imperative given that PGMS students, particularly those attending the prayers, have been largely underrepresented in the news media coverage thus far.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

There is a wealth of literature on the role of religion in schools, and also on the post-colonial depiction of Muslims and Islam in the media, particularly after 9/11. The PGMS prayers, and the reaction to them, have presented a unique research opportunity, encompassing a range of topics including Islamophobia, the experiences of Muslim students in public schools, religious accommodation, and critical anti-racism/multicultural education. This chapter reviews the existing literature relating to this study, particularly that which addresses the role of religion in public schools, the experiences of Muslim students in the West, and the media's coverage of Muslims and Islam. This review of literature is categorized into the following interrelating themes:

- The Separation of church and state?' The role of religion and Christian privilege in Ontario's public schools
- Accommodation or Assimilation? The religious accommodation of non-dominant religious groups
- Public vs. private: the growing popularity of separate religious schools
- Religious discrimination & post-colonial views of Islam and Muslims as "the other"
- Muslims in the popular media
- The veiled, oppressed, other: Muslim women in the media and public perceptions
- The misrepresentation of Islam in school textbooks, curriculum, and teachers' knowledge/lessons

Of course, many, if not all, of these themes are not mutually exclusive and often overlap in the literature. However, in this chapter, each theme will be covered separately through an examination of the relevant literature:

The Separation of Church and State? The Role of Religion and Christian Privilege in Ontario's Public Schools

There has been a long, often contentious, relationship between religion and schools, or as it is often referred to, 'Church and State.' The issue has been particularly controversial in Ontario, which has radically changed since the 1840's, when the population was made up almost entirely of Christian denominations, most notably Protestants and Catholics (Menendez, 1996, p. 48), and "[t]he beliefs of the very few students of other traditions, including Native spiritual traditions, were virtually ignored in the curriculum" (Ministry of Education, 1994, para.6).

Ontario's current system of publicly funding two school boards, the public and Catholic boards, is rooted in the establishment of taxpayer funded public education in the late 19th century. For decades, education in Ontario, then known as Upper Canada, was religiously based and was administered and controlled by the various denominations of the Christian Church (Ministry of Education, 1994, para.4). A number of School Acts had been passed by the late 1840's, which by then had established a system of non-denominational schools (attended mostly by Protestant students) and a separate school system for Roman Catholic students (Ministry of Education, 1994, para.6). Religious accommodations were also made for students at the time, with The School Act of 1843 which allowed students in the non-denominational schools to be exempt from any religious instruction or exercises to "which their parents and guardians objected" (Ministry of Education, 1994, para.9).

It was the British North America Act of 1867, the basis of Canada's constitution, which guaranteed the ongoing public funding for Catholic schools in Ontario. Article 93 of the Act "placed Catholic schools on an equal basis with the "common" [public] schools in terms of funding" (Menendez, 1996, p. 48) and established funding for Catholic elementary schools up until Grade 8, then grade 10, and in 1984, funding through what was then known as OAC, or Grade 13 (Menendez, 1996, p. 49).

Over time, the fact that separate religious schools, particularly those belonging to one specific denomination, were the beneficiary of public funding became an issue of great debate and consternation. As a result, many Canadian provinces have since developed alternative models and guidelines for funding all accredited separate and independent schools, or they do not fund them at all, supporting only one, non-denominational public school system (Sweet, 1997).

Ironically, although Ontario is Canada's most populous and diverse province (Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 8), it now remains the only province in Canada which still funds one type of religious school, Roman Catholic, "to the exclusion of all others" (Killoran, 2012, para.1).

Sweet (1997) recounts an incident which is indicative of how polarizing the role of religion in schools can, and has become. As she recalls, the 1984 decision to extend funding for Catholic schools until the last year of secondary school, made by Conservative premier Bill Davis (Sweet, p. 39), was extremely controversial and even led to threats and vandalism, particularly in Essex County. According to Sweet, the debate and public outcry became particularly divisive in the early 1990's, in response to the transfer of public high school buildings and resources to the now publicly funded Catholic secondary system (1997, p. 42). She

narrates one disturbing incident, where a Catholic church was spray painted with (misspelled) graffiti reading, "Buy a gun. Kill a Cathlic" (Sweet, 1997, p. 43).

Fortunately, extreme acts in response to the presence of religion in schools are not commonplace. However the issue is one of ongoing consternation, and Ontario has now been legally challenged several times by parents and/or groups representing non-dominant religious groups, due to the province's continued funding of Catholic separate schools to the exclusion of all other faith-based schools (Sweet, 1997). A group of Christian and Jewish parents fought the issue for ten years at the provincial level until it was brought before the Supreme Court of Canada in 1996 (Sweet, 1997, p. 114). The Supreme Court ruled in favour of the province of Ontario, based on "the constitutional obligation to fund Catholics, as guaranteed in the 1867 BNA Act" (Sweet, 1997, p. 115). However the exclusive public funding of Catholic schools was once again challenged in 1999, this time by a Jewish parent named Arieh Waldman (CBC News, 1999, para.3), whose lawyer brought the case before the United Nations human rights committee (1999, para.2). While the UN ruled Ontario's funding policy to be discriminatory and in violation of international law (para.1), no action was, or has since been taken in response to the decision. Furthermore, although there is still debate and objection to Ontario's funding of Catholic schools, it seems that politicians aren't willing to address the issue. Even when politicians have raised the possibility of extending provincial funding to all religious and faith-based schools, as was the case in the 2007 Ontario provincial election, the proposition has been met with public ire and backlash (Sonnenberg, 2011).

The alternative, to remove public funding from Catholic schools, and thus have only one publicly funded school system in the province, is an option, albeit a potentially controversial one. However, while it has been argued that Article 93 of constitution cannot be overturned and there

is a legal obligation to continue funding Catholic schools, Killoran (2012) argues that, "[i]n reality, all that is really required is an act of the Ontario provincial legislature and the consent of the federal government" (para. 6). Many have argued for such an action to be taken, particularly as Quebec and Newfoundland have done so in the last decade, without any long-term negative consequences or ongoing public dissent (Killoran, 2012, para. 6). Based on recent history in Ontario however, there is no doubt that, at least for the time being, politicians will sidestep or even completely avoid the issue of separate school funding, at least until there is enough public support and demand for either public funding of all private schools (religious and otherwise), or the defunding of Ontario's Catholic separate schools.

Parents have had much more clout and legal success when challenging the province on the role of religion in Ontario's public non-denominational school system. The government itself has historically been, for the most part, proactive in making reforms based on public needs and demands, particularly with increasing immigration in the 1970's and 1980's and the federal government's promotion of multiculturalism (Ministry of Education, 1994, para.18). While parents still had the right to exempt their children from any religious instruction or exercises they found objectionable, it was evident that this provision alone was not enough, particularly considering the increasing religious diversity in the province. On September 23rd, 1988 (Ministry of Education, 1989, para.1), the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled on religious opening exercises in Ontario public schools. According to the Policy/Program Memorandum No. 108, it was decided by the court "that one religion must not be given a position of primacy and that the content of opening or closing exercises must reflect the multicultural realities and traditions of Ontario society" (para.2).

In 1989, the Ontario government established an inquiry to examine the role of religious education in the province's elementary schools (Ministry of Education, 1994, para.19). This inquiry coincided with a major legal challenge against the province's religious education guidelines which mandated two periods of religious education a week (Douglas & Dunsmuir, 1998, para.22). The case was brought to the Ontario Court of Appeal in 1990 on behalf of a group of non-Christian parents who argued that the Elgin County schools' religious education curriculum "inculcated predominantly Christian values" (Black-Branch, 1995, p. 23). The Court ruled that "state authorized religious indoctrination amounts to the imposition of the majority's religious beliefs on minorities" (Black-Branch, 1995, p. 24) and contravened the Charter. While the court's ruling deemed religious and moral education to be permissible, "indoctrination in a particular religious faith" (Ministry of Education, 1994, para. 19) was barred from Ontario's public schools.

In order to differentiate between religious instruction and religious indoctrination, the court stated that:

1. The school may sponsor the *study* of religion, but may not sponsor the *practice* of religion.
2. The school may *expose* students to all religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view.
3. The school's approach to religion is one of *instruction*, not one of *indoctrination*.
4. The function of the school is to *educate* about all religions, not to *convert* to any one religion.
5. The school's approach is *academic*, not *devotional*.
6. The school should *study* what all people believe, but should not *teach* a student what to believe.
7. The school should strive for student *awareness* of all religions, but should not press for student *acceptance* of any one religion.
8. The school should seek to *inform* the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to *conform* him or her to any one belief (Black-Branch, 1995, p. 24).

Regulation 298 of the Education Act also outlines the protocol for religious education in public schools, and reiterates that different religions and religious beliefs may be studied, "without giving primacy to, and without indoctrination in, any particular religion or religious belief" (Allison & Mangan, 2007, p. 167). The Ministry of Education further elaborated on the new rulings and regulations for religious education in public schools with their comprehensive document titled *Education About Religion in Ontario Public Elementary Schools* (1994). This document outlines the history of religion in Ontario public schools, legal rulings, and offers guidelines for educators and administrators.

Despite the fact that the Ontario Court of Appeal made clear in its' ruling that particular religions are not to be favoured, nor practiced in the classroom, some (Goldstein, 2000, Sensoy, 2009a, Sweet, 1997) argue that Christian privilege is widespread in Canadian public schools. While the continued public funding of separate Catholic schools in Ontario demonstrates the province's preferential treatment and status of one religious denomination over others, the predominance of Christian beliefs and celebrations is also commonplace in public schools across Ontario, particularly in the month of December.

In her article "Kill Santa: Religious Diversity and the Winter Holiday Problem" (2009a), Sensoy discusses "the interrelated sets of issues concerning discrimination, oppression, and privilege and the ways in which these issues become manifest when we seek "solutions" to the "problems" of religion in schools, religious celebrations, and holy days" (p. 322). Sensoy and other authors (Goldstein, 2000; Imam, 2009; Zine, 2008; Stonebanks & Stonebanks, 2009), note that while schools may balk at the accommodation of non-dominant religions and the students who practice them, they often not only celebrate Christmas, but plan entire lessons and school activities around the holiday (Sensoy, 2009a, p. 322). These lessons and activities include, but

are not limited to, Christmas plays and assemblies, bulletin boards, staff activities and clothing, Christmas decorations, and much more (Sensoy, 2009a, p. 322-324). Stonebanks and Stonebanks (2009), both of whom teach pre-service teachers in Quebec, share how their students "wondered why, in academia, our schools were being presented as locations of secular education when the actual daily life in schools was suffused with an underlying Christian view of the world" (p. 313).

All students, regardless of their religious beliefs, are expected, or at the very least may feel pressured to participate in these Christmas-themed activities. Recognizing this potential conflict or discomfort, well-meaning teachers often make an effort to include their non-Christian students as well, by inviting them to share their religious practices and holidays with their peers (I myself was asked to do this several times in elementary school, as were my other non-Christian peers). While my classmates and I were excited about these presentations at the time, I am now aware that, as well intentioned as they may be, such approaches to a multicultural curriculum are not effective, as they tend to focus on cultural, rather than religious, aspects of the celebrations and traditions. By centering on music, food, and clothing, or as some put it, "saris and samosas" (R. Olivero, personal communication, Oct. 6, 2011), these presentations and lessons make light of significant and meaningful religious celebrations and traditions. This approach then "often results in "tourist curriculum"- a quick visit to the unfamiliar, then home again to events taken for granted" (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force, as cited in Neubert & Jones, 1998, p. 14).

Additionally, these "quick visits" can potentially reinforce negative attitudes and stereotypes towards students of non-dominant religious and cultural backgrounds. As Sensoy (2009a) notes, this practice emphasizes 'otherness' of non-Christian students when "a student

from a marginalized religious community (Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Jew) is expected to teach the class about his/her tradition [yet] Christian students (wherever they are on the spectrum from orthodox to secular) are never asked to educate others about Christianity" (Sensoy, 2009a, p. 327). It is automatically assumed that "everyone in the class if familiar with Christian traditions" (2009a, p. 327) and as a result, the practices and faith of the dominant group(s) are portrayed as normal and familiar, while other religious and cultural beliefs and rituals become marginalized and superficial. This also reinforces the idea that non-Christian beliefs and traditions are only worthy of being presented once a year at a time when Christmas celebrations dominate the curriculum and class and school activities (Sensoy, 2009a, p. 327).

Goldstein (2000), also considers "the legacy of institutionalized Christianity in Canadian public schools" (Goldstein, 2000, p. 99), and the impact that this legacy has had not only on herself, as both a Jewish student and now as an educator, but also on other non-Christian students in the public school system. Goldstein describes the predominance of Christian traditions in her public school classroom when she was a student, from the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and a Christian hymn at the onset of the school day, to the month of December, where Christmas was celebrated through carolling and a variety of other activities (Goldstein, 2000, p. 100-101).

One of these activities was the decorating of the classroom door, and while the door was decorated for every month of the school year, Goldstein, who was in charge of the door for the month of December felt compelled to decorate it with a Christmas theme (Goldstein, 2000, p. 101). Goldstein writes of how pleased she and her teacher were at the poster she created for the classroom, so much so in fact, that Goldstein recreated a menorah poster made of lollipops for the Hanukkah celebrations at her home (2000, p. 101). Looking back on this, Goldstein reflects, "it never occurred to me to decorate the classroom door with a menorah. The classroom door of

the public school was for posters of Christmas trees; menorah posters were for our private celebrations at home" (p. 101).

Goldstein's experience reflects the broader sense of alienation and otherness which non-Christian students may experience in public schools during the month of December, and also at other times throughout the academic year. As they participate in these activities, non-Christian students may not even realize that they are essentially celebrating Christmas and other Christian traditions while they are at school, while their own celebrations, traditions, and even a part of their identity are left unshared, limited to their own personal lives outside of school hours (Goldstein, 2000, p. 101; Imam, 2009). As Sweet (1997) argues, this lack of acknowledgement not only alienates students from non-dominant religious groups, but also makes them feel insignificant. As a result, these students' (and their parents') want for inclusion may motivate some parents to enroll their children in private religious schools, an inclination which has also been noticed by Zine (2008). As Sweet (1997) notes,

> [w]hen religion is denied and/or ignored in schools, a clear message is conveyed: Religious belief isn't significant enough to study, and the people who hold religious beliefs aren't worthy of our time and attention. If, instead, neighbourhood public schools honoured the diversity of religious belief in more than the superficial ways of dress, food, and festivals, I suspect that many religiously moderate parents would be much less motivated to put their children in independent religious schools (p. 239).

If parents, teachers, and students recognize and object to the dominance of Christmas themed activities and lessons, and/or the lack of other religions being represented at this time of year, it is seen an attack on Christmas and Christian values, made by "multiculturalists...who want to kill Santa" (Sensoy, 2009a, p. 324). Even when accommodations for non-Christian students and/or holidays and traditions are suggested, tensions can arise, as Goldstein (2000) experienced with her fellow teachers when she suggested that the annual Christmas door

decorating contest which took place at the school where they taught be changed to a "holiday" door decorating contest (p. 103). While Goldstein "meant other holiday themes in addition to Christmas themes" (2000, p. 103), she describes the resentment and anger of her colleagues, who accused her of stealing Christmas, and believed that "the only reason [she] was so interested in "holiday" doors was because [she] was Jewish and...wanted everyone to celebrate Hanukkah instead of Christmas" (Goldstein, 2000, p. 103).

The Christian privilege which has long been taken for granted and has remained (for the most part) unchallenged is now being contested as Canada's public schools become increasingly diverse. And as the number of non-Christian students continues to grow, so too does the tension and apprehension over what many now see as the preferential treatment of non-dominant religious groups, and the threat they pose to Christian holidays and traditions (Bascaramurty and Friesen, 2011, Browne, 2011, Goldstein, 2000, Imam, 2009, Sensoy, 2009a)**.** In their efforts to uphold traditional Christian celebrations such as Christmas without offending the growing number of students and parents belonging to non-dominant religious groups, a number of schools and administrators are now unsure of how to deal with religious accommodation during the holidays.

Regrettably, rather than make the effort to accommodate or to incorporate a variety of religious traditions and celebrations into the holiday curriculum, many boards and administrators have simply begun to remove any mention or celebration of religion and religious traditions from their schools. As Bascaramurty and Friesen (2011) report, it is becoming increasingly common for school administrators to cancel or heavily scale back Christmas celebrations in order to accommodate non-Christian students. In December of 2011, when Mihairi Rowland, the principal of a school in Embrun, Ontario chose to cancel the school's annual Christmas concert

because nine students did not want to take part, she received over 300 angry e-mails from across the country (Bascaramuty & Friesen, 2011, para.1). The situation in Embrun is not unique, as many other schools, and even municipalities, struggle with how to maintain the status quo while also becoming more inclusive and embracing religious and cultural diversity. Instead of addressing the issues and concerns at hand, they either abolish Christmas traditions, or they rename them, such as the "Holiday Trees" which have been (controversially) becoming more commonplace in municipalities across North America, including the tree gracing the Town Hall of the Innisfil, Ontario (Browne, 2011, para.5).

It is unfortunate that rather than celebrating pluralism and diversity by including diverse traditions in addition to Christmas, that Christmas is simply being removed in the name of political correctness. Nadir Shirazi, who runs a religious accommodation consultancy in Ontario notes that "many managers and administrators are taking a pre-emptive approach. They radically overhaul tradition before requests for accommodation even come in - effectively swatting flies with a sledgehammer" (Bascaramurty and Friesen, 2011, para.8). On a similar note, Sensoy (2009a) argues that

> ...we must do more than dilute our faith-based practices (which have deep and historical meanings to us) into nondescript "friendship trees." Rather, young people must become comfortable with discomfort and tension and develop the skills with which to see structurally conferred dominance of some groups over others" (p. 329).

As Goldstein (2000) experienced firsthand, when non-Christians suggest inclusiveness and incorporating other holidays into the curriculum, or into public traditions, it is seen as a threat, thus exacerbating feelings of resentment and even prejudice. If public schools and other civic institutions continue to avoid or remove religion in the classroom, especially while accommodating increasing numbers of non-dominant religious groups, negative attitudes

towards pluralism and religious diversity will inevitably increase. Unfortunately, it will be students belonging to non-dominant religious groups who will likely be targeted, and even blamed, as has already been the case.

Accommodation or Assimilation? The Religious Accommodation of Non-Dominant Religious Groups

Legally, freedom of religion and religious practice is protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Ontario Human Rights Code, and accommodations based on religious needs are done in accordance with these laws. However, it is clear that despite these rulings and policies, school boards have still struggled with creating and implementing their own religious accommodation policies. In 2009, the Ministry of Education found that despite the growing number of religious minorities in Ontario, "only twelve boards [out of Ontario's seventy-two] report that they have policies or guidelines relating to religious accommodation, and only three of those could be considered comprehensive" (Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 9)."

Recognizing the urgent requirement to address the religious needs of Ontario's students, an increasing number of whom belong to either non-dominant religious groups or have no religious affiliation, the Ministry of Education (MOE) ensured that the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009a) or PPM No. 119 (2009b) required all school boards to implement inclusive education policies, including religious accommodation guidelines, by September 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2009b). On religious accommodation specifically, PPM No. 119 (2009b) outlines that:

> School board policies on religious accommodation must be in accordance with the Ontario Human Rights Code and the requirements stated in Policy/Program Memoranda No. 108, "Opening or Closing Exercises in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools", and No. 112, "Education About Religion in the Public Elementary and Secondary

> Schools". As part of their new or revised equity and inclusive education policy and implementation plan, boards will include a religious accommodation guideline in keeping with the Ontario Human Rights Code, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of creed (includes religion) and imposes a duty to accommodate. Accordingly, boards are expected to take appropriate steps to provide religious accommodation for students and staff (Ministry of Education, 2009b).

The Ontario Education Services Corporation (OESC) has developed a religious accommodation template which Ontario's school boards may adopt, in accordance with PPM No. 119 (Walpole, 2009). The OESC templates and guidelines are quite comprehensive, focusing on accommodating non-dominant religious groups, including, but not limited to, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims. The policy covers requests for accommodation, the role of staff and students, various religious holidays, what is considered "undue hardship" (OESC, p. 2, n.d.), and areas of accommodation such as prayers, religious dress, dietary needs (p. 4), etc. Of course, the religious accommodations made by school boards and administrators must also be reasonable and not cause undue hardship, and the measures taken must consider the needs of both the school and the students involved.

As these new guidelines demonstrate, multicultural and anti-racism education initiatives are now much more comprehensive and thorough, addressing a number of factors and concerns in addition to, rather than only, race and cultural background. As Rezai-Rashti (1994) recommends, "[t]he definition of anti-racist education should be more inclusive; anti-racism should include issues of ethnicity and religion...we should understand that the process of exclusion does not always occur because of colour differences" (Rezai-Rashti, 1994, p. 38).

As previously noted, this is something which has been advocated for by several educators and academics working in the field of anti-racism and multicultural education (Dei, 1996, 2008; Goldstein, 2000; May & Sleeter, 2010; Rezai-Rashti, 1994, 1997; Sensoy, 2006, 2009a; Sensoy

& Stonebanks, 2009; Sweet, 1997), and it is promising that, in Ontario at least, the Ministry of Education has taken heed of these recommendations and recognized the need to address the needs of the province's religiously diverse student population. All of the province's public schools must adopt religious and cultural (in addition to other) accommodation policies which are in compliance with the Equity and Inclusive Education strategy.

However, while the Ministry of Education, school boards, administrators, and teachers have been developing inclusive education strategies which consider how to implement religious accommodation policies, there is still a great deal of public wariness and uncertainty about these accommodations.

Hughes (1994) believes that resistance to addressing religion in public schools, particularly when it comes to the beliefs and/or accommodation of non-dominant religious (and cultural) groups, stems from a fear of change (Hughes, 1994, p. 4). Sweet (1997) also cites a fear of change as one of the factors motivating the opposition to religious accommodation in public schools. Social change is inevitable, as can be seen by the changing demographics of the student population in what have traditionally been Judeo-Christian, predominantly White countries. According to Statistics Canada, by 2031, "the percentage of the population belonging to non-Christian denominations will nearly double, to 15 per cent. At the same time those professing a Christian faith will decline by 10 percentage points to 64 per cent" (Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011, para. 6). This is a marked difference from just 20 years ago, when approximately 85 per cent of Canadians were Christian (Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011, para. 6).

Perhaps due to this fear of change, as well as the resistance to what is often perceived as an encroaching threat to Western norms and values, the accommodation of non-dominant religious groups is particularly controversial. This has been demonstrated by the reaction to the

religious accommodations made at PGMS, which allow for Muslim students to pray on school property, during school hours. The debate surrounding these prayers is just one recent example of the widespread controversy which can result when religious accommodations are made in schools, as a number of those both against and in support of the prayers are members of the general public with no (known) affiliation to the school or the school community (M. Anderson, personal communication, Nov. 15th, 2011).

Public vs. Private: The Growing Popularity of Separate Religious Schools

While there are a variety of reasons for why parents may opt to place their children in spate religious schools, parents of students who come from non-Christian backgrounds may feel the need to do so due to prejudice, ignorance, or discrimination. These parents may also feel that their religious beliefs will not be accommodated in the public school system, and as a result, they may then send their children to private religious schools where they can practice and observe their religion more freely. In fact, this is something which many of those objecting to the PGMS prayers and other cases of religious accommodation in public schools have advocated. Barbara Kay (2011) states that "[i]f Muslims feel it is so important to pray five times a day, stop their ears to music and all the rest, let them fund their own schools" (Gurney, Kay, & Libin, 2011, para.4) while Blizzard (2011) writes that "Jewish parents have been paying to educate their children in their own schools for generations and that perhaps the parents at Pine Grove should do likewise" (para.22). Several others have also argued that students seeking accommodation based on religious grounds should instead attend privately funded religious schools

In Ontario, many parents *are* now choosing to send their children to either publicly funded Catholic schools, or private religious schools, which are becoming an increasingly more

popular option. There are currently over 600, 000 students enrolled in Ontario's Roman Catholic separate school system (Artuso, 2012, para.19), supported by "2.3 million Catholic ratepayers" (para.19). The number of students enrolled in independent private schools in Ontario has increased significantly over the past several decades, moving "from 1.9 percent of the student population in 1960 to 5.6 percent in 2006" (Van Pelt, P. Allison, & D. Allison, 2007, p.3).

While there are a number of reasons for why parents may choose religious schools for their children, it is a matter of concern if they are doing so solely because they do not feel respected and/or included in the public school system. Many parents belonging to non-dominant religious groups are becoming increasingly frustrated, and the growing popularity of private religious schools is by no means limited to the Muslim community. Throughout her research, Sweet (1997) spoke to Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian parents who had made the decision to send their children to separate religious schools, undeterred by the cost of tuition. When asked about her choice to send her daughter to a Hebrew Day school, a Jewish parent stated that the public system "says it celebrates diversity, but it seems to deal with it by turning it into nothing" (Sweet, 1997, p. 111).

Even those who chose to continue with the public school system expressed concern over the challenge that their children faced due to their religious and/or cultural background. One Sikh parent who spoke to Sweet (1997) described the "agony" experienced by his six-year old son due to the fact that, in accordance with the Sikh faith, his hair was wrapped into a bun and tied with a white handkerchief (p. 15). According to the parent, many other Sikh students also faced bullying and ridicule due to their religious practices and customs, and as a last resort, many Sikh parents chose to cut their children's hair (going against one of the tenets of their faith) in "a final, desperate attempt to stop the harassment" (p. 15). Sweet reflects that although she personally

does not support the idea of separate religious schools, there is "[l]ittle wonder that many parents who are members of minority religions feel that their only hope lies in putting their children in their own, religiously based schools" (1997, p. 15).

Sweet (1997) believes that students should be taught about different religions in school, as a part of the curriculum in order to develop "religious literacy" (p. 239) in childhood. As mandated by the Ontario Court of Appeal in its 1990 Guidelines, education *about* religion is permitted, so long as it does not indoctrinate, nor favour any one religion (Black-Branch, 1995, p. 24). Sweet (1997) asserts that "[i]n our multicultural, multi-faith society, the classroom is a perfect place to begin education children about religious differences" (p. 239). She further argues that,

> [i]f there is no teaching about the beliefs of different faith systems and how those beliefs are expressed in the daily lives of followers, how can children possibly begin to gain an appreciation for those who differ from them in their religious convictions? (Sweet, 1997, p. 239)

Public schools have the option to truly make an effort to honour religious diversity. This may be done through teacher education initiatives, lessons on various religions and religious practices, incorporating celebrations or common themes of diverse religions into the curriculum throughout the year, or including religion in discussions about diversity, respect, and multiculturalism.

Without such measures, ignorance and lack of understanding of religions will continue, particularly as the number of students belonging to non-dominant religious groups attending separate religious school increases. Referring to the daily incidents of religiously based discrimination and ridicule faced by his young son, a Sikh parent lamented, "[t]his happens because they don't understand our religion...[w]hy can't there be a class in school to teach children about all the religions?" (Sweet,1997, p.15). And while it has been argued, for example

in the case of the PGMS prayers, that those seeking religious accommodations or acknowledgement are receiving preferential treatment and pose a threat to long standing norms and traditions (Bascaramurty and Friesen, 2011), as the Sikh parent makes clear, that is not always the case. He, like many other religious parents, envisions a public school system where all beliefs are respected and acknowledged, and mutual respect and pluralism is not undermined by religious difference or misunderstanding. He states, "[w]e want respect and equality for all children, not just our own. We want the children to get firsthand knowledge of all the religions because they all have to live together" (Sweet, 1997, p. 15).

While this vision of a religiously pluralistic and welcoming public school system may seem utopian, it is both a noble and increasingly necessary aim. Whether it is a realistic and achievable goal however, remains to be seen, and will require a great deal of effort and conviction from teachers, students, school administrators, and the general public, particularly given the current state of affairs and recent events such as the reaction to the PGMS prayers.

Sweet's suggestion has merit, and is well worth considering. Already in Ontario, declining enrolment in public schools is becoming problematic, leading to school closures and a shortage of teaching and support staff employment opportunities in the public education sector (Levac & Newman, 2008, p. 1). The only region of the province which has, and will continue to see steady, even increasing student enrolment in public schools is the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), due to ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse migrants moving to the area (Levac & Newman, 2008, p. 2). Other areas of the province have seen similar trends, and Rachel Olivero, diversity officer for a large, ethnically and religiously diverse school board in South-western Ontario, like Sweet, believes that the increasing popularity of separate religious schools may be one of the (many) factors for declining enrollment in public schools. Olivero noted that

religious schools have flourished in her district, and stated that this is likely to continue unless educators consider how to reasonably and fairly address the needs of all students, including those from non-dominant religious groups (R. Olivero, personal communication, Oct. 6th, 2011).

Religious Discrimination & Post-Colonial Views of Islam and Muslims as "the Other"

There is extensive literature on what Said (2003) calls "the Orient" (p. 1) (the geographical region in close proximity to Europe which is now most commonly referred to as 'the Muslim world' or 'the Middle East'), which Said describes as being "not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and riches and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (Said, 1979, p. 1). It is this idea of 'otherness' which is still prevalent across Europe and North America, and it is Muslims and Islam who are often the inferior, oppressed, backwards, and monolithic other. In *Covering Islam,* Said (1997) writes:

> In no really significant way is there a direct correspondence between the "Islam" in common Western usage and the enormously varies life that goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800 million people, its millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies cultures. On the other hand, "Islam" is peculiarly traumatic news today in the West... (Said, 1997, x)

Unfortunately, the intense media coverage of Islam and Muslims which has followed in the aftermath of 9/11 has been even more loaded with sweeping generalizations of an angry, oppressed, and violent 'Islamist' population who are ready at any moment to take up arms and fight *jihad* against the 'infidel' West. Even those who know and understand that is not only unreasonable, but illogical to make such assumptions about such a vast and incredibly diverse and geographically outspread population can still fall prey to misconceptions and stereotypical views and opinions, and educators are far from immune.

These assumptions and beliefs tend to cast Islam and other non-Western religions as inferior, and often even as backwards and oppressive, particularly in relation to their own experiences, beliefs, and perceived freedoms and liberties. The opinion of Muslims as the "other" has been exacerbated by the fact that demographic changes in recent years have led to a growing Muslim population in Canada and the West. This is particularly true in schools, where a growing number of religious accommodation cases now involve non-dominant religious groups. As Sweet (1997) observes, these individuals are targeted for being "un-Canadian members of minority religions who attempt to cling to their religious symbols" (Sweet, 1997, p.5). Similar sentiments have been reflected in many of the objections to the PGMS prayers, which have been based upon the belief that the accommodation of Muslim students has gone too far and represents an encroachment of religious and ideological extremism (Kheiriddin, 2011a; Mallick, 2011a, 2011b; Selley, 2011a, 2011b; Teitel, 2011). Ironically though**,** it can be argued that "a readiness to change the system to accommodate people-undermines fundamentalism...[i]f people feel rejected by a society, then religion becomes more of their identity, and that fosters fundamentalism" (Batelaan, as cited in Sweet, 1997, p. 132).

Sweet also continues on to note that while conducting her research on the role of religion in education, she often heard the discriminatory axiom "If they don't want to be like us, why don't they go back to where they came from?" (1997, p. 5). This attitude has been prevalent amongst those objecting to the prayers at PGMS, in both the signs and slogans used in the protests against the prayers (Vu, 2011), as well as the comments posted in response to newspaper and online articles covering the issue (Bootlegger1, 2011).

These attitudes unfortunately result in a tendency to view students requesting accommodation, and others who belong to their faith, as a foreign menace who pose a clear and

present danger because their religious beliefs and practices are considered to be incongruent with Canadian values. This is especially true when it is Muslim students who are requesting accommodation, particularly Muslim women and girls. However, Zine (2012) notes that "[d]espite public concern over the integration of Canadian Muslims" (p. 7), a survey conducted between 2006 to 2007 found that "although about 90 percent of Canadian Muslims were born outside of the country, a vast majority articulated a strong sense of attachment to Canada" (Zine, 2012, p. 7). Furthermore, Zine (2012) reports that of the 500 Muslim adults surveyed, "94 percent said they were proud to be Canadian, a figure that matches the national average of 94 percent" (p. 7).

Unfortunately, despite these findings, the perception of Muslims as the "other," incongruent with, and even a threat to, Canadian society and values prevails, as the literature, as well as the media and public reaction to the PGMS prayers, has shown.

The Veiled, Oppressed, "Other:" Muslim Women in the Media and Public Perceptions

Rezai-Rashti (1999) writes about the "colonial attitudes on the part of educators towards Muslims, especially in their views on gender issues in Muslim culture" (1999, p. 49), and notes that "educators, administrators, and students alike still rely on the old stereotypes as well as on the more recent popular images of Muslims portrayed by the media" (p. 50). Rezai-Rashti refers to this phenomenon as "the persistence of the essentialist colonial discourse, in which educators implicitly and explicitly express their ideas of Western superiority in relation to Islam and Muslim women" (p. 47). Whether or not these views are vocalized or outwardly expressed, they are often evident, particularly to Muslim students. For example, Rezai-Rashti notes that educators may view the *hijab* as oppressive and forced upon female Muslim students against their will (p. 51), or that students may even take advantage of teachers' misunderstanding and

stereotypical views of Muslims and racial/cultural minorities as an excuse for not completing assigned work, such as the student who convinced her principal that studying mathematics is against Islam (p. 53).

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2006) also discuss educators' perceptions of Muslims and Islam and the stereotypical attitudes that are held towards them, particularly in relation to "gender oppression in the archetypal "Muslim Woman"' (p. 1). The authors conducted research through interviews and discussions with "predominantly White, female student teachers" (p. 1), in which they looked at and discussed media images (taken from news media images, advertising, etc.) of Muslim women. They use binaries (p. 2) in their analysis, and one which was prevalent throughout both the media images and also the discussions was the binary of "the oppressed [Muslim] woman versus the liberated White U.S. woman" (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2006, p. 3). One image, taken from an advertisement, is especially striking and illustrative of this binary, featuring a veiled Muslim woman and a White American woman. Of the Muslim woman, the Sensoy and DiAngelo (2006) write "her makeup, and her features are thick and dark. These are signifiers of non-White ethnicity" (p. 4) while the American woman pictured alongside is "in stark contrast...the model's makeup has been naturalized and her skin lightened. The veil has been replaced by a white shirt and a baseball cap, a classic symbol of "America"' (2006, p. 4). While the Muslim woman is pictured as silent and serious, unsmiling, the American woman is laughing, her mouth "wide open and smiling, signalling voice and freedom" (p. 4). Unsurprisingly, the preservice teachers involved in the study saw the American woman as "familiar, neutral and unremarkable" (2006, p. 4), while the Muslim woman became "the Other" (p. 4).

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2006) also come across the common perception that Muslim women are inherently less privileged and liberated than non-Muslim women or women living in the West. As one teacher commented, "I'm so glad that I'm not a Muslim woman in the Middle East. I can't even imagine that existence" (2006, p. 5). The teachers consistently viewed the Muslim women in the images as oppressed, while they considered themselves to be liberated and much more fortunate, unaware of (or unwilling to acknowledge) the gender oppression which also exists in 'the West,' impacting them in their daily lives (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2006, p. 1). The authors further note that in their research, "White female student teachers use a language of "culture clash" in an effort to reconcile the ambiguities of their position as liberated in relation to Muslim women's positions as oppressed" (2006, p. 10).

Those objecting to what they perceive as mistreatment and injustice towards Muslim women, such as the teacher candidates interviewed in Sensoy and DiAngelo's study (2006), or those objecting to the PGMS prayers, often make assumptions about Muslim women and girls based on their own personal experiences and beliefs, which are implied to be not only superior, but as the ideal standard for all women. Rezai-Rashti (1994) discusses stereotypes held by many about Muslim women being "backward, oppressed, secluded, and battered victims" (p. 37) and stresses that while oppression and mistreatment must not be ignored or denied, she opposes "the Eurocentric attitude that Muslim women should abandon their culture and religion and conform to western culture in order to approve their status" (p. 37). This is particularly important since domestic violence and other forms of discrimination and violence against women are prevalent across the world and in a number of nations and cultures, including North America. Additionally, some religious or cultural symbols and religious practices among Muslim women which are seen as oppressive and unfathomable by many in the West, may be seen as empowering or even as a

form of resistance by those who adopt and practice them (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009, para.15). What Marshall and Sensoy (2009) stress is that the situations of Muslim women must be taken in context, rather than making sweeping generalizations and assumptions. The authors cite the fact that it is illegal to wear the hijab in public areas in Turkey, a Middle Eastern country with a predominantly Muslim population (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009, para.15), while in Afghanistan, women hid video cameras under their burqas to document abuses and crimes committed by the Taliban (para.15). Marshall and Sensoy (2009) argue that

> It is problematic to wholly and simplistically equate women's oppression with the burqa, just as it would be problematic to claim that once Western women stop using make-up to cover their faces, it will mean an end to domestic violence in the United States and Canada (para.16).

As problematic and simplistic as it may be to focus only on the negative perceptions or views of the niqab, hijab, and other religious symbols and practices, this is unfortunately commonplace when the discussion involves Muslim women, particularly in the media. Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2008) discuss a column written by *The Globe and Mail* columnist Margaret Wente (2006) in which Wente is said to be

> imploring Muslim women to unveil and by so doing to succumb to the civilizing influences of the West. Wente, in fact, draws on familiar tropes of the Muslim subject as the *alien* other through invoking discourses about veiling as a signifier of radical Islam. In this sense, Muslim veiled women are presented as failing to assimilate to *our* ways of life and customs and, in this sense are cast as refusing to integrate into Canadian society (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008, p. 428).

In her aptly titled article "Loving Muslim Women with a Vengeance: The West, Women, and Fundamentalism" (2004), Loubna Skalli also writes of the popular perception amongst both the media and the public that Muslim women "are victims of oppressive veils and walls of seclusion, awaiting delivery by the West, even if this comes in the garb of "shock and awe" military intervention" (p. 43). This mentality has been overwhelmingly evident in the media

coverage of the PGMS prayers, where the focus has been on the perception of the Muslim female students as oppressed and in need of assistance or outside intervention (Kheiriddin, 2011a, 2011b; Mallick, 2011a, 2011b).

Skalli (2004) recognizes that subjugation and violence towards Muslim women does take place in the name of Islam. She discusses religious extremism as it manifests itself in the "policing of women's bodies and lives and a retraditionalization of the Muslim family" (p. 44). However, she argues that rather than stemming directly from, or being a part of religious rulings and scriptures, these restrictions and oppressions of Muslim women are actually considered by extremists as an effective tactic to challenge Western imperialism and influence (Skalli, 2004, p. 44). Interestingly, Skalli (20004) notes that:

> Muslim fundamentalists, however, are neither unique nor original in their strategic use of Muslim women to advance their politico-religious agendas. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, European colonial powers saw in Muslim women a strategic tool for pacifying Arab-Muslim societies and domesticating the rebellious indigenous population. Both patriarchal ideologies have been strikingly naïve in assuming that Muslim women can be manipulated at ease with great obedience and little resistance (p. 45).

According to Sensoy and Marshall (2009), the idea of the oppressed Muslim woman requiring Western aid and intervention is also present in contemporary young adult novels which are frequently read in classrooms and/or stocked in school libraries. The authors critically examine these works, noting that "[y]oung adult titles that focus on the lives of Muslim girls in the Middle East, written predominantly by white women, have appeared in increasing numbers since Sept. 11, 2001" (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009, para.1) and that:

> [e]ach [novel] features a young heroine trapped in a violent Middle East from which she must escape or save herself, her family, and other innocents in the region. Authors portray Muslim girls overwhelmingly as characters haunted by a sad past, on the cusp of a (usually arranged) marriage, or impoverished and wishing for the freedoms that are often assigned to the West, such as education, safety and prosperity (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009, para.1).

These novels, such as *The Breadwinner* trilogy by Deborah Ellis, a celebrated Canadian author (who I too greatly admire), are frequently used in classroom book lists, novel studies, and featured in lessons. However, as Marshall and Sensoy (2009) argue, these novels need to be examined critically, particularly as they are geared towards young adult audiences and written by White, non-Muslim women living in the West. The authors outline three common stereotypes found in these novels, the first being that "Muslim Girls Are Veiled, Nameless, and Silent" (Marshall and Sensoy, 2009, para.5), the second that "Veiled = Oppressed" (para.13), and the third that "Muslim Girls and Women Want To Be Saved by the West" (para.24). As discussed earlier, these are common misconceptions about Muslim women and girls; however the fact that these stereotypes are so pervasive that they are now the subject matter of young adult literature is a matter of great concern. It is important to consider that these novels are "marketed and consumed in the West consistently reinforce[ing] the idea that Muslim women are *inherently* oppressed, that they are oppressed in ways that Western women are not, and that this oppression is a function of Islam" (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009, para.22).

Interestingly, several authors (Abo-Zena, Sahli, & Tobias-Nahi, 2009; Bayoumi, 2009; Imam, 2009; Khan, 2009; Mossali, 2009; Zine, 2001, 2008) have researched and/or interviewed female Muslim students about their experiences as Muslim women, the hijab (veil), and gender stereotypes, and the students' responses challenge, and are even contradictory to, the pervasive view of Muslim women as oppressed. In fact, female students spoke of the hijab as being a deliberate and purposeful choice they made for themselves (Abo-Zena, Sahli, & Tobias-Nahi, 2009, Bayoumi, 2009), something which they felt was liberating and a source of pride, courage, and confidence (Abo-Zena, Sahli, & Tobias-Nahi, 2009), and even as a form of resistance to social and peer pressure (Zine, 2001, 2008).

Of course, this is not to imply that every single Muslim woman who wears the veil does so by choice, or sees it as a form of liberation. It is also not meant to overlook the fact that Muslim women who choose not to cover may themselves feel ostracized or judged for their decision. However, given that the media, and ingrained post-colonial attitudes of Western superiority and freedom infer that the veil is inherently oppressive and a symbol of dominance, control, and subjugation, it is essential to highlight the fact that many Muslim women challenge these stereotypes through their convictions and their view of the hijab as a form of liberation, rather than oppression. Reflecting on the results of their research, Abo-Zena, Sahli, & Tobias-Nahi (2009) write (of women who wear hijab):

> [r]ather than allowing others to judge their physical appearance, they expect to be valued for their deeds, character, and intelligence. Thus, these narratives about the hijab actively counter and respond to discourse that is deeply engrained in popular society regarding gender and veiling (p. 17).

Muslims and Islam in the Popular Media

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Said examines how British imperialism manifested itself in the works of, and was even supported by lauded authors such as "a great artist like Kipling (few more imperialist and reactionary than he)" (Said, 1994, p. xxi) in their much celebrated novels. Considering more recent manifestations of the Orientalist discourse, Said (2003) reflects that,

> One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of "the mysterious Orient" (Said, 2003, p. 26)

Similarly, Jack Shaheen's work (1984, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2008) considers depictions of Muslims and Islam in popular culture, such as blockbuster Hollywood movies and television

shows (both before and after 9/11), while Ozlem Sensoy (2006, 2008, 2010, 2011) studies portrayals of Muslims and Arabs in a variety of media, from newspapers and magazines to *Bugs Bunny* cartoons. Both Shaheen and Sensoy's work critiques the stereotypical, violent, and overwhelmingly negative portrayals of Muslims and Arabs in the media, and examine the effect that these depictions have on audiences' perceptions of Islam and its' followers. Several other authors also have written about the Western media's portrayal of Islam (Bayoumi, 2009, Haque, 2004, Imam, 2009, et al.[5]) and all have argued that this media bias intensifies negative perceptions of Islam.

Unfortunately, these perceptions are usually then internalized and often result in Islamophobia and/or animosity and distrust towards Muslims, and Muslim students in North American public schools are far from immune. Even more troubling is that it is not only Muslim students' peers who may be influenced by negative media representations of Islam, but also their teachers. Sensoy (2006) examines this phenomenon thoroughly in her article "I Wouldn't Want to be a Muslim Woman Living in the Middle East," which, as the title suggests, exposes many biases and assumptions teachers make about Muslim women, both based on and supported by images taken from the media and popular culture.

Haque (2004) argues that while "the media that is responsible for fanning anti-Muslim sentiment in the West should be used instead to mitigate feelings of Islamophobia among the general public" (p.13). I agree that the media should challenge stereotypes and the overwhelmingly negative portrayals and coverage of Muslims and Islam, particularly as the

[5] Bayoumi, 2009; Haque, 2004; Imam, 2009; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, Marshall and Sensoy, 2009; Rizvi, 2005; Said, 1997, 2003; Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009; Shaheen, 1984, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2008; Skalli, 2004; Steinberg, et al., 2010; Watt, 2008

media's reach and influence, especially given the ease of access now available to information, popular culture, and media through digital means, is ever more pervasive.

As Shaheen (1984, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2008) and others (Bayoumi, 2009; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, Marshall, & Sensoy, 2009; Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009; Sensoy, 2010; Steinberg, et al., 2010) have shown, Hollywood movies, television dramas, and even children's cartoons have repeatedly and regularly depicted Muslims, Islam, and individuals from the Middle East (traits which are often used interchangeably to describe Muslims) in an unfavourable or stereotypical manner. This is of course a matter of concern, particularly as these forms of entertainment media are enjoyed by millions of viewers and consumers of all ages.

The Misrepresentation of Islam in School Textbooks, Curriculum, and Teachers' Knowledge and/or Lessons

Unfortunately, misunderstanding, and even blatant discrimination towards Muslims and Islam is not limited 'only' to Hollywood movies and magazine advertisements. As several authors have found in their research and personal experiences, the misrepresentation and stereotypical attitudes towards Islam and/or Muslim students is ever present in public schools (particularly after 9/11), whether it be in administrators' and teachers' treatment of their Muslim students (Bayoumi, 2009; Khan, 2009; Rezai-Rashti, 1999; Imam, 2009; van Driel, 2004; Zine, 2001, 2008) or in school textbooks and teachers' lesson plans (Imam, 2009; Sensoy, 2009; van Driel, 2004; Kincheloe et al. 2004, 2010). There are some truly disturbing incidents, such as a teacher telling "students in class that their God whom they call *Allah,* is not God. One teacher told a student when she said to the teacher she is Muslim that there is no such thing" (Imam, 2009, p. 48). Bayoumi (2009) tells the story of Yasmin, a spirited high school student who ran for the secretary position on her school's student government and won the election, but was later

forced to resign (or else be removed from the position) by her school's administration because she, as a Muslim was willing to help out with the school dances, but could not attend due to her religious convictions (Bayoumi, 2009, p. 83-114).

Other cases are not as extreme, but as they are more common, these incidents are also troubling. For example, Khan (2009) interviewed students who found that "because they were identified as Muslims they were mistakenly presumed, particularly by their teachers, to have knowledge about Islamic religious practices, other countries, and cultures" (p. 30). These students were then expected to act as ambassadors and/or authorities for Islam, often being singled out in their classrooms (Khan, 2009, p. 30). Rizvi (2005) tells of an incident which occurred in the early aftermath of the 9/11 attacks- a Muslim parent of Indian descent who took pride in his American citizenship and identity was distraught because his American born daughters were suddenly targeted for being Muslim:

> Both his daughters were now reluctant to go to school, and came home unhappy and agitated, often in tears. They told their parents they were subjected to constant name-calling, even from those who they had regarded as their close friends. They were called "terrorists," and their religion was repeatedly mocked. According the girls, even the teachers were not sympathetic, expressing stereotypes of Islam and constantly drawing attention to the fact that the girls were Muslim (Rizvi, 2005, p. 167).

As the experiences recounted by Bayoumi (2009), Imam (2009), Khan (2009), Rizvi (2009) and others reveal, the discrimination or mistreatment faced by a number of Muslim students in North American public schools, particularly after 9/11, is either ignored, or even exacerbated by teachers. Zine (2001) interviewed Muslim students about their experiences in Ontario public schools, and found that many of the students recounted experiences where their academic ability, personal beliefs, and experiences were prejudged based on stereotypes and assumptions. One student described how some teachers, particularly supply teachers, tended to show surprise at her presence (as a Muslim woman) in the classroom, and often spoke to her

slowly and in simplified English, until they heard her speak fluently and articulately (Zine, 2001, p. 409). She and another student also expressed frustration at the fact that despite achieving at an average, even above average, level academically, they were often placed in less rigorous and challenging non-academic courses, and they noted that this also happened to other students who were also cultural and/or racial minorities (Zine, 2001, p. 415). Zine believes that such experiences are the result of attitudes held by educators which "include a set of assumptions that have been formulated prior to their encounter [with students]" (2001, p. 409) and that "the identification of difference as foreignness and otherness is an attitude that often frames the relationships between Muslim students and teachers" (p. 409). Sweet (1997) stresses that "if children who are born into a household in which religion forms the basis for their identity attend a school that ignores or rejects that religious identity, then the children feel rejected as people" (p. 14). Indeed Zine (2001, 2003, 2008), who has researched and written extensively on the experiences of Muslim students in both Canadian Islamic schools and public schools writes, "[b]oth students and parents told me that public schools were failing to accommodate Muslim religious practices and holidays. They appreciated the centering of their religious knowledge, history, and practices in Islamic schools" (Zine, 2008, p. 102). It is worth noting that the work of Zine, a Pakistani Muslim woman, is driven by the fact that she dropped out of school when she was younger, "due to the pressures of racism and social difference" (Zine, 2001, p. 401). Imam (2009) also provides examples of the alienation and even discrimination that Muslim students experienced in public schools. Imam (2009), notes that, "for a long time, the message about Muslims and Islam in the mass media was loud and clear" (p. 45), goes on to describe an interview with a Muslim parent, who

> reported a disempowering conversation with a teacher in which the teacher wanted the high school student to be allowed to have a girlfriend and told the parent that, "a

> girlfriend would save him from other kinds of violence because he would have someone." As the interview continued, the parent noted that the teacher sympathetically revealed, "I know your people have these issues we hear about when we turn on the television" (Imam, 2009, p. 45).

While these are some of the more extreme (albeit not uncommon) instances of ignorance and even prejudice Imam came across, she noted that schools also failed to provide even basic information on religious holidays, such as the dates of major celebrations, to teachers and administration, which meant parents and students had to "inform the school or teacher ever year of beliefs, practices and holidays as if they are new [to the school]" (Imam, 2009, p. 48).

Also of concern, however, are the misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims in school resources, such as textbooks or novels currently used by teachers in classrooms across Canada (and elsewhere). Sensoy (2009b) analyzes "the visual representation of Muslims in world history and social studies textbooks published between 1996 and 1998...that are widely used in a school district in a major urban centre" (Sensoy, 2009b, p. 72). What Sensoy (2009b) found in her study was that the textbooks reinforced the idea of a uniform, monolithic "Muslim world and...Arab world" (p. 72) and that "the terms "Arabs" and "Muslims" are also often interchangeable in mainstream discourse" (p. 72), despite the fact that most of the countries with the highest Muslim populations (Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh) (Sensoy, p. 73) are not even in the region described as 'the Middle East' or 'Arab.' However Sensoy found that 78% of the Muslims depicted in textbooks reside are "located in the Middle East...[while] only 2% of this sample represented Muslims in Southeast Asia" (2009b, p. 74). While this may not seem to be a grievous error, it is appalling that textbooks used in school classrooms, specifically those meant to teach students about the worlds' populations, cultures, and religions, are so inaccurate and/or lacking in their representations of Muslims. Sensoy also notes that textbooks very rarely (32% of all images) depict Muslims in "contemporary urban environments (such as tall buildings,

factories or industrial sectors, technologies, urban infrastructures and finance)" (2009b, p. 77), thus reinforcing the "discourse of backwardness" (Sensoy, 2009b, p. 77) which tends to dominate the West's perception and opinion of Muslims and the Middle East. There are several other misrepresentations and stereotypes evident in Sensoy's study of the representation of Muslims and Islam in school textbooks, and what is most troubling is that these sources are seen as factual and reliable, and contain information which is taught, transmitted, and studied and learned in Canadian classrooms.

Riley (2009) makes a similar argument, but focuses on young adult fiction, in her thesis about *Bifocal*, a novel about the tensions between Muslim and Non-Muslim students at a Toronto area school after the terrorism related charges and arrests against the 'Toronto 18.' Krista argues that *Bifocal* and other multicultural young adult novels (as well as most multicultural education initiatives), "tend to smooth over differences and resolve problems at an individual and rather superficial level, rather than promoting critical awareness of racism and discrimination at the societal and institutional levels and encouraging students to challenge these existing power structures" (Mahmud, 2011, p. 6). Marshall, Sensoy, and Riley all rightfully argue that these novels should not by any means be excluded from the classroom, but rather, they must be used to engage students in a critical analysis of religious and cultural stereotypes which have become commonplace in the West, and the reasons for such depictions and attitudes. Additionally, stereotypical attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, often propagated by the media, can be challenged through education. I strongly agree with Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2008) who assert that,

> [b]y juxtaposing various ideological standpoints as they are articulated via the representational apparatus of the public media, spaces of resistance can be created in public schools and universities where students can be encouraged to develop a more

> critical media literacy that is capable of addressing the persistence of colonial discourses in the post-September 11 context (p. 428).

This could in fact be an informative and timely lesson(s), incorporated into the Ontario Language Arts Curriculum's Media Literacy component, and would enable educators and students to help make schools and other educational institutions and programs places where stereotypes and discrimination are challenged, rather than disseminated.

Despite the challenges facing Muslim students (as well as others belonging to non-dominant religious groups) however, Imam (2009), Khan (2009) and Zine (2001) emphasize that many students do manage to maintain their religious and cultural identities while also embracing Canadian and 'Western' values and having a strong sense of citizenship. Through her research, Zine (2001) has found that many "Muslim students were not only able to negotiate their religious identities, but to use their identities as a means of resistance to counteract their marginality within secular Eurocentric schools" (p. 401).

Chapter Summary

As the literature has shown, the role of religion in Ontario's public schools has long been a contentious one. This is particularly true post 9/11, where the accommodation of Muslim students has been seen as increasingly problematic, and where the media's depiction of Muslims and Islam has only served to exacerbate tensions and stereotypical attitudes towards Muslims in the West.

A number of themes in the literature were discussed, and these were: 1) the role of religion and Christian privilege in Ontario's public schools 2) the religious accommodation of non-dominant religious groups 3) the growing popularity of separate religious schools 4) religious discrimination & post-colonial views of Islam and Muslims as "the other" 5) Muslims

in the popular media 6) Muslim women in the media and public perceptions and 7) the misrepresentation of Islam in school textbooks, curriculum, and teachers' knowledge/lessons

While these seven themes cover a broad range of literature and discussion, they are all interrelated. The literature has shown that the role of religion in Ontario's public schools has long been a contentious and oft debated one. While Ontario Ministry of Education has developed and implemented Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119 in order to make the province's schools more inclusive and equitable for all students, including Muslims, such measures which are meant to respond to the province's changing demographics and the need to accommodate an increasingly diverse student population have made evident the long-standing Christian privilege which has become the norm in most, if not all of Ontario's publicly funded non-denominational schools. This in turn has resulted in media and public ire, particularly in response to the accommodation of Muslim students. Furthermore, as the literature has revealed, religious accommodation policies, as promising and necessary as they may be, are not always understood or properly implemented in all schools.

The literature reviewed also considers the experiences of Muslim students in North America's public schools, and the unique challenges and situations which many of these youth face in an education system which, at least in Ontario, has only recently acknowledged the need to address their distinct needs and concerns. The isolation or discrimination which some Muslim students in the West may feel is only exacerbated by the media's coverage of Muslims and Islam, particularly Muslim women, as it disseminates post-colonial stereotypes of Muslims as the "other," who pose a perceived threat to Western society.

The literature considered in this chapter examined the interplay between religion in schools and the role of the media, especially the portrayal of Muslims and Islam. However there

is no existing literature which looks specifically at how the religious accommodation of Muslim students in public schools is portrayed in the news media, or at what impact this coverage would have on students, the school community, and the public's perceptions of, and reactions to such accommodations being made.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature, and by focusing specifically on the PGMS prayers, the school community, and widespread and intense media and public response to them, these questions and concerns will be addressed in the subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology used in this study, as well as the rationale for why I have focused my research on the PGMS prayers and school community. Information is also provided on the research participants and the process of selecting them. Finally, the benefits and limitations of qualitative research approaches, particularly those such as the one employed in this study, are also considered.

Methodology

The methodology selected for this study was a qualitative case study analysis of PGMS through eight semi-structured interviews. These interviews were with five current PGMS students, a former parent and community volunteer involved in organizing the prayers, a student who organized a rally in support of the Lake Ontario District School Board (LODSB), and the school principal. While they can be time consuming, I believe that qualitative interviews were the most suitable method of collecting data for this study, as the primary interest throughout my research has been in learning more about the prayers from those in the PGMS community. Additionally, conducting interviews allowed me to address specific media and public concerns and questions about the prayers with participants, something which would have been limited, or even impossible if alternate research methods had been employed. In addition to the interviews, I also looked at sixty-five news media items on the topic of the PGMS prayers. More information about this discourse analysis, and how it was carried out, can be found in Chapter 4.

The interview questions (see Appendices D, E, and F) focused on both the prayers themselves, as well as the effects of the media attention and how it was/is understood and

experienced firsthand by Muslim students at the school. As Horrocks and King (2010) note, "most qualitative or mixed-method case studies...are principally concerned with understanding their participants' lived experience from their own position-to step inside their shoes as it were" (p. 142).

The perspective of others is important, meaningful, and worth sharing (Patton, 2002, p. 341) and this is especially pertinent as the voices of marginalized groups are often overlooked or understood from the perspectives and norms of the dominant group. This has been even more true since 9/11, as multicultural education and religious accommodation, particularly measures which consider the needs of Muslim students, have come under increased scrutiny and politicians and members of the public across Europe, the U.S., and Canada "assert that minority groups "integrate or accept dominant social, cultural linguistic and (especially) religious mores as the price of ongoing citizenship" (Modood, as cited in May & Sleeter, 2010, p. 2). Muslim students have been quoted in very few of the articles or news coverage reviewed for this study, and are often spoken for by many journalists covering the issue. The goal of this research is to give a voice to some of the students who have been attending the prayers, and to hear their experiences and concerns, particularly given the prolonged and widespread concerns and media attention surrounding the accommodation of Muslim students at PGMS. The lack of student perspectives and opinions in this media attention is concerning, as is the regular categorization of Muslim students in public schools as disadvantaged and powerless victims of their circumstances. Like Khan (2009), I want to "illustrate how youth are actively involved in transforming the marginalizing factors in their environment" (p. 28) and study "the potential of youth to be active agents of change in their own lives and in society" (Khan, p. 28). Additionally, prior to the interviews, I was interested in exploring whether the perspectives of the Muslim students at

PGMS would challenge the "narratives about [Muslims and Middle Easterners] which widely circulate in mainstream Canadian society and popular culture, [and] are reinforced in Canadian Schooling" (Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2011, p. 72). The interviews may be seen as "counterstories," (Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2011, p. 73) which "resist the master narratives about Islam and Muslims" (p. 73). '"[C]ounterstory" narratives" (Nelson, as cited in Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009, p. x) can be "utilized to empower and repair damaged group and individual identities that emerge from dominant-group constructs of Muslim people" (Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009, p. x). As the students at PGMS have not been represented or given a voice in the extensive media coverage of the prayers at their school, I hope that these interviews and my research have provided some of the students who were attending the prayers with an outlet, albeit on a very small scale, to openly and honestly express their own experiences and feelings about the prayers and the ensuing media coverage.

The Rationale behind Selecting Pine Grove Middle School

Initially my intended topic of study was to examine how the Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, or Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, specifically the religious accommodation guidelines, were being implemented in my former school board. I was also interested in teachers' perceptions of the policy and how they were applying it, particularly as the school board has very little religious and cultural diversity. At the time, I had assumed that religious accommodation was not only commonplace, but also accepted in more diverse regions of Ontario, particularly in the province's larger metropolitan centres and regions which tend to attract higher numbers of immigrants.

It is for this reason that I was quite surprised when the news coverage and objections to the PGMS prayers first began. While it initially seemed like an isolated response, as has been

mentioned elsewhere, the prayers received nationwide media attention and were the source of prolonged and intense debate, protest, and news coverage. Due to my own personal interest in the story, I was closely following the news coverage and I began to learn more about PGMS and the prayers taking place at the school. I was motivated to investigate why and how the prayers received so much attention and opposition, particularly as they had been taking place for several years without incident. I also found it alarming that while students at PGMS were often spoken for in the media, there were scarcely any articles interviewing students or recounting their firsthand opinions and experiences regarding the prayers.

As I am not a member of the PGMS community, or even a resident of the area in which the school, or the LODSB, is located, I was initially hesitant in focusing my research study on the school and the prayers. However, after receiving research ethics approval, I contacted members of the school community, including the principal and the adult community volunteer who is also a former PGMS parent. While the volunteer was initially wary at my motivations, due to the intense media coverage and the regular requests for comment or interviews which he had been receiving from news media outlets, he agreed to meet with me. He and his wife were subsequently very helpful, providing me with information about the prayers, recruiting students for interviews, and familiarizing me with the area and the school.

The PGMS prayers are not the only example of religious accommodation, particularly of Muslim students, that have been controversial or received public and media attention. However, they have proven to be an excellent topic for further study as they encompass religious accommodation, news media coverage, and anti-racism structural power analysis, which are all research interests of mine. Additionally, while other cases of religious accommodation may have received some degree of media and public scrutiny, the scale and degree of media attention

surrounding the PGMS prayers is unprecedented, and the reaction to the prayers has revealed a great deal of public wariness, resentment, and uncertainty about the changing religious and cultural demographics in Ontario's public schools, and the (real and perceived) implications of these changes.

Data Collection

All of the interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder. I ensured that all participants knew that they would be recorded, and this fact was stated clearly in the consent form. I also reminded participants at the time of the interviews that they would be recorded, if they were still comfortable with my doing so. I realize that students may have felt uncomfortable at being taped, and I made clear to them that the interviews will be completely private and all recordings (both those on the recorder and those stored in mp3 format on my computer) will be destroyed upon completion of my M.Ed degree requirements. In addition, as suggested by Horrocks and King (2010), I turned on the recorder as promptly as possible, and preferred to do so as I was explaining the interview protocol, rather than waiting until the moment the interviewee began answering questions, which could have potentially made them more self-conscious about being recorded (p. 46). I had initially thought that for confidentiality and liability reasons, the PGMS principal may have declined being recorded, and had prepared to make detailed handwritten notes if this had been the case. However, the principal was comfortable with being recorded for the entirety of our conversation.

I also let all of the participants know that they can contact me at any time with questions and/or concerns and that I will also alert them once the research has been published, if they have requested that I do so.

As I was dealing with minors, there were also ethical concerns in conducting this research. I of course required parental consent prior to students participating in interviews and I also ensured, through my Letter of Information and personal communication that both students and their parents/guardians knew what the research involved, its purposes, and that they had the option of withdrawing or refusing to participate at anytime without being penalized. As I had not previously met any of the participants and am not a member of the PGMS community, I also informed students and parents that they had the option of contacting me at any time with their questions and concerns, or for further information. This not only helped to alleviate some parents' concerns (which were exacerbated due to the amount and intensity of media coverage surrounding the prayers), but it also helped to build rapport between myself and the adult community volunteers who recruited the student participants.

In addition to the information collected from interviews, I have also been examining provincial and LODSB religious accommodation policies and documents to obtain data about PGMS. This information will serve as supplementary data and will help give more context and perspective to the data collected from interviews and literature. However, it is worth noting that although I was expecting to have to rely quite heavily on this supplementary data, the interview with the principal provided an extensive amount of valuable information, such as the number of Muslim students at PGMS and the rules and regulations surrounding the prayers.

Early in my research, I also kept a research diary which was quite beneficial in helping me to establish when further research and analysis were required. It also aided me in recognizing personal strengths, weaknesses, and areas of interest. As Horrocks and King (2010) note, "the research diary contains the uninhibited, candid, and personal thoughts of researchers as they work on a specific project" (p. 131), and that for the qualitative researcher and interviewer, the

content of the diary may later "be used as data that can be analyzed in its own right, offer elaborations that enhance our analysis and/or provide methodological insight" (p. 131).

Participants

A total of eight individuals were interviewed for the purpose of this study: five current PGMS students, the principal of PGMS, a first year university student majoring in Religious Studies who has organized a rally and made other efforts to bolster support for the LODSB's religious accommodation policies, and a former PGMS parent who, along with her husband, has been actively involved in both organizing and volunteering at the prayers since their inauguration. Further information about the participants can be found in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Research Participants

Name[6]	Position	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Religious Affiliation
PGMS Administration					
Michael	PGMS Principal	Male	N/A	European	Eastern Orthodox
Community Members					
Shazia	Volunteer/former PGMS Parent	Female	50	Pakistani	Muslim
Madiha	University student/Activist	Female	19	Lebanese	Muslim
PGMS Students					
Aliya	Grade 8	Female	13	Pakistani	Muslim
Esa	Grade 8	Male	13	Pakistani	Muslim
Jameela	Grade 7	Female	12	Pakistani	Muslim
Zainab	Grade 7	Female	12	Pakistani	Muslim
Zaki	Grade 8	Male	13	Pakistani	Muslim

[6] Pseudonyms have been used for all research participants in order to protect their privacy and ensure anonymity.

The purpose of these interviews was to investigate the reason for the extensive media coverage and public debate surrounding the PGMS prayers, and to examine what, if any, affect this media and public reaction had on members of the PGMS community, as outlined in the research questions in Chapter 1. The aim of this research is to move beyond the rhetoric and controversy created by the media and public reaction to the prayers and to gain a deeper understanding of the prayers, and the PGMS school community, from members of the community itself.

The adults, particularly the principal of PGMS, were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the logistical and procedural information about the prayers and the school community itself, as well as their opinions of the media and public reaction to the prayers. When searching for students to participate in research interviews, I sought the help of community members involved with organizing the prayers in order to help me recruit participants, as per the recommendation of the Research Ethics Board (REB). The community members who assisted me were a former PGMS student who is now attending university, and a married couple who are former PGMS parents and still actively involved with the school and the prayers. The only criteria that I provided to these community members were that the students preferably be in the intermediate grades (grade 7 and 8), and that they attend the prayers regularly (therefore, all of the students interviewed are also Muslim). Five current PGMS students, specifically those who attend the weekly prayers, were recommended to me and selected for this study. All of the students have been at PGMS since they were in Grade 6 (the school runs from Grades 6 through 8).

I chose to interview these students as participants due to the fact that it is the students who take part in the prayers, and yet their voices and opinions have been greatly

underrepresented in the media coverage of the prayers thus far. In addition to garnering the students' opinions and perspectives on the prayers, the interview results were also analyzed with the intention of searching for any discernible effects that the media coverage and public controversy may have had on them.

While I was anticipating, and would have preferred some cultural diversity amongst the students interviewed, all of them were of Pakistani and/or South Asian descent, like the majority of Muslims in the PGMS area (according to Shazia, and also from what I observed from being in the area). However, because a small sample size was used in this research, and also due to the fact that the focus of this study is on the prayers, and not the students' cultural background or other factors, the lack of cultural diversity amongst the students, while not ideal, is not a pressing concern.

I contacted the principal, the parent volunteers, and the student activist personally. The interviews with these individuals were intended to gather information and research data about the prayers themselves, for example, the number of students participating, when and how the prayers were initiated, the religious and cultural dynamics of the school, etc.

I was directed to Afzal, and his wife, Shazia by other community members due to their involvement in volunteering for, and maintaining the prayers. I first met with Afzal to discuss my research and also to garner more information about the prayers and the community. As I am not a community member, and did personally know anyone affiliated with PGMS, I also asked Afzal to contact potential participants and provide them with my contact information and Letter of Information. This also avoided possible coercion to participate.

I interviewed Shazia, as she, like Afzal, plays an integral part in arranging the prayers and mobilizing other volunteers. The student activist I interviewed, Madiha, is a female university

student who was actively involved in defending the prayers. I found her name in the media coverage of the PGMS prayers and the rally she was involved with, and contacted her via email. She responded and expressed an interest in participating, and we met at a later date for her formal interview.

The five students I interviewed, Esa, Aliya, Jameela, Zaki, and Zainab, all currently attend PGMS and they are all regular attendees of the prayers. They all know Shazia and her husband due to their involvement in the prayers, as well as the fact that many of them live in the same residential complex and attend the same Mosque, community events, and gatherings.

The interviews were semi-structured and as such, they varied in length, with the interviews with adults lasting an average of forty-five minutes, while the interviews with students tended to be briefer, running approximately twenty minutes each. Although the interviews were semi-structured and open ended in format, I had lists of prepared questions for students (see Appendix D), community members (see Appendix E), and a third list for the school principal (see Appendix F). These guiding questions were instrumental in ensuring that the interviews stayed on-topic and relevant to the research questions. As Patton (cited in Horrocks & King, 2010, p. 36) notes, there are six different types of interview questions in qualitative interviews, but I focused on background/demographic questions, experience/behaviour questions, opinion/values questions, and knowledge questions (Horrocks & King, p. 37).

All of the interviews took place between November 2011 and February 2012. Interviews with three of the students, the community volunteers Afzal and Shazia, and Madiha, the student activist, took place at a mutually agreed upon location- a popular coffee franchise located near PGMS, and therefore, in the vicinity of the participants' residences. The students and parents were given the option of meeting in any other location of their choice and/or convenience,

however all of them asked me to request a location in the area which was easily accessible. While two other siblings were also originally scheduled to meet me at this location as well, they were unable to meet in person and I instead conducted their interviews over Skype at a later date. The principal and I met at a time and location of his choosing, due to his busy schedule.

I had prepared for any potential concerns that may have arisen about my meeting male students, particularly if interviews were to take place in a more private location, such as the students' homes, due to religious reasons (observant Muslims avoid being alone with non-related members of the opposite sex). However, no concerns were raised in any of the interviews, likely due to the fact that they all took place in public.

The initial plan was to interview all of the students individually. However, I interviewed four of the participants in one day and as the coffee establishment was quite crowded, we were limited to one large table and thus, all three students and the community volunteer were present throughout all of the interviews. While this was not ideal, I did request that students and others refrain from commenting or participating in any way during someone else's interview. I am aware of course that the mere presence of another individual, particularly a family member, may have influenced students' responses. Thus, while I wanted to interview individuals one-on-one, I had to make concessions as there was no other option available, particularly as I travelled from out of town to meet with students. The two interviews on Skype were one-on-one, although the students were at home when interviewed.

My interview with the principal was one-on-one and was semi-structured, although more structured and time-sensitive than the interviews conducted with students, particularly as the goal of this interview was to get a deeper understanding of the school's policies, and the rationale behind them. Interestingly, although I expected the interview to be relatively brief due to the

principal's busy schedule, he was very cordial and ensured that he answered all of my questions thoroughly. He also offered many of his own insights and reactions to the prayers, the public reaction, and the amount and breadth of media attention, and this in turn led to more questions and discussion.

Data Analysis

The first stage of analyzing interview data was the transcription of the interviews. I had initially planned to first listen to each recording once through without interruptions, then make notes and listen for any common themes or particularly insightful or relevant data related to the research questions. However, due to time constraints and delays in recruiting and meeting with interviewees, I transcribed each interview as soon as possible, without first listening to the recordings in their entirety. I also made some written notes during each interview, and referred to these when/if necessary. As I worked with a relatively small sample (eight interviewees), I carried out full verbatim transcription of the interview recordings. While word for word transcription is certainly a tedious and time-consuming process, much more so than I was expecting, in the long run having a text version of each interview, with all of the quotes and topics easily searchable through word processing programs, has been worthwhile, particularly throughout the reporting and writing process.

In terms of selecting a consistent transcription style for speech styles, intonation, pauses, emphasis, and so on, I have used a fairly simple and straightforward system developed by Horrocks and King (2010) which the authors have titled "A basic transcription system" (p. 145-6).

Once all of the interviews were transcribed, I organized the data using a matrix very similar to, and based upon one developed by Ahmed (2010) for preparing interview data

collected while conducting research for her graduate thesis. Prior to analysis, Ahmed organized her interview data using a matrix "with the questions horizontally lined up and each participant group categorized on the vertical axis. The answers of each participant group to the respective question were placed in the appropriate cell of the matrix" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 23). In order to distinguish interviewees' responses within the matrix, Ahmed used bullet points which "helped to distill the major themes and responses to each question by participant group" (p. 23).

Ahmed's matrix design was well suited to my research as she also interviewed small sample groups and her model was ideal for analyzing individuals' responses and discerning themes and commonalities among the interview data. Using a matrix designed for larger samples, or analysis based on the coding of responses would have been counterintuitive to my research, and would also have required a researcher with more experience in data collection and analysis.

After completing the matrix with all participants' responses, I used thematic analysis in order to search for common themes and patterns in the interview data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, "[a] theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). Since this research focuses on unique individuals and their own situations and experiences, I did not initially expect a cross-case analysis to reveal common themes throughout every single interview. However, due to the fact that nearly all of the participants are Muslim students, and all of them are attending the same middle school and were asked identical (or nearly identical) questions, the data revealed a significant degree of common themes and patterns which were then be studied at a deeper level. Like Braun and Clarke, I do not believe that patterns must necessarily be measured by their prevalence in the data set, but rather on their significance and

their relevance to the research question and methodology. I engaged in "a 'theoretical' thematic analysis" (Braun & Clarke, p. 84) as I approached my research from a critical anti-racism framework. For example, I identified a 'pattern' if all or most students and participants expressed similar feelings and reactions to the media coverage about the prayers at their school, or to the protests against them.

As I identified patterns, I then drew from interview data, using quotes for example to highlight common themes, attitudes, and issues surrounding the media's coverage of the prayers at PGMS. Furthermore, I have then cited relevant news media coverage related to these interviewees responses, and have then added my own analysis and critical perspective to elaborate on these themes.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodology, analysis, rationale, and limitations of my research study. While qualitative research interviews have their limitations, particularly due to time constraints, they served as the best method of collecting data and gaining an in-depth perspective and understanding of the prayers at Pine Grove Middle School (PGMS).

The PGMS community and prayers have been selected as the focus of this research study due to the intense and widespread media and public reaction to the prayers, which reflect the larger public debate over religious accommodation, religious and cultural accommodation versus assimilation, multiculturalism, and media and public stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding Muslims and Islam.

While the sample size is limited, consisting of eight individuals, it represents the views and experiences of a variety of members of the school community, including administration, parents, and most significantly, students who regularly attend the prayers.

It is my intention that the results of this study will reflect the opinions and firsthand accounts of the students at PGMS, specifically those who have been attending the prayers, who have rarely been heard from in the news media coverage, despite the fact that the prayers are held for, and attended by, these students. Considering the continually increasing number of students belonging to non-dominant religious groups, I also hope that the results of this research study will encourage a shift away from the public and media controversy and rhetoric surrounding the prayers, and instead facilitate healthy, open, and fair debate and discussion about religious accommodation in Ontario's public schools.

CHAPTER 4

The News Coverage of the PGMS Prayers

Introduction

This chapter is focused on the media coverage of the prayers at Pine Grove Middle School (PGMS). It will outline how and when the media coverage began, and the key individuals and groups both in support of, and opposed to the prayers. In addition, there is an overview and discussion of the sixty-two print news items examined in the course of this study, and some of the concerns which arose as a result of this discourse analysis, including the publication of incorrect information, and media conglomeration and consolidation in Canada. Finally, the implications and effects of online comments and discussion posted in response to news media items are considered, particularly as the news items covering the PGMS prayers generated hundreds of comments from both sides of the debate. However, in order to provide context and situate this study, this chapter will first address the oft problematic way in which the media has covered not only the PGMS prayers, but also most stories and events involving Muslims and Islam, particularly after 9/11.

The News Media's Portrayal of Islam and Muslims

> There...seems to have been a strange revival of canonical, though previously discredited, Orientalist ideas about Muslim, generally non-white, people- ideas which have achieved a startling prominence at a time when racial or religious misrepresentations of every other cultural group are no longer circulated with such impunity. Malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West; what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians (Said, 1997, p. xii).

Islamophobia, misunderstandings and misconceptions of Islam and Muslims, particularly Muslim women and the veil (hijab), the face veil (niqab) and the full body covering (burqa), as

well as the view of Islam as oppressive and backwards as discussed above, are inextricably linked to, and unfortunately exacerbated by Western media.

One of the earliest and most well known works on the topic of the media's coverage of Muslims and Islam is *Covering Islam* by Edward Said (1997), which is quoted above. Said (1997) argues that Western news media coverage of Islam has long been biased and has depicted Islam and Muslims as a homogeneous, threatening, body representing "the other," particularly in relation to Western society and ideals.

The climate of mistrust and fear surrounding Muslims and Islam has become more pronounced over recent years with the events of 9/11, the war on terror, and intensified media coverage of stories involving the Muslim "other." As Said (2003) observes, "[i]n the demonization of an unknown enemy, for whom the label "terrorist" serves the general purpose of keeping people stirred up and angry, media images command too much attention and can be exploited at times of crisis and insecurity of the kind that the post-9/11 period has produced" (p. xxvi).

It is particularly troubling that the overwhelming majority of news media coverage is also biased in its' coverage of events which involve, or are about Muslims and/or Islam. Said (1997) notes that "Islam is peculiarly traumatic news today in the West" (p. l) and in discussing news coverage of Islam and Muslims in the West, Said writes,

> It has given consumers of news the sense that they have understood Islam without at the same time intimating to them that a great deal of this energetic coverage is based on far from objective material. In many instances "Islam" has licensed not only patent inaccuracy but also expressions of unrestrained ethnocentrism, cultural and even racial hatred, deep yet paradoxically free-floating hostility (p. li).

While biased and even hostile news coverage is certainly not limited to stories relating to Muslims and Islam, it certainly is prevalent, and even accepted, particularly after the attacks of

9/11. When a major event or catastrophe occurs, it is the news, whether it be television networks, newspapers, magazines, or online news sources, that the majority of people turn to for information and analysis of the situation, as is evidenced by The Pew Center's findings that in the days following the 9/11 attacks, 74% of Americans were "very closely following news about the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon" and "another 22% reported following the attacks fairly closely"(Pew Research Center, 2001, para.2). One month after the attacks, news viewership further increased, and by "mid-October, the number [of Americans] paying very close attention increased slightly to 78%" (Pew Research Center, 2001, para.2). In early 2001 and in previous years, only 24% of Americans paid "very close attention" to the news (Pew Research Center, 2001, para. 3). It is evident that due to the events of 9/11, Americans went from being relatively disinterested in the news to being held rapt by the extensive coverage of the attacks and their aftermath.

When considering stories and events linked to Islam and/or Muslims, particularly those in recent history, it is violent and abhorrent acts, particularly those which took place on 9/11, that receive the most news coverage by far, and in turn, likely have the most impact. Said (1997) observed, "Only when there is a bomb in Saudi Arabia or the threat of violence against the United States in Iran has "Islam" seemed worthy of general comment" (p. 16). Unfortunately, this phenomenon of covering Islam almost exclusively in the context of an act of violence, or as a looming threat to Western culture, values, and norms (as has been evidenced in the media coverage of the PGMS prayers) already skews viewers' perceptions and makes it even less likely that they will receive fair and accurate information regarding Islam and Muslims. This is particularly perturbing as polls in the United States have shown that "[n]early four in ten Americans (39%) say they do feel some prejudice" (Saad, 2006, p. 2) towards Muslims.

Additionally, "[n]early one quarter of Americans, 22%, say they would not like to have a Muslim as a neighbour" (Saad, 2006, p. 1) while 31% of Americans reported that "they would feel nervous if they noticed a Muslim man on their flight" (p. 1) while travelling. Furthermore, the poll also found that many Americans believe that Muslims, even American citizens, have questionable loyalty to their country, and respondents also felt that Muslims should carry special identification and be subject to more stringent security checks when travelling in the United States (Saad, 2006, p. 3). What is especially concerning is that of the respondents who had negative perceptions or fear of Muslims and wouldn't want to have them as neighbours, only 10% of them actually personally knew someone who was Muslim (Saad, 2006, p. 3). According to the poll's author, "[p]ersonally knowing someone who is Muslim -- which 41% of Americans say they do – corresponds with more favorable attitudes" (Saad, 2006, p. 1) towards Muslims. The study also noted that personally knowing someone who is Muslim does not always minimize discrimination or fear, and that the age of respondents was a major factor (Saad, 2006, p. 4). Other studies and research have also found that viewership of certain more conservative news networks such as Fox News, correlates with a deeper fear and mistrust of Muslims, as well as other minorities (Ali, Clifton, Duss, et al., 2011; Jiwani, 2010; Jones, Cox, Galston, et al., 2011; Saad, 2006). For example, according to Jones, Cox, Galston, et al. (2011), "Americans who most trust Fox News agree that the values of Islam are at odds with American values" (p. 1). Additionally, the study found that

> [t]rust in Fox News is highly correlated with negative attitudes about Islam. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of Americans who most trust Fox News for their information about politics and current events say that the values of Islam are at odds with American values. In contrast, less than half of Americans who most trust broadcast network news (45 percent), CNN (37 percent), or public television (37 percent) agree that Islam is at odds with American values (Jones, Cox, Galson, et al., 2011, p. 11).

While the individuals who watch Fox News and similar networks may have already harboured certain beliefs and/or views of Muslims and Islam, and thus selected certain news sources based on these attitudes, these studies indicate that the media's portrayal of Islam and Muslims is a significant factor in influencing the perceptions and opinions of viewers, or at the very least, serves to reinforce certain beliefs and stereotypes. This in turn has perpetuated animosity and misinformation about a vast, incredibly diverse, and varied population spread out across the globe. Although Fox News is an American network, it is available in Canada via cable and satellite. Furthermore, Canada's Quebecor Media Inc. (QMI) launched its' right-leaning Sun News Network in April of 2011 (Metha, 2012, para. 2), which is frequently referred to as "Fox News North" (Metha, 2012; Mudhar, 2012; Taber, 2010) due to its' coverage and tone.

Additionally, studies focusing on Canadian news media and Canadian's perceptions and attitudes have also raised concerns about how Muslims and Islam are represented. The Association for Canadian Studies (ACS) poll which found that 52% of Canadians do not trust Muslims (Boswell, 2012, para.7) asked respondents where they believed that "racism is most present" (Boswell, 2012, para.14). 19% of respondents answered radio/television, while 8% listed newspapers (Boswell, 2012, para.14). Jiwani (2010) argues that media bias and misrepresentation may be especially problematic in Canada, where media convergence has led to a small number of conglomerates owning and controlling the vast majority of news sources and publications (p. 60).

By its very nature and purpose, the news is meant to inform and report on current events and stories in a thorough and unbiased manner. One can assume that viewers who turn to the news for information and access to events taking place worldwide are (justifiably) expecting accurate and balanced coverage. However, as noted throughout this thesis, media bias,

particularly in how Muslims and Islam are portrayed, has become increasingly problematic, and it can, and has even been shown to, increase animosity, misinformation, and distrust.

The Media and Public Controversy Surrounding the Prayers at PGMS

On the second last day of the 2010-2011 academic year, Pine Grove Middle school (PGMS) suddenly and unexpectedly became the centre of nationwide media coverage, ensuing public outcry, protests at the school board's head office (CBC News; Elghawaby, 2011; Friesen & Hopper, 2011; et al.[7]) and impassioned media and public debate over religious accommodation, women's rights and equality (Blizzard, 2011; Connor, 2011; Corbella, 2011; et al.[8]), the separation of church and state (Yuen, 2011), and the perceived attack on Canadian norms and values (Selley, 2011a, 2011b; Kheiriddin, 2011a, 2011b; Mallick, 2011a).

It has been reported that the controversy surrounding the PGMS prayers was sparked by reports in the *Toronto Sun*, and the story was then picked up by other news outlets (Fatah, 2012, para.7). It is more likely however, that the debate surrounding the prayers was first initiated by Arnie Lemaire, who is the author of the popular right-wing online blog *Blazing Cat Fur*. On June 29th, 2011, Lemaire posted a blog entry on the topic of the PGMS prayers. The post, which was one of several which Lemaire would write over the coming months lambasting the prayers, contained an excerpt from an e-mail written by a concerned parent whose daughter was a student at PGMS. While the email contained some incorrect information, the parent was clearly upset about the "Islamic prayers" taking place at PGMS, and also had some reservations regarding "a number of other incidents involving Islam and other anti-Christian issues" (Harding, as cited in

[7] CBC News; Elghawaby, 2011; Friesen & Hopper, 2011; Godfrey, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Hopper, 2011; Kalinowski, 2011; McParland, 2011; Siddiqui, H., 2011a; Talbot, 2011b; Vu, 2011; Yuen, 2011

[8] Blizzard, 2011; Connor, 2011; Corbella, 2011; Dwivedi, 2011; Fatah, 2011; Hopper, 2011; Kheiriddin, 2011a, 2011b; Mallick, 2011a, 2011b; Robertson, 2011; Teitel, 2011; Yuen, 2011

Lemaire, 2011, para.6). It is not mentioned whether or not the parent expressed his concerns to the school administration, although according to Michael Anderson, the principal of PGMS, no parents or members of the school community ever complained or objected to the prayers, either to him or to any other members of school administration. The blog entry also provided the LODSB's and school's contact information, presumably so readers can contact the school and the LODSB to complain or express concern. Ezra Levant, an author, columnist, and host of Sun News Network's *The Source*, credited *Blazing Cat Fur*, which he recommended as "one of [his] favourite blogs" (Sun News, 2011b, July 15th, 2011), for bringing the prayers to his attention. These comments were made in an episode of *The Source* called "Mosqueteria Madness," one of two episodes of *The Source* which Levant dedicated to the topic of the PGMS prayers (Sun News, 2011, July 15th, 2011b).

According to Michael, the PGMS principal, members of the public did begin to contact the school in the last days of the school year, which ended on June 29th, and into the summer months. He received approximately five to ten calls in the last two days of the school year, and a great deal more over the summer which he ignored due to the sheer volume of calls and the fact that the secretaries were not in the office during the summer months.

The increase in the number of calls was likely due to the fact that the mainstream media outlets, including *The National Post*/Post Media, QMI Agency's Sun News Network and numerous affiliated newspapers, and several Toronto area newspapers and news outlets, began to extensively cover the prayers in early July. By mid-July, the prayers at PGMS were the subject of dozens of newspaper articles and columns, television news reports, and online blogs and debates.

Also around early to mid July of 2011, a number of religious and secular groups opposed to the prayers began to organize protests and make statements to the media, with the intention of placing public and media pressure on the LODSB to cease holding the weekly religious service. On July 18th, leaders from a coalition of groups opposing the prayers held a press conference at the Toronto Zionist Centre (Yuen, 2011a, para.2). The individuals leading the press conference were representing the Christian Heritage Party (CHP), the Jewish Defense League (JDL), the Canadian Hindu Advocacy (CHA), and "two other Christian missions" (Yuen, 2011a, para.5), and they all voiced their concerns about the prayers taking place in a public school. They also announced that they were organizing a protest which took place on July 25th at the LODSB headquarters. A second protest against the prayers took place on August 8th. Proponents of the prayers attended these protests to show their support for the LODSB and on September 17th, an Appreciation Rally was held for the LODSB by the prayers' proponents. A number of groups have also spoken out in support of the prayers, including the Hindu Federation, the Ontario Multifaith Council, the Hindu Canadian Alliance, the Toronto branch of the Canadian Council for Israel and Jewish Advocacy (CIJA) in Toronto, and numerous Islamic organizations including Muslim Association of Canada (MAC), the Islamic Society of North America-Canada (ISNA-Canada), and the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CAN).

The news media, particularly QMI/Sun Media's Sun TV network, as well "as many right-wing bloggers have dubbed the prayer issue as the "mosqueteria"' (Sun News, 2011a, July 15th, 2011, Sun News, 2011b, July 25, 2011, Teitel, 2011, para. 4), and most, if not all of Canada's national newspapers, as well as local media outlets, have extensively covered the issue. Many of these news outlets have featured letters and online comments from readers both vehemently opposed to, and supportive of, the prayers. CityNews, a news outlet which has closely followed

the story of the PGMS prayers since it first broke, expressed surprise at the public's strong reaction, stating that "we never thought our story and accompanying poll on Muslim prayers in a North York school would touch such a nerve. But five months after being published it remains by far the most-read story on CityNews.ca" (Talbot, 2011a, para.1). The article goes on to report that the reaction was so widespread and impassioned that, "the story went viral across North America with church groups urging congregants to head to CityNews.ca to vote on the contentious issue" (para.2).

Analysis of News Coverage

Throughout the duration of this study, I examined sixty-two newspaper and magazine articles and opinion pieces (although most of these articles were found online, they are identical to those published in the print editions) and three television news reports. While I have read multiple blog entries and independent pieces on the topic of the PGMS prayers, in this discourse analysis I have considered only the coverage from Canadian mainstream media outlets. This was done for the purpose of brevity, and also in order to reflect on the most readily available and 'legitimate' news coverage which is followed by the majority of Canada's general population (NADbank, 2011). The articles were found through online searches using the school's name and/or terms related to the prayers as the search query, and also through browsing the websites of all of the major Canadian news outlets and newspapers. Additionally, whenever possible I would review a number of print newspapers to seek any content which was not otherwise available online. There was no preference given to any news outlets and all articles which met the above criteria were considered. Table 5.1 details which media organizations and/or outlets were used and the number of articles and news items sourced from each of them in this study.

Table 5.1

News Media Sources[9]

News Organization/Outlet	Number of News Articles	Number of Opinion Pieces/Editorials	Number of Television Reports	Total Number of News Items
CBC News	2	0	0	2
CityNews	2	0	1	3
The Huffington Post	0	1	N/A	1
Maclean's Magazine	0	2	N/A	2
Post Media/The National Post	4	13	N/A	17
The Globe and Mail Inc.	5	2	N/A	7
TorStar Corp./The Toronto Star	5	7	N/A	12
Toronto Life	1	0	N/A	1
QMI/Sun Media	11	7	2	20
TOTAL:	**30**	**32**	**3**	**65**

As noted in Table 5.1, QMI/Sun Media and Post Media/*The National Post* had the highest number of print news items, with eighteen news items sourced from Sun Media and seventeen news items sourced from Post Media/*The National Post*. While Post Media/The National Post had the highest number of opinion pieces, it was QMI/Sun Media which had the most news items, with eleven articles dedicated to the prayers. As can be seen in Table 5.1, this far outnumbers the number of articles found from any of the other media outlets sourced for this study. This is likely due to the fact that Sun Media Corporation, a subsidiary of Quebecor Media Inc. (QMI), owns over 200 community newspapers (Canoe Inc., 2012, para.1) and was more

[9] It must be noted that these are only the news items which I found throughout the course of my research. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and there are likely a number of additional news items published by these, and other, news organizations and outlets which have not been included in this study.

likely to turn up in both online and print search results. Additionally, Sun Media covered the prayers more heavily than other news outlets, with coverage in both their print media outlets, as well as their television news network Sun News Network, from which two television reports were sourced. Post Media's *The National Post*, one of Canada's two daily national papers, and its' accompanying website also heavily covered the prayers, featuring thirteen opinion pieces and four articles. *The Globe and Mail*, which is Canada's other nationwide newspaper, also covered the story, although not as frequently as the *Toronto Star*, a popular Toronto-based newspaper. I also looked at print and online coverage from Maclean's magazine, City TV News, CBC News, and one opinion piece from the Canadian edition of *The Huffington Post*, a popular online-only news source.

Opinion Pieces about the PGMS Prayers

Of the sixty-two articles and columns on the topic of the PGMS prayers which were examined for this particular study, there were thirty-two columns and editorial pieces, nine of which were in support of the prayers, and twenty-three which were opposed to them, as outlined in Table 5.2. Only three of these thirty-two opinion pieces were editorials, with the *Toronto Star*'s editorial board lauding PGMS for "putting the needs of its students first" (Toronto Star, 2011, para. 10), while *The Globe and Mail* published two editorials against the prayers, arguing that that "[s]egregating genders so that students can pray in a school cafeteria is not the best solution" (Globe and Mail, 2011, para.6). The rest of the opinion pieces were written by print and online columnists and it is interesting to note that a number of news outlets featured numerous opinion pieces written by columnists both vehemently in support of, and against the prayers at PGMS. Interestingly, in the case of *The National Post* and *Toronto Star*, some

journalists wrote multiple columns on the topic of the prayers, and thus some of the results shown in Table 5.2. may appear to be misleading, as numerous opinion pieces may represent the view of only one individual columnist. For example, Haroon Siddiqui, a staunch proponent of the prayers, wrote three pieces for the *Toronto Star* in support of the prayers, while Heather Mallick, a vocal opponent of the prayers wrote both *Star* pieces against them. The other *Toronto Star* piece in support of the prayers was written by a guest columnist, Shahinia Siddiqui (no relation). Post Media published thirteen opinion pieces about the PGMS prayers, the most of any of the news outlets sourced in this study. Of these opinion pieces, there were ten opposed to the prayers and three in support of them. Of the ten columns opposed to the prayers, four were written by Chris Selley, and two were written by Tasha Kheiriddin, with both demanding the cessation of the PGMS prayers (Kheiriddin, 2011a, 2011b; Selley, 2012, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). The Post Media/*The National Post* columns in support of the prayers were all written by different authors, as were all of the pieces (both for and against the prayers) published by Sun Media/QMI. Of the news outlets which have been sourced, Sun Media has the highest number of columnists expressing their opposition to the prayers, with six opinion pieces against the prayers and one column in support of them.

Thus, there was both support and opposition to the prayers in the news media coverage. However, while columns were published both in support of, and in opposition to the prayers, the number of journalists and/or columnists opposed to the prayers far outnumbers those in support of them, as shown in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2

Stance of Opinion Pieces & Editorials

News Organization/Outlet	Number of pieces in support of the prayers	Number of pieces opposed to the prayers	Total Number of Opinion Pieces
The Huffington Post	0	1	1
Maclean's Magazine	0	2	2
Post Media/The National Post	3	10	13
The Globe and Mail Inc.	0	2	2
TorStar Corp./Toronto Star	5	2	7
QMI/Sun Media	1	6	7
TOTAL:	**9**	**23**	**32**

The Media Debate over Religious Prayers taking place at Pine Grove Middle School

Much of the news coverage of the PGMS prayers, particularly initially, was focused on the fact that religious prayers are taking place at an Ontario public school, and particularly controversial has been the fact that they are held during school hours (Agar, 2011; Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011; Yuen, 2011a, 2011b; et al.[10])

The LODSB's religious accommodation policy, implemented in 2000 (MacDonald, 2011), recognizes the centrality and importance of prayer to many faiths, including, but not limited to Islam. Like many other policies now being drafted across Ontario in accordance with Policy/program memorandum No. 119 (2009b), it has a section addressing prayer specifically. The policy states that:

[10] Agar, 2011; Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011; Brown, 2011; Canadian Press, 2011; CBC News, 2011; Davidson, 2011; D'Souza, 2011; Doughart, 2011; Dwivedi, 2011; Vu, 2011; Elghawaby, 2011; Friesen & Hammer, 2011; Furey, 2011; Globe and Mail, 2011a; Godfrey, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Hammer, 2011a, 2011b; Kallinowski, 2011; Killoran, 2012; Lewis, 2011; MacDonald, 2011; Talbot, 2011b; McParland, 2011; Reynolds, 2011b; Rushowy & Brown, 2011; Selley, 2011a; Sonnenberg, 2011; Teitel, 2011; Warmington, 2011; Yuen, 2011a**,** 2011b

> Schools should make every reasonable effort to accommodate the requirement for daily prayer by providing an appropriate location within the building for prayer. This may mean a quiet space in the library or an empty room, or wherever it is mutually satisfactory for the school and the student or staff member requesting the accommodation. Some accommodation for late school arrival or early school leaving may be necessary. For some religions, the time for prayer changes with the seasons (TDSB, 2000, para.20).

However, while the prayers at PGMS are in line with the LODSB's policy and guidelines for prayer, they contradict the Ontario Education Act which states that:

> A board may permit a person to conduct religion exercises or to provide instruction that includes indoctrination in a particular religion or religious belief in a school if,
>
> a) The exercises are not conducted or the instruction is not provided by or under the auspices of the board
> b) The exercises are conducted or the instruction is provided on a school day at a time that is before or after the school's instructional program, or on a day that is not a school day;
> c) No person is required by the board to attend the exercises or instruction; and
> d) The board provides space for the exercises or instruction on the same basis as it provides space for other community activities (R.R.O. 1990, Reg. 298, s. 29 (s).

The prayers at PGMS are in line with all of the above stipulations for Ontario public schools, except for b), as they fall during the school's instructional hours. While the Muslim students at PGMS now miss less instructional time praying at the school than when they used to walk to the mosque (and not always return), the fact is that even with changes made to Ontario's religious accommodation guidelines under Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119 (2009b), the prayers contravene the Education Act. This has been a point of great contention and debate in the controversy surrounding the prayers, and some groups including the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC) have threatened legal action against the LODSB in an effort "to force the [board] to respect the Ontario Education Act" (Kheiriddin, 2011b, para.8). In July, several days after the media and public controversy surrounding the prayers began, the LODSB responded. Many trustees and board members made unofficial statements and wrote letters to the media, and the

board's director released an official statement about the prayers on the LODSB website (Spence, 2011). This statement outlines several reasons for the board's decision to allow prayers to be held on PGMS property (as well as at other LODSB schools), the most significant of which are freedom of religion under the Canadian Charter of Human rights (Spence, 2011, para.6), student safety and maximizing instructional time (2011, para.8), and religious accommodation versus religious indoctrination and instruction (para.9). The LODSB acknowledges the public's objections and protests against the prayers at PGMS, however, they have remained resolute in their support of the prayers, stating that,

> We understand that this is a very sensitive issue for many, and that there will continue to be differing opinions among members of our communities. However, we believe it is the willingness to have courageous conversations like these that has made Canada the diverse yet cohesive society that comes together in Lake Ontario District School Board's classrooms every day (Spence, 2011, para.11).

As the LODSB has argued, the prayers at PGMS are protected under the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Ontario Human Rights Code, and this argument is supported by Barbara Hall, Ontario's Human Rights Commissioner (Artuso, 2011a, para.1). While Hall stipulates that religious instruction (indoctrination versus instruction about a religion) must not take place in the classroom (Artuso, 2011a, para.11), she states that as long as the religious accommodations do not hinder the school's "primary goal of educating students" (para.3), the board must make a reasonable effort to accommodate religious practices "to the point of undue hardship" (para.2). Individuals who are involved with the LODSB's inclusive schools initiative, like Spence and Hall, argue that the prayers at PGMS are legally mandated and protected (para.9). Of the accommodation process, one member of the LODSB explains that the board first looks at the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, specifically it's guarantee of freedom of religion, then at the Ontario Human Rights Code, which also mandates the protection and

freedom of religious freedom, and finally the Ministry of Education's guidelines, as well as the LODSB's religious accommodation guidelines (Selley, 2012, para. 9). As the LODSB official notes,

> This isn't just something where a bunch of educational bureaucrats say, eh, 'this feels right,' 'this doesn't feel right.' We've got some solid legal opinions" (Spyropolous, as cited in Selley, 2012, para. 9)

Even Selley (2012), one of the columnists most staunchly opposed to the prayers, acknowledges that PGMS "seems to have been following a legally defensible set of rules" (para.8). However the LODSB's statements and Hall's position have done little to diminish the growing controversy surrounding the prayers, or the resurgence of the longstanding debate over the role of religious accommodation in schools. In fact, the media coverage and public protests and reaction have lasted a number of months, and although the media coverage has waned over time, particularly after December 2011, articles about the prayers have continued to be published in 2012 (Fatah, 2012; Selley, 2012).

Misrepresentation and Bias in the Media Coverage of the PGMS Prayers

A particularly concerning aspect of the media coverage of the PGMS prayers is the fact that nearly all of the news items which were examined in this study contained misleading, or even false information. Some of the most frequent claims which have been made in the news media are that an adult imam was leading the prayers (Agar, 2011; Brown, 2011; Canadian Press, 2011; et al.[11]) and that non-Muslim students were not permitted to attend the prayers, or even use the cafeteria on Fridays (Blizzard, 2011; Corbella, 2011; Doughart, 2011; et al.[12]).

[11] Agar,2011; Brown, 2011; Canadian Press, 2011; CBC News, 2011; Davidson, 2011; Doughart, 2011; Dwivedi, 2011; Vu, 2011; Friesen & Hammer, 2011; Furey, 2011; Globe and Mail, 2011a; Godfrey, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Hammer, 2011a, 2011b; Kalinowski, 2011; Lewis, 2011; McParland, 2011; Reynolds, 2011b; Rushowy & Brown, 2011; Selley, 2011a; Sonnenberg, 2011; Talbot, 2011b; Teitel, 2011; Warmington, 2011; Yuen, 2011a, 2011b

[12] Blizzard, 2011; Corbella, 2011; Doughart, 2011; Godfrey, 2011c; Hammer, 2011a; Kheiriddin, 2011a, 2011b; Reynolds, 2011a, 2011b; Robertson, 2011;Yuen, 2011a

In regards to the widespread belief that an imam from the local mosque was leading the prayers, some of the misunderstanding may have arisen from the fact that the word *imam* itself means 'leader' in Arabic, and it is used to refer to identify any male who has reached puberty and is leading a group of people in prayer, regardless of where they are held. The *imam* can also be the religious leader of a congregation or a mosque (similar to a church minister), which is what has often been implied in the coverage of the PGMS prayers. At PGMS, the sermon (*khutbah)* is delivered in Arabic by a teenaged student from the secondary school neighbouring PGMS, who then also leads the subsequent congregational prayers. Thus, while the students who take turns leading the prayers are from outside of the school, they are not of the age of majority.

Some journalists have even stated that the imam leading the prayers was not only an adult religious leader, but that he was asking the female students if they were menstruating and then telling them where to sit (Corbella, 2011; Mallick, 2011a; Robertson, 2011). Teitel (2011), while being opposed to the PGMS prayers, calls for the prayers' detractors to show respect and dignity in their protests, expressing her disappointment with the "morally deficient" (para.2) and "politically fuelled" (para.4) tactics used by some of the prayers more vocal opponents. However, she then goes on to state that, "[a]n old bearded man—of any religious stripe—relegating 13-year-old menstruating girls to the back of the room is highly unsavoury, but so is Ezra Levant donning a burka on national television to show solidarity with oppressed Muslim women" (para.2). Although Teitel expresses her dismay at what she views as gender oppression as well as the actions of some of the PGMS prayers' opponents, she also incorrectly states that the leader of the prayers is an adult religious leader who tells the female students where to sit. Furthermore, she does so while propagating stereotypes of old, bearded, (and in this case

Muslim) men being synonymous with what she deems as religious oppression and extremism (Sensoy, 2010).

While some media outlets and news items (Brown, 2011; Globe and Mail, 2011; Selley, 2011a) have now clarified that it is a high school student who leads the prayers, they have implied that this is a new occurrence: "High school students - not a religious leader from outside - now lead the weekly Muslim prayers...a change the school hopes will ease objections to the 30-minute service" (Brown, 2011, para.1).

Another point of contention in the media coverage has been the belief that non-Muslim students are not permitted to enter the cafeteria on Fridays (Corbella, 2011; Hammer, 2011; Yuen, 2011a; et al.[13]). Corbella (2011) states (incorrectly) that Pine Grove "caved in to Muslim demands to allow Islamic prayers to be conducted in the school cafeteria every Friday at noon that exclude all non-Muslims...Menstruating girls are forced to sit on a bench at the very back of the room" (para.17), while Robertson (2011), using almost identical language, writes that the school "caved in to Muslim demands to allow Islamic prayers to be conducted in the school cafeteria every Friday at noon that exclude all non-Muslims" (para.4). Even articles which quote the prayers detractors' claims that non-Muslims are not allowed in the cafeteria on Fridays make no effort to challenge the validity of these statements, or clarify to readers that this in fact is not the case.

In addition to incorrect information being published in much of the media coverage of the prayers, some news items have included leading or biased language and/or content. As noted, columns and opinion pieces give the author(s) license to state their own opinions and point of view, while news pieces and articles are meant to be unbiased and factual. However, in the

[13] Blizzard, 2011; Corbella, 2011; Doughart, 2011; Godfrey, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Hammer, 2011; Kheiriddin, 2011a, 2011b; Reynolds, 2011a; Robertson, 2011; Yuen, 2011a

coverage of the PGMS prayers, in addition to printing incorrect information, some journalists were also using biased and leading language in their reporting. One of the more extreme examples is the fact that both Sun newspapers and Sun News TV regularly refer to the PGMS prayers as the "Mosqueteria" (Sun News, 2011a, July 15th, 2011, Sun News, 2011b, July 25, 2011, Teitel, 2011, para. 4).

Another article stated that the female students at PGMS are "forced" to sit at the back of the room and that girls who are menstruating are "banished" to the back of the room (Robertson, 2011, para.4). Several other articles cite the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC) or other Muslim individuals and groups who are opposed to the prayers as the sole source or authority for Islamic beliefs and practices (Davidson, 2011; Dwivedi, 2011; Kheiriddin, 2011a, 2011b; Mallick, 2011a; Rushowy & Brown, 2011; Teitel, 2011). Some of the reporters who interviewed the MCC and other Muslim individuals and groups against the prayers acknowledged that the MCC is considered "progressive" (Kheiriddin, 2011a) or "liberal minded" (Mallick, 2011a), which in itself infers that Muslims who do not agree with or support the MCC are backwards. However, aside from the prayers' detractors, no other Muslim organizations or religious scholars were consulted for their views or interpretations in these articles.

The analysis of the articles raised some other concerns as well. For example, the subtitle of one column about the prayers (MacDonald, 2011) which was printed in the *Toronto* Sun, stated that Pine Grove "let the Muslims in" (MacDonald, 2011), despite (or perhaps due to) the fact that over 80% of the school's student body is Muslim. The wording of this subtitle is particularly troubling, as it reinforces the idea of Muslims as "these strange Oriental peoples over there who have been such a terrible thorn in "our" flesh" (Said, 2003, p. xx), who need to be grudgingly "let in" and acknowledged. This choice of a subtitle is even more unfortunate

considering that although MacDonald (2011) is herself opposed to the prayers, she was one of the first journalists to interview Shazia's husband, Afzal, and she also extensively quoted school and board members in her column.

These issues which have arisen in the media coverage of the prayers are especially concerning due to the fact that media convergence has meant that the majority of articles which I examined were from QMI Agency, meaning that individual articles were reprinted numerous times in the hundreds of newspapers owned by the company across Canada. Additionally, all of the articles which I examined were readily available online. Thus, while one article containing some incorrect or partial information printed in a community newspaper may not be cause for alarm in itself, the fact that this misinformation can, and now is, spread in newspapers across the country, as well as being available online, is problematic, particularly as readers (presumably) turn to the news for the factual and unbiased reporting about issues and current events.

Underrepresentation of PGMS Students in the Media Coverage

One aspect of the media coverage which I personally found particularly concerning, and also surprising, was the fact that PGMS students were not interviewed or sought out for their in-depth opinion(s) in any of the articles examined for this study. In fact, this was one of the factors which motivated this study, for while students were spoken *for* in much of the media coverage about the prayers, they were rarely asked for their own views, opinions, or experiences, and their voices remained largely unheard.

Although students' were underrepresented in the coverage, it is likely due to legal and practical restrictions, rather than any overt bias or deliberate attempt to silence students in the coverage of the PGMS prayers. In order to interview PGMS students or any other minors, the journalists covering the story are legally required to obtain consent from the students' parent(s)

and/or guardian(s). Therefore, while these restrictions are meant to, and do protect minors, students, if not accompanied by an adult guardian, are not easily accessible for interviews or comments with news outlets, particularly given the tight deadlines facing journalists working for daily newspapers and television reports. Three articles and columns did cite students, although not extensively, often quoting a single comment or statement, and frequently, the students remained unnamed (Selley, 2011a; Hopper, 2011; Godfrey, 2011b).

Furthermore, it is surprising that PGMS students were not featured in any monthly magazine articles or in-depth pieces on the prayers. Without tight daily deadlines, it would have been easier for journalists to seek out parents and obtain permission if their children were willing to be interviewed.

The media coverage of the PGMS prayers also brings attention to the unfortunate fact that children, in general, are largely underrepresented in the news media. When they, or something which directly affects them are the subject of media coverage, as has been the case with the PGMS prayers, minors are often spoken for, rather than being spoken to and respected for their beliefs, viewpoints, and experiences.

Conglomeration & Bias in Canadian News Media

As the analysis of news media coverage for the purpose of this study has demonstrated, the majority of news media publications, networks, and other sources (such as radio) are owned by an increasingly fewer number of corporations. Concerns about media conglomeration in Canada, and its' implications for press freedom and integrity, were raised as early as 1981, when:

> the Kent Commission Report cautioned Canadians that "in a country that has allowed so many newspapers to be owned by a few conglomerates, freedom of the press means, in itself, only that enormous influence without responsibility is conferred on a handful of people." (Kent, as cited in Hudson, 2011, p. 1)

Canadians did not take heed of Kent's warning about the implications of concentrated media ownership, considering that by 2011, twelve private companies owned hundreds of media outlets across Canada, and of these twelve companies, four (Bell, Shaw Communications, Rogers, and Quebecor Inc.) dominate news media ownership (CMG, 2010). Postmedia also has significant control and influence of news media through its' thirteen daily newspapers and one of Canada's two national newspapers, *The National Post* (CMG, 2010). Postmedia Network owns more major "metropolitan daily newspapers in the country" (Postmedia, 2012, para.1) than any other news conglomerate: In addition to *The National Post,* the company controls nine other major newspapers, including *The Ottawa Citizen*, *The Montreal Gazette,* and *The Vancouver Sun* (Postmedia, 2012, para.2). However it is Quebecor Inc. (QMI) that owns the most newspapers of all of the companies which were examined in this study, with control of "43 paid-circulation and free dailies in Canada's key urban markets [the majority of which are in Ontario] and more than 200 community publications" (Canoe Inc., 2012, para.1). These publications reach over 10.5 million Canadians every week (Canoe Inc., 2012, para.1), nearly a third of Canada's population. Additionally, the Sun News TV Network was launched in 2011 and QMI also owns "a number of and an assortment of video, publishing, and film operations" (Hudson, 2011, p. 1).

Given that these few companies have direct and absolute control over the vast majority of privately owned news media in Canada, concerns about bias and impartiality are well founded. The Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications' "Final Report on the Canadian News Media" (2006) outlines the ramifications of increasing media conglomeration and concentration in Canada. Some of the concerns listed in the report include a shrinking number of foreign news bureaus owned by Canadian news media outlets (Canadian Senate, 2009, Part 2, Sec. 1), centralized media coverage, the reprinting or articles in numerous

newspapers (Sec. 2), and the loss of diverse opinions and viewpoints, particularly as national or regional opinion pieces and editorials are now commonly printed in daily community newspapers (Sec. 3).

Jiwani (2010) also expresses many of the same concerns expressed in the Senate Committee Report (2006), particularly the notion that media conglomeration and consolidation can limit press freedom, as journalists may feel pressured report from the ideological or political viewpoints of the corporations which now control the majority of Canada's news media (Jiwani, 2010, p. 60). Jiwani (2010) asserts that in such environments, even those journalists who feel differently may comply with their employers' expectations to avoid risking their careers. She writes that, "[i]n such a situation, it is not unusual to find journalists and editors who are compelled, through threat of losing their jobs, to toe the corporate line and privilege the ideologies of those in power" (p. 60). According to Hudson (2011), Pierre Karl Peladeau, the president and CEO of Quebecor Media Inc. who "has locked out various staff no fewer than 10 times, unabashedly uses his media empire to rail against the power of unions, and admits to having no interest in balanced reporting, claiming a "small-c conservative" bias" (p. 1). Furthermore, Edge (2011) writes, "as demonstrated by Quebecor's lockout at the *Journal de Montréal*, convergence has also allowed media owners disproportionate power over journalists and other media workers" (p. 1276).

This bias and control is evident throughout Sun Media's coverage of the PGMS prayers, as well as a number of other stories, and is particularly concerning given that Quebecor Media Inc. has, in recent years, taken over a number of struggling community newspapers (including my own local newspaper, *The Sarnia Observer*). As noted in the Senate Committee Report (2006), the media corporation CanWest centralized their news coverage (and saved costs) by

reprinting and re-editing articles across numerous newspapers, leading to less local content (Senate Committee, 2006, Part 2, Sec.3). CanWest also limited local opinion pieces and editorials by printing its' own national editorials in community newspapers, a move which triggered protest and controversy amongst journalists (Senate Committee, 2006, Part 2, Sec. 4). While CanWest is now defunct, QMI has many similar practices, as numerous articles (including the coverage of the PGMS prayers) were printed in dozens of newspapers across Canada. Additionally, many opinion pieces about the prayers appeared in several of QMI's larger newspapers, such as *The Toronto Sun,* as well as in the company's local, community publications, including the *Sarnia Observer* and *The London Free Press.*

QMI's Sun News Network , "often colloquially referred to as Fox News North because of its stated goal of providing conservative-leaning commentary" (Mudhar, 2012, para.2) debuted in April of 2011 (para.2), despite some attempts to keep the network from launching and receiving cable television fees (Avaaz, 2010). In September of 2010, the online advocacy website Avaaz created a petition titled "Canada: Stop "Fox News North" (Avaaz, 2010), urging Canadians to sign a petition directed to Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Konrad von Finckenstein, chairman of Canada's Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (Avaaz, 2010). The petition, which urged Canadians to oppose "the kind of hate-filled propaganda with which Fox News has poisoned U.S. politics" (Avaaz, 2010, para.7) was signed by 83, 597 individuals, including famed Canadian author Margaret Atwood (Taber, 2010, para.1).

When Sun News Network did launch, "network officials said Sun News would balance what was seen as a "lefty bias" in Canada's traditional media. Quebecor Media Inc. (QMI) CEO Pierre Karl Peladeau had even argued that other Canadian news networks were boring"' (Mehta, 2012, para.17). As Jiwani (2010) notes, "[i]n light of the biases inherent in media monopolies

and cartels, it is not surprising then that contemporary news portrayals of Arabs, Muslims, and Islam fare so negatively" (p. 60). This may account for why five separate QMI columnists and two television reports produced by QMI/Sun News (in addition to a number of other Sun News Network reports on the subject of the prayers which were not cited in this study) were against the prayers at PGMS. Only one column (Agar, 2011) was in support of the prayers at PGMS, despite the fact that QMI owns hundreds of daily community newspapers across Canada (Canada, 2012).

It must be noted however, that QMI Agency is certainly not the only news organization or outlet reporting from a particular ideological viewpoint. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, (CBC), Canada's government funded public radio and television broadcaster, has often been accused of left-wing bias, (Doyle, 2011), particularly by QMI's Sun News Network, as well as QMI journalists such as Brian Lilley (Doyle, 2011, para. 2, Spector, 2002). Others (Winn, 2002) have also expressed their concern over the public broadcaster's "bias problem" (Winn, 2002, p. 1). Said (1997) notes that bias in the news media is inevitable, as he reflects that,

> the actuality is...that journalists, news agencies, and networks consciously go about deciding what is to be portrayed, how it is to be portrayed, and the like. News, in other words, is less as inert given than the result of a complex process of usually deliberate selection and expression (Said, 1997, p. 50).

Unfortunately, this purposeful and selective portrayal of current events has become more pronounced in the Canadian news media landscape due to conglomeration and consolidation. While several concerns have been raised about the effects of such measures on press freedom, media bias, and accuracy, both by the Senate Committee Report (2006), as well as by academics and authors such as Edge (2011) and Jiwani (2010), the fact is that as of 2012, an increasingly smaller number of corporations now own a great deal of Canada's mainstream and community news (and other) media outlets, directly affecting the quality and integrity of the news and information received by millions of Canadians.

Comments in Response to Online News Coverage

A growing number of Canadians now seek out the news online, and as Krashinsky (2010) reports "[o]nline readership for all the major Canadian newspapers increased in 2009 at a rate outpacing growth in print readership" (para.2). Similarly, in their 2011 study of newspaper readership across Canada, The Newspaper Audience Databank Inc. (NADbank) found that while print newspapers are still a popular source for news, an increasing number of Canadians access online news, either in addition to, or as an alternative to print sources (NADbank, 2011). All of the news outlets I examined in this study have a considerable online presence, with nearly all of their print content also available on their respective websites. Other news outlets, such as City TV/City News, CBC News, and *The Huffington Post* (which is completely online) also have extensive articles, commentaries, editorials, and opinion pieces available on their websites.

Nearly all of the articles about the PGMS prayers which were accessed online allowed readers the option to leave their comments, feedback, opinions, and reaction to the story. While readers have long had the option of responding to news and/or editorial content via letters to the editor, many of which are then printed, those who access their news online now also have the option of leaving feedback immediately and anonymously. Letters to the editor are held to higher publishing and editorial standards in terms of editing and content, and unlike in online forums, letter writers must provide their name. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that their letter will be published. Additionally, in online forums, as comments sections are publicly displayed, and open to anyone who registers as a user, many readers respond to each other's comments, and discussion (or debate) may ensue, much more promptly and extensively than responses to letters published in the print editions of newspapers.

Although a significant number of letters have been written to several newspapers in response to the prayers at PGMS, they are far outnumbered by the online comments generated in response to every article posted online where there is an option for readers to leave feedback publicly, but anonymously. Nearly all of the online articles posted about the PGMS prayers which I examined allowed for readers to leave comments, and some of the news items garnered hundreds of responses. While these online forums and areas for comments encourage readers to engage with news content and allow for discussion, they can, and often do become, a breeding ground for discriminatory, even inflammatory, remarks, particularly as readers can use pseudonyms as their usernames and are not required to identify themselves. Jedwab, as cited in Boswell (2012) notes that

> the relatively "unfettered character" of communication via the Internet may be reinforcing, spreading and amplifying negative impressions of various groups in Canada, though particularly Muslims.
>
> While traditional newspapers...tend to block out harsh or extreme views from public view...many media websites and other online portals create a virtual "free-for-all" for public comments that can fuel intolerance (para.17-18).

Boswell (2012) continues on to note that particularly controversial issues and stories can garner hundreds of online comments from readers (para.19), as has been the case in the overwhelming number of messages posted in response to articles about the PGMS prayers. What is of particular concern is that, that many of the comments left about the prayers reflect discriminatory and stereotypical attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. As noted by Jedwab (as cited in Boswell, 2012, para.18), these comments may serve to reinforce stereotypes and intolerance (para.17). Several comments left by readers online reveal the common perception of Muslims as the “other,” who need to either assimilate to Western norms and practices, or return to wherever they (presumably) came from. For example, a comment posted by a reader in

response to one such column discussing the prayers read, "If Muzzies [referring to Muslims] don't like it here, they can go back to whatever hellhole they crawled out of" (Bootlegger1, 2011). This comment received 150 'likes' from other readers and of the 437 comments posted in response to the news item, there were several dozen more which reflected similar attitudes and opinions. In response to a column written for the *Toronto Star*, many readers were respectful and stated their reasons for being for, or against, the practice of religion, and/ or Islamic prayers specifically, in public schools. However, a number of those leaving comments became involved in a debate about Islamic practices. The perception of Muslims as the problematic "other" who pose a threat to, and thus do not belong in, Canadian society was evident in some of the replies:

> @ Waleed, your backwards mentality on equality isn't welcomed in this country. If you can't get into the 21st century and accept that we are all equal and shouldn't be segregated like this, get out of my country. anyone [sic] who supports or even tries to rationalize this as promoting religious equality should be deported. Its [sic] one thing to tolerate a religion; that means we wont persecute you for believing something different. Its [sic] another thing entirely to bring backwards values we don't hold into our country so we can create a new islam [sic] in the west. People call people like me bigots for saying these things, but its [sic] their insistence on changing our culture thats [sic] created this hostile environment. So get with the program or get out. (Jackie1188, 2011)

Hundreds of similar comments reflecting these attitudes were also found in response to all of the articles, columns, and opinion pieces I have examined about the prayers at PGMS where there is an option for readers to leave public comments, regardless of which news media outlet the article was published by, although QMI/Sun Media articles seemed to generate the highest number of responses. While of course there are also comments which reflect differing opinions in a respectful tone, the vast majority of the feedback posted in response to articles about the PGMS prayers reflects attitudes rooted in prejudice and stereotypical beliefs, and at the very least, misunderstanding. Such beliefs often stem from a lack of knowledge or

misinformation about other faith groups, as well as cultural and religious stereotypes perpetuated by the entertainment and news media (Bayoumi, 2009; Haque, 2004; Imam, 2009; et al.[14])

What is particularly concerning about these comments is the fact that they were not removed from the websites on which they were posted. The CANOE Network (which is owned by QMI and thus published all of the QMI/Sun Media articles about the PGMS prayers) clearly states on its website that readers who are commenting must abide by the "Netiquitte" and rules outlined for comments (Blizzard, 2011). These rules, provided by the CANOE Network, clearly state that comments must be respectful, and a number of "terms, messages and/or content that shall not be tolerated" (CANOE, 2012, para.2) are outlined. Among the items on the list are, "vulgarities" (CANOE, 2012, para.3), "offensive, slanderous, obscene and/or insulting comments" (para.3), "discriminatory, racist and/or sexist comments" (para.3), and "comments that incite to violence and or hatred" (para.3). Like CANOE/Sun Media, the *Toronto Star,* also provides a link to its' "Commenting Guidelines" (Toronto Star, 2012), stating that those commenting to be respectful and avoid "comments that are threatening, obscene, profane, contain hate speech or degrade others" (Toronto Star, 2012, para.5).

However, while comments like those left by "Bootlegger1" (2011) and others in response to this, and other articles are certainly offensive, insulting, discriminatory, and hateful, they have not been removed from the website. Many of the comments left in these online forums and discussion boards reflect prejudicial attitudes, and they may, unfortunately, further spread such beliefs. This is particularly true as many of the objectionable comments are 'liked' by other

[14] Bayoumi, 2009; Haque, 2004; Imam, 2009; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, Marshall & Sensoy, 2009; Rizvi, 2005; Said, 1997, 2003; Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009; Shaheen, 1984, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2008; Skalli, 2004; Steinberg, et al., 2010; Watt, 2008

users, thus encouraging and supporting the propagation of these stereotypical, even discriminatory, remarks and sentiments.

Chapter Summary

This chapter first considered the way in which Muslims and Islam are portrayed and depicted in Western News media coverage, particularly since 9/11. It then moved into a discussion of the discourse analysis which was conducted of sixty-two print and three television news items about the PGMS prayers. While the majority of opinion pieces published have been opposed to the prayers, both sides were represented in the overall media coverage of the prayers.

A number of additional concerns were outlined in this chapter, including the publication of incorrect and/or partial information about the prayers, concerns about news media conglomeration and consolidation in Canada, and the troubling reality and implications of comments left in response to news articles published online.

Chapter 5 will consider the results of research interviews, and amongst other findings, will explore what, if any, effect that the media coverage of the prayers at PGMS has had on members of the school community.

CHAPTER 5

Research Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of eight qualitative semi-structured research interviews which I conducted with members of the PGMS community, as well as other individuals who were involved in the prayers and/or the media and public reaction to them. The participants' responses have been presented thematically, with four major themes being identified. The purpose of these interviews, and this study as a whole, has been to gain the perspectives and firsthand experiences of students who have been attending the prayers at PGMS, particularly as these (or any other) students were not adequately represented in the media coverage. Finally, this chapter considers what, if any, effect that the news coverage of the prayers and the public debate has had on the PGMS community, and shares the participants' responses to the controversy.

Participants

Of the eight interviewees, five were current students: Aliya, Esa, Jameela, Zaki, and Zainab. In addition to these students, Michael, the principal of PGMS was also interviewed, as were Shazia, a former PGMS parent and current volunteer with the prayers, and Madiha, a university student and activist who organized a rally in support of the prayers (more information about the participants can be found in Chapter 3).

Although all of the interviewees answered the prepared questions (Appendices C, D, and E), the fact that the interviews were semi-structured allowed the students to share their experiences, opinions, and thoughts on the prayers, as well as the media coverage, in depth. Furthermore, as three of the students were interviewed at the same location, there was also some group discussion about the prayers and the controversy surrounding them.

Presentation of Results

The results of these interviews, as presented in this chapter, have been divided into four sections, based on the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Patton, 2002) of the interview data. These four sections are: 1) The PGMS prayers from the perspective of the school community 2) The importance of Islam and prayer in the participants' lives 3) The oppressed Muslim girl in the media's coverage of the PGMS prayers 3) The participants' responses to the media coverage and 4) The disconnect and polarization between PGMS' perceptions of the prayers and those of the prayers' detractors.

The PGMS Prayers from the Perspective of the School Community

Michael has been the principal of Pine Grove Middle School (PGMS) since 2007 and has worked in education, first as a teacher, and then as a principal, for over thirty-six years. He is an affable man who clearly takes pride in the school's diversity, and the board and administration's measures to accommodate and promote pluralism. According to Michael, PGMS serves approximately 1,200 students from grades 6 through 8. The school is situated in one of Ontario's most highly populated and most culturally and religiously diverse regions. The majority of the population is made up of immigrant families, "primarily from India, Pakistan and more recently Afghanistan – reflecting Canada's shifting urban demographics" (Friesen & Hammer, 2011, para.3), most of whom are Muslim (Friesen & Hammer, 2011, para.4). This is reflected at PGMS, where anywhere from eighty to ninety percent of the student population is Muslim. According to Michael, approximately 400 students attended the prayers held every week in the school's cafeteria.

According to Michael and Shazia, a community volunteer and former PGMS parent, the prayers are held every Friday afternoon from November to March, since the shorter days in these

winter months are when the afternoon prayer *Dhur*, one of the five daily prayers performed by devout Muslims, falls during school hours.

Michael and Shazia explained that students have been praying at PGMS without incident for several years, well before Michael became the principal. In fact it was Shazia and her husband who helped to initiate the first prayers for Muslim students at PGMS in 2001. Shazia proudly showed me copy of a letter which she and her husband had received from the previous PGMS principal in 2001, soon after the prayers had commenced. The letter, which recognized the couple's efforts in orchestrating the prayers and arranging for volunteer supervisors, described their actions as a "truly wonderful example of the school and community working together for the common good of the children."

Hundreds of other schools in the LODSB allow students to pray on school property, according to Michael and Shazia. While other schools may allow students to pray however, it is the Friday congregational prayers at PGMS which received widespread media and public attention, likely due to the fact that they take place in the school's cafeteria and are attended by an average of 400 students on a weekly basis from November to March. The students were attending the prayers voluntarily and (approximately) less than half of the school's Muslim student population chose to participate in the prayers every week.

Students at PGMS are required to have their parents and/or guardians sign a permission form at the commencement of each school year in order to leave class to participate in the prayers. The prayers are voluntary and it is the choice of the students to attend on a weekly basis, although some (Teitel, 2011) have argued that they may feel pressured to participate by community members and peers.

The Rationale behind the Prayers

According to Michael, the prayers, as they are held now, were motivated due to safety concerns and to maximize instructional time for the school's Muslim students. He explained that the motivation for the current arrangement "wasn't really about religion, it was more about keeping the kids in school and keeping them safe." The congregational prayers have been held at PGMS since 2007, soon after Michael became principal of the school. Prior to his arrival at PGMS, the Muslim students used to leave the school on Friday afternoons and walk to the local mosque to attend the congregational prayers taking place there. According to Michael, the walk from the school to the mosque (one way) takes approximately twenty minutes and slightly longer in the winter. He noted that as the PGMS principal, he was quite uncomfortable with students leaving the school, unsupervised and in such large numbers, for several reasons. Michael stressed that the most pressing concern was, and remains, the safety of the students under his care and supervision. This was a concern shared by Shazia, as well as three of the students I interviewed. Four of the participants noted that the school and the mosque are located in a very high traffic area, and believed that the previous arrangement posed a high risk for students, particularly as they walked to and from the prayers unattended. The students also felt that due to the large Muslim population at the school, it was more practical to have the prayers inside PGMS, rather than having hundreds of students walk to the mosque and back. Esa, who stated that the prayers made him feel more comfortable at the school, echoed Michael's sentiments about walking to the mosque being a safety issue and a loss in instructional time, stating that

> …there's a bridge to cross to come here, and many things could happen. And the class time, where usually students might not have enough time, because by the time they get back they might have missed a lesson or something. But like, it's a good thing to have it there [at PGMS].

Although some (Selley, 2011b) have argued that a crossing guard would alleviate safety concerns, this did not come up in the interviews. Additionally, Michael cited that there was no way of knowing that the students who left to attend the prayers were in fact, doing so. He recalled instances where he would drive by the students on his way to and from meetings or other engagements and would find them

> taking their time going to mosque, some just, you know, throwing snowballs and doing what kids do, and I thought, you know, this really is a safety issue. How do I know they're actually getting there, how do I know they're going there?

Michael also found that many of the students would simply not return to school once the prayers were complete, as it was nearing dismissal time and for many of the students, the mosque is in closer proximity to their homes than PGMS. From an educational perspective, this could be considered a disciplinary issue (Dwivedi, 2011; Mallick, 2011a), as the students were truant for reasons other than attending the prayers, or due to the fact that they were taking longer than necessary to go to and from the prayers. However Michael reiterated that the safety of his students was, and remains the motivating factor behind holding the weekly Friday prayers at the school, rather than having students walk to the mosque. In his words, "it wasn't really about religion, it was more about keeping the kids in school and keeping them safe."

Michael and several of the students also noted that with the prior arrangement, where students left the school to attend the prayers at the mosque, a great deal of instructional time was lost on Fridays. Michael cited this as the second reason, after safety, for having the students pray at PGMS. He stated that having such a large number of students absent for nearly half of the school day on Fridays was "affecting the integrity of instructional time" and that if students were to instead take thirty to forty-five minutes to pray at school, then return directly to class, it would "at least save part of the instructional day." He also stated that the students are aware that they

are "responsible for catching up" in terms of any instruction or material that they may have missed while attending the prayers.

Therefore, according to Michael, the prayers were initiated due to the safety concerns of the school's administration and parents, as well as in an effort to keep students in the school and minimize the amount of instructional time that was being missed by the students attending the prayers at the mosque. Due to his concerns, Michael spoke to members of the school council, the school administration, and Muslim parents and community volunteers worked together to organize and initiate the Friday congregational prayers which are now held in the PGMS cafeteria. Michael also made it clear that the prayers are organized, funded, set up, and supervised by parent volunteers and that the while the school hosts the prayers, PGMS (or the LODSB) does not provide any support, financial or otherwise.

The Importance of Islam and Prayer in the Participants' Lives

For devout and practicing Muslims, such as the students and community volunteers I interviewed, praying at the ordained times, five times daily, is an obligation which is fundamental to their faith in God and their practice of Islam[15]. The Friday (*Jummah*) prayers are

[15] According to *ahadith* (sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)), there are five pillars of Islam which are the basis of the faith. After the first pillar, which is the basis of Islam, to "testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Apostle" (Bukhari, 1:2:8), comes the second pillar: "To offer the prayers perfectly" (Bukhari, 1:2:48). The prayers, and their significance, are mentioned numerous times in the Quran, including the verse "Maintain with care the [obligatory] prayers and [in particular] the middle prayer and stand before Allah, devoutly obedient" (The Quran, 2:238). Additionally, there are dozens of Hadiths which highlight the importance of prayer, including one in which the Prophet (PBUH) states that "Verily, between man and polytheism and disbelief is abandonment of the prayer" (Sahih Al Muslim). For devout Muslims, including all of the Muslim individuals I interviewed, praying at the ordained times, five times daily, is an obligation which is a non-negotiable, fundamental part of their faith in God and their practice of Islam.

particularly important[16], as Friday is the holy day in Islam, comparable in significance to Sunday in Christianity, and Saturday in Judaism.

The five students interviewed attend the Friday congregational prayers at PGMS on a weekly basis, in addition to praying regularly outside of school. One of the students, Zainab, stated that while she occasionally did not participate in the prayers, it was due to the fact that she sometimes did not hear the announcements which are given over the school's PA system to notify students that the prayers are commencing.

All of the students were asked what Islam means to them personally, and what role it plays in their lives. A strong sense of conviction in their faith and beliefs was expressed by the students, and they stated that Islam gives them a sense of purpose. Aliya, who like Jameela wears the *hijab*, reflected that Islam is "like, it's what keeps me together, it's like um, it's actually like it gives you this feeling, you have this feeling that you know you're doing something right." Esa, Aliya, and Jameela also stated that Islam is/feels like what is "right," with Jameela sharing that "I'm very proud to be Muslim because I know it's the right thing to do." While all of the students said that they were encouraged by their parents to attend the weekly prayers at PGMS, they emphasized that they do so willingly. On the matter of participating in the prayers by choice, Jameela said, "I would tell [the media] that the people aren't- the kids aren't being forced to go there, they're going there by choice. And even if they are being forced, they could have said no, they could have told someone."

The importance and emphasis of religion in all of the participants' lives is one which is shared by many other Muslim students in the West (Imam, 2009; Khan, 2009; Sensoy &

[16] The importance of the *Jum'ah* prayers specifically is mentioned in the Quran, with a verse stating, "Believers! When the call to prayer is made on the day of congregation, hasten to the remembrance of God, and leave all worldly commerce: this is for your own good, if you but knew it" (The Quran, 62:9).

Stonebanks, 2009a; Zine, 2001, 2008). In an essay quoted by Abo-Zena, Sahli, & Tobias-Nahi (2009), Osama, a 6th grade student expresses the importance of prayer to him as a Muslim, and the necessity of praying all of the prayers at the mandated times:

> Imagine having a meeting with the President of the United States. Would you be late? Of course not. Well I had a meeting with the Creator of the universe. Being Muslim means you have a different life than most people. You have to pray five times a day. When you pray to Allah (the Arabic word for the one God) you wouldn't want to miss that meeting (p.12).

All of the students expressed the importance of prayer to them as a religious obligation, and explained how Islam is an integral to their character and identity, much like Osama, or a number of students interviewed by Zine (2008). As Zine (2008) writes, "[c]learly, religion provided these young people with a path to personal and spiritual fulfilment" (p. 146). These sentiments were also expressed by Jameela and Aliya, when they were asked about what they found to be the most positive aspect of the prayers. Jameela responded, "[w]ell, we get to practice our religion and it shows people that we're proud of being Muslims" while Aliya stated that,

> well it's like I said that-it's like a part of my daily life so if I don't attend it it's like, it's like I have a hollow feeling inside like I know I did something wrong or it's like I'm forgetting to do something today.

Aliya, Esa, Jameela, Zainab, and Zaki all shared that they are most grateful for the prayers being held at PGMS due to the fact that they allow Muslim students to attend school without having to compromise their religious beliefs or convictions. Additionally, all of the participants also expressed their appreciation to the PGMS administration and the LODSB for allowing for the prayers and for continuing them, which helped them to feel that they, and their religion, were respected.

The Stereotypical Oppressed Female Muslim in the Media Coverage of the Prayers

Perceptions of Muslim Women in the West

The perception of Muslim women as powerless and subjugated victims of their circumstances who must be liberated by Western values and norms is frequently propagated by media outlets, and has dominated the media coverage of the prayers at PGMS. Moallem, as cited in Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2008) notes that "the Western trope of the Muslim woman as the ultimate victim of a timeless patriarchy defined by the barbarism of the Islamic religion, which is in need of civilizing has become a very important component of Western regimes of knowledge" (Moallem, as cited in Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008, p. 417-418). Many journalists have chosen to speak for the students, particularly the female students at PGMS, lamenting their situation while disregarding the experiences and opinions of the female students' themselves. The fact that Muslim women at PGMS pray behind men and are exempt from the five daily prayers while menstruating has been one of the most contentious and controversial aspects of the prayers, and is often the basis of the arguments against them. As my research thus far has shown, the prayers are not seen as discriminatory or sexist by the female (or other) students I interviewed, nor have there been any known complaints made by female students to the school or to the prayers' organizers.

The Perceived Need to Protect the "Shy" Female Students at PGMS

Many journalists (and other members of the general public) however have had strong reactions and opinions on the issue, with one columnist stating that photographs of the girls praying behind the boys has made her "blood roil in anger" (Kheiriddin, 2011, para.1) while another calls the prayers "viscerally offensive" (Selley, 2011b, para.4) on behalf of the "menstruating 12-year-old Muslim girl[s]" (para.4) at Pine Grove Middle School. Heather

Mallick (2011a, 2011b) of the *Toronto Star* expresses outrage at what she also perceives as maltreatment of the female Muslim students at the school, describing them as "shy and of tender age" (Mallick, 2011b, para. 13) and in need of defense (para. 13). Like Mallick, columnist Tasha Kheiriddin (2011a), of *The National Post,* implies that the girls are not fully capable of understanding or choosing their own religious beliefs and convictions, stating that they are "impressionable young women, Grade 8 students" (Kheiriddin, 2011a, para. 4) who cannot yet "make up their own minds about whether they are comfortable with religious practices that relegate women to the back of the bus" (para. 4). She then goes further, stating that,

> [t]his is the same type of discrimination against which Canadian soldiers fought in Afghanistan, where, in the name of religion, women were shrouded in burkas and some girls forbidden from even going to school. It is the type of thinking that in its most extreme forms justifies female circumcision, honour killings and men beating their wives.
>
> Now, in a Canadian public school, religious leaders are being allowed to instill the same type of message. At least there are no burkas involved. Yet. (Kheiriddin, 2011a, para.5-6)

While it is certainly possible that these female students are young and are capable of being indoctrinated, it can be seen as insulting, and rather ironic that both authors discuss challenging sexism through female empowerment and equality, yet they undermine the female Muslim students at PGMS and assume that they are oppressed and not acting according their own will. The columnists essentially render the female Muslim students as incapable of making their own decisions and/or acting upon their own religious convictions and beliefs. Kheriddin (2011a) even goes as far as to link the prayers to violent and abhorrent acts against women such as domestic abuse, genital mutilation, and murder, furthering stereotypes perpetuated by the media which ascribe these crimes (often exclusively) to Muslims and Islam.

Even some news articles have used language which is leading and biased, such as an article written by Ian Robertson (2011), of the QMI Agency, which states (incorrectly) that

"[m]uch of the controversy arose after a Toronto school recently permitted Muslim prayers in a cafeteria, where non-adherents are barred from participating, girls are forced to worship behind boys, and menstruating girls are banished to the back of the room" (Robertson, 2011, para.4).

As noted in Chapter 2, this perceived need to 'rescue' Muslim women is by no means isolated, nor is it a new phenomenon (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008; Rezai-Rashti, 1994, 1999). Rather, it is "an exemplary instance of what Said (1997, 2003) has identified as the political enterprise of Orientalism, which has intensified in the post-September 11 aftermath of the demonization of Islam and the Muslim subject" (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008, p. 417). And like the detractors of the PGMS prayers in the media, who have been calling for the cessation of the services on the basis of protecting the rights and well-being of the Muslim female students at PGMS, "many feminists and Quebec nationalists in Canada have advocated the banning of the veil in public schools on the basis that it will free young women from oppression imposed on them by their families" (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008, p. 420-21). This is despite the fact that the experiences and responses of Muslim students or girls participating in either the study cited by Martino & Rezai-Rashti (2008), or in this study have not backed up such allegations, and rather, they have contradicted and challenged the stereotypical views of Muslim girls and women which are often forced upon them.

The Female (and Male) Students' Counternarratives

Indeed, the students (both male and female) participating in this study have all provided counter narratives which challenge the broad statements and sweeping generalizations made about all of the female Muslim students who participate in the weekly prayers at PGMS. And while of course such generalizations should not be made based on the opinions and responses of the three female students I interviewed, they openly expressed their frustration and disagreement

with how they, as female Muslim students at PGMS, have been perceived and spoken for in the media coverage of the prayers.

All of the students were adamant that they participate in the prayers, as well as other forms of Islamic practice and worship, by their own choice. The students, both male and female, and all of the other interviewees were familiar with the debate over the girls at the school praying behind the boys, and not praying while they are menstruating. In response to the argument that such practices are discriminatory and sexist, and should not be taking place in a public school, Aliya and Esa (who is male) answered:

> Aliya: Um, no it's like- it's like every other day, it doesn't really make a difference for us, we're still there, we're sitting back there, we're a part of like, all the other- we're just…how do I say this?
>
> Esa: We're praying for the same God
>
> Aliya: Yea, and they think that we're different, that they're you know excluding us but we're just-we're all equal there, we're all sitting there for the same reason. So yea.

Aliya and Jameela were especially outspoken and candid when asked about their thoughts on the media's coverage of the prayers, particularly on the perception of the female students at the school (and Muslim women in general). When asked about how she felt about praying behind males, and what the media was saying about the matter, Aliya responded:

> Yea, so there's barriers right [referring to the physical barriers-tables- placed between the boys and the girls at the prayers]? But if they actually go through why- the meanings of why we actually sit at the back then they'll actually understand why we do it. But obviously they haven't, you know read all about it and they're accusing-they're saying things without knowing all of the facts.

She then explained how she would respond to the journalists (or any other individuals) who believe that she, and the other female students at PGMS, are discriminated against because they pray behind their male peers:

> Well, from what I've been taught it's just that if women sit at the front it's like, it causes distractions (referring to when women prostrate in prayer) and you're not there to you know, fool around, you're there for God. So we do it that way because you know, we want to respect God and we're not just there to look at each other.

Aliya and Jameela also reiterated that when they, and other female students were menstruating, they attended the prayers by choice in order to be there and listen to the sermon, and stated that they sit in the back willingly. Shazia then explained that the reason an empty row was left in between the female students who were praying and those who were menstruating (which was one of the points of consternation in the media and public reaction to the prayers) was so that students who were arriving late to the prayers could easily join in. Shazia noted that this was due to the fact that out of respect, it is not Islamically permissible for one to disturb or distract another's prayer, or knowingly walk in front of someone who is praying (unless there is some sort of barrier, object, or space in between them). There is also a row left empty behind the boys for the same reason, and this is evident from photographs of the prayers which Shazia sent to me.

Shazia, Aliya, and Jameela also explained how the stereotypical views and beliefs about Muslim women and girls being oppressed and forced/coerced into certain religious practices that were prevalent in the media coverage of the prayers were also evident in the comments and reactions which they received from the prayers' detractors. While Zainab and Zaki were away in the summer months and did not attend the Appreciation Rally held in support of the LODSB, Aliya, Jameela, and Esa were all there. Aliya and Jameela described their experience with one of the prayers' opponents whom they encountered at the rally:

> Aliya: Yea, there was this one guy, he was like, standing in front of all these girls, we were wearing scarves, and he was like um, what would happen if you took off your scarf, like what would your father say, would he kill you? Like what would he do?
>
> Jameela: That's another thing, like we don't get forced to put on our scarves

Both girls believed that such stereotypical comments and attitudes in both the public and media discourse are a result of ignorance and lack of understanding about Islamic teachings, practices, and rulings, and also about Muslims in general:

Jameela: They don't know all the facts

Aliya: They need to get their facts right before they start accusing people

Jameela: They don't see us coming around and accusing [their fathers]

Interestingly, the above discussion also reveals the students' awareness of the fact that perceptions of women being subjugated and under the threat of patriarchal oppression and violence are something often ascribed uniquely to Islam and Muslims, while such generalizations are not made about non-Muslim women. As Abu-Lughod (2002) notes, "[p]rojects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged" (p. 789). Those objecting to what they perceive as mistreatment and injustice towards Muslim women, such as the teacher candidates interviewed in Sensoy and DiAngelo's study (2006), or the journalists and members of the public opposed to the PGMS prayers, often make assumptions or generalizations about Muslim women and girls based on their own personal experiences and beliefs, which are implied to be not only superior, but as the ideal standard for all women. While some Muslim women and organizations such as the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC) and the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) have objected to the prayers, other Muslim women and organizations speaking out in support of the prayers are, in comparison, greatly underrepresented in the coverage.

When Michael, who has been urged by many of the prayers' opponents to cease holding them due to the perceived gender discrimination, was questioned about the issue, he responded,

> Well, my answer to it is very clear, ah, number one, we can't say "we'll accommodate for your prayers, but you have to do it-pray-our way." ONE, I think that's absolutely ridiculous, if you're accommodating, you're accommodating. Um, ah- this is part of the belief system- Muslim belief system (pause). Ah, it's no different in Christian, I mean I'm a Christian Orthodox, um, women, ah, at one point had to sit on one side of the Church and men on the other. That doesn't- it's evolved away from that and I'm sure Muslim religion may evolve, but it may not, I don't know.

Michael noted that no students or community members had ever expressed concern with the current arrangement.

Of particular concern is the fact that the female student themselves were not consulted about the issue at all and are not cited in any of the media coverage aside from two articles which quoted three students in total (Hopper, 2011, Selley, 2011a). These students were present at a LODSB event organized for members of the public to discuss the PGMS prayers, and according to Hopper (2011),

> [o]ne of them, Anna, accused "outsiders" in the room of imposing their views on Valley Park students. "We're angry because people are telling us what's good for us … they think we're stupid or weak and can't decide for ourselves," she said (para.12)

The other two students quoted, one by Selley (2011a) and the other in Hopper's (2011) article, remain anonymous. This lack of input from the female students at PGMS themselves is in spite of the fact that the debate itself was (reportedly and presumably) about their equality, rights, welfare, and well-being. All of the female students whom I interviewed challenged the way in which they, as female Muslim students at PGMS, were portrayed in the media coverage, and also resented the fact that they were not fairly represented, or even consulted. Through their interview responses and discussion, Jameela, Aliya, and Zainab served to provide counterstories to the numerous opinion pieces and news items (Artuso, 2011b; Banerjee, 2011; Blizzard, 2011; et al.[17]) which take issue with the fact that the girls pray behind the boys and do not pray while

[17] Artuso, 2011b; Banerjee, 2011; Blizzard, 2011; Connor, 2011; Corbella, 2011; Doughart, 2011; Dwivedi, 2011; Fatah, 2012; Furey, 2011; Godfrey, 2011; Hopper, 2011; Kheiriddin, 2011a, 2011b; Mallick, 2011a, 2011b;

menstruating, and in some cases, categorize all of the female students at PGMS as shy, impressionable, defenceless, and in need of protection and intervention to free them from practices viewed as oppressive, backwards, and demeaning. It is also evident that while the students were bothered by, and frustrated at the way that they, as Muslim females, have been underrepresented and portrayed in the news coverage of the PGMS prayers (as well as other news stories featuring Muslims and Islam), they remained resolute in their religious convictions and practices.

The Participants' Responses to the Media Coverage

Misinformation & Misconceptions in the Media Coverage of the PGMS Prayers

The adults I interviewed, particularly Michael, the principal of PGMS, were greatly concerned about the fact that media outlets have continued to print information which is either misconstrued, or even completely false. As discussed in Chapter 4, a number of false or misleading statements and claims were repeatedly made in the news coverage about the prayers at PGMS, including that the prayers were being led by an adult imam or religious figure (Agar, 2011; Brown, 2011; Canadian Press, 2011; et al.[18]) and that non-Muslim students were barred from not only the prayers, but also the cafeteria on Friday afternoons (Blizzard, 2011; Corbella, 2011; Doughart, 2011, et al.[19]).

Michael and Shazia were visibly upset at these claims, particularly as they were so pervasive throughout the media coverage and public reaction to the prayers. According to

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[18] Agar, 2011; Brown, 2011; Canadian Press, 2011; CBC News, 2011; Davidson, 2011; Doughart, 2011; Dwivedi, 2011; Vu, 2011; Friesen & Hammer, 2011; Furey, 2011; Globe and Mail, 2011a; Godfrey, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Hammer, 2011a, 2011b; Kalinowski, 2011; Lewis, 2011; McParland, 2011; Reynolds, 2011b; Rushowy & Brown, 2011; Selley, 2011a; Sonnenberg, 2011; Talbot, 2011b; Teitel, 2011; Warmington, 2011; Yuen, 2011a, 2011b

[19] Blizzard, 2011; Corbella, 2011; Doughart, 2011; Godfrey, 2011c; Hammer, 2011a; Kheiriddin, 2011a, 2011b; Robertson, 2011; Reynolds, 2011a, 2011b; Yuen, 2011a

Michael, Shazia, and Esa, the individual leading the prayers was, and always had been, a secondary school student, and not an adult imam or religious leader from the local (or any other) mosque. Shazia also noted that while the students leading the prayers, like hundreds of other Muslims in the area, attended the mosque for prayers, classes, and other events, they did not represent the mosque or have any official affiliation or positions of authority with any religious organization. The students leading the prayers have not been the same individuals every year, and some years there have been three different students taking turns leading the prayers every week, while this year it was the same student every week, according to Esa.

Michael then acknowledged that he and other members of school and board administration may have used the word imam or "junior imam" which was then misconstrued or misunderstood in the subsequent media coverage. Noting this widespread belief that the individual leading the prayers was an adult male from a mosque or other religious leader or authority figure, and how his previous statements may have been misconstrued, Michael, had since made a conscious effort to clarify that the imam leading the PGMS prayers is in fact a high school student who has not yet reached the age of majority. During the interview, Shazia also wryly pointed out that the student leading the prayers this year did not have a beard. However, while some media outlets and news items (Brown, 2011; Globe and Mail, 2011; Selley, 2011a) have now clarified that it is a high school student who leads the prayers at PGMS, they have implied that this is a new occurrence: "High school students - not a religious leader from outside - now lead the weekly Muslim prayers...a change the school hopes will ease objections to the 30-minute service" (Brown, 2011, para.1).

In response to the claims that non-Muslims were not permitted to enter or use the cafeteria on Fridays, Michael and Shazia clarified that the prayers were held at 1:30pm every

week, well after the students at PGMS finished eating their lunch in the cafeteria. The cafeteria is not in use during this time, something which was considered when finding a location for the prayers to take place. Once the school caretakers finish cleaning up the cafeteria after lunch, parent volunteers move in to set up the prayer mats and supervise the prayers. When asked if any non-Muslim students had at any point asked him for permission to attend the prayers, Michael responded:

> Well, they'd be permitted. But again, I'd have no problem with that but- but um, they do have classes and- and they're in classes. So- no one's even asked but if they did I would have no problem with that.

Michael, Shazia, and the students were all aware of the fact that that there was misinformation being reported in the media coverage of the PGMS prayers. All of the interviewees found this frustrating, particularly as many of the claims were widespread and were reported as fact. Michael and Shazia attributed some of the misinformation to some of the groups and individuals who were most vehemently opposed to the prayers, as they were making similar claims (such as non-Muslim students not being permitted in the cafeteria) during the protests held at the LODSB headquarters (forhisglory700, 2011), in a joint press conference (Lemaire, 2011a), and to/in the media (Banerjee, 2011; Talbot, 2011b; et al. [20]). When asked about how he felt about the media coverage of the prayers, Michael replied that

> [i]t was initiated by a small group of people who are very a- to me, very anti- uh, Muslim. And- I didn't appreciate the fact that, that people like that get such a-got their five minutes of fame basically in the paper and, and um, you know, what they talked about was sheer, utter, nonsense. And so I, I wasn't happy with the fact that these people were given credibility, in terms of you know, stating their case, but making up things like, you know, kids- non-Muslims were not allowed to eat lunch on Fridays because it was being use- because the cafeteria was being used, I mean it's all nonsense. And no one bothered to ask us- they simply went ahead and published it. I, I take exception to that.

[20] Banerjee, 2011; CBC News, 2011; D'Souza, 2011; Godfrey, 2011a, 2011c; Hammer, 2011a; Kalinowski, 2011; Morrow, 2011; Siddiqui, H., 2011; Talbot, 2011b; Teitel, 2011; Vu, 2011; Yuen, 2011a, 2011b

As noted by Michael, it is disconcerting that false claims about the prayers were made consistently and prevalently in the media coverage, without any apparent clarification or fact checking with school officials.

The Students' Responses to the Media Coverage

All of the participants and their families had been following the news media coverage of the prayers since it began in June of 2011. When questioned on how they felt about the media coverage, the students and Shazia all believed that much of the media coverage of the PGMS prayers served to propagate post-colonial stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, particularly Muslim women, sometimes to the point where these attitudes overshadowed the topic of the prayers themselves. They also believed that much of the media coverage was one-sided.

In response to the question on how she felt about the media's coverage of the prayers, Aliya believed that the news media was reporting "mostly negatively," and stated, "well, I think they're only-they're only trying to get- they're only covering one side of the story. They're not actually talking, - like asking the Muslim students how they feel, they're only asking the other people." Like Aliya, Jameela also felt that the news coverage in response to the prayers was "unfair," and she observed that "[the news media] only interview people who think it's wrong. I haven't seen that many people who say it's right, so uh, it's not fair." While Esa shared the other students' belief that the media coverage was one-sided, he was more reflective in his response, stating that the media has been reporting "their own opinion, and they have freedom of speech so they can say what they like…but we can say what we like too."

As expected, the participants acknowledged and appreciated the columnists who wrote in support of the prayers (Agar, 2011; Elghawaby, 2011; Gardner, 2011; et al.[21]), yet were also disappointed that in addition to the groups and individuals mobilizing against the prayers at the protests, the majority of opinion pieces and columns on the topic were against the prayers taking place at PGMS, or any Ontario public school (Banerjee, 2011; Blizzard, 2011; Corbella, 2011; et al.[22]).

Zainab, who was away for the summer, only learned about the controversy upon her return and stated that when she learned that there were calls for the prayers to cease, she felt "frustrated about it because in our religion we are supposed to pray so they can't really stop that because it's like, we're allowed to. Canada is a free country so you can do your religion without being stopped."

However, while they were frustrated about the media coverage and the protests, aside from Esa, who stated that the opposition to the prayers had increased his motivation to attend them and to show his support, none of the other students' opinions or feelings towards the prayers had changed due to the media coverage. All of the participants noted that they were disturbed or frustrated by what was said by the media and/or members of the public who were from outside of the school community. However they stressed that it was much more significant and meaningful to them that the PGMS staff and administration and the LODSB continued to remain resolute in their support of the prayers and had allowed for them to continue.

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[21] Agar, 2011; Elghawaby, 2011; Gardner, 2011; McParland, 2011; Siddiqui, H., 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Siddiqui, S. 2011;Toronto Star, 2011

[22] Banerjee, 2011; Blizzard, 2011; Corbella, 2011; Killoran 2012; Doughart, 2011; Dwivedi, 2011; Furey, 2011; Globe and Mail, 2011; Kheiriddin, 2011a, 2011b; MacDonald, 2011; Mallick, 2011a, 2011b; Selley, 2012, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Sonnenberg, 2011; Teitel, 2011; Warmington, 2011

Underrepresentation of Students in the Media Coverage

All of the students who were interviewed felt that they were underrepresented in the media coverage of the PGMS prayers. Indeed, while the Muslim students at PGMS are discussed in much of the media coverage, and many journalists have expressed concern for what they perceive to be mistreatment or discrimination, particularly against the female students, the students themselves have very rarely been interviewed or quoted in the news coverage, particularly print media, such as newspapers. According to Michael, students were notified that if any member of the media wanted to speak to them, he or she must first obtain parental consent. Additionally, the students were instructed on what to do if they were approached by any members of the news media who may be surrounding the school at dismissal time. The students were told that unless they were accompanied by a parent or guardian and had permission, they were not to speak to any members of the media if they were approached immediately before or after school or just outside of school property. Reflecting on these directives which were given to students, Michael explained, "the press isn't all bad, but I don't want people taking advantage of kids either."

Accusations of Muslim Student Privilege at PGMS

All of the participants were also aware that concerns had been expressed in the media about Muslim students receiving preferential treatment over other religious groups at the school (Banerjee, 2011; Corbella, 2011; Doughart, 2011; et al.[23]). Jameela shared that "my friends, they say sometimes it might be unfair for them because they don't get to practice their religion while we do, and um, yea." She then went on to state that these friends had not asked the school's administration for accommodations, and that she had encouraged them to do so. Jameela, and all

[23] Banerjee, 2011; Corbella, 2011; Doughart, 2011; Godfrey, 2011c; Hammer, 2011a; Kheiriddin, 2011b, 2011; Selley, 2011a; Sonnenberg, 2011; Warmington, 2011

of the other students interviewed believe that all religious groups should receive accommodation at PGMS if they request it, although according to Michael, no other religious groups had asked for accommodations or religious services.

In regards to the belief that Muslim students at PGMS are favoured over other religious groups, Michael reiterated that the school administration had never received any complaints from anybody in the school community, and he then responded,

> I mean basically this is the policy of the school, and like, people can choose to participate. There's no, you know, no other religious groups come forward and say "we need time to pray," that's why I get very upset with the media, when you know, "oh, Christians can't pray," well no, Christians are accommodated because they have Saturday and Sunday, and- or, Christians and Jews are accommodated because their holy days are Saturday and Sunday and the whole board LODSB calendar accommodates them...and, as far as Hindus, like this guy [Ron Banerjee] was saying Hindus' prayers, well no one's come forward in our community to say "Hindus would like to pray," if they would they would get it, there would be no issue (laughs), no issue whatsoever.

When I mentioned the predominantly Muslim student population at PGMS, and asked if this was a factor in holding the prayers, Michael was emphatic that the prayers would be held (in some capacity) regardless of how many Muslim students were attending PGMS:

> It's not about-it's not about that. It's not about how many. It's about the needs- equity is not about doing the same for all, equity is about meeting the needs of everybody so they feel valued, so they feel like, uh, important members of the school community. That's it.

The Perceived Attack on Christian Norms, Values, and Traditions

Michael also discussed the fact that Christmas and other Christian traditions are now being removed from many schools in the name of political correctness, which has led to increasing resentment, particularly towards the religious accommodation of other religious groups (Agar, 2011; Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011; Blizzard, 2011; et al.[24]). He noted that,

[24] Agar, 2011; Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011; Blizzard, 2011; Calgary Herald, 2011; Doughart, 2011; Elghawaby, 2011; Gurney, Kay, & Libin, 2011; Hammer, 2011b; Lewis, 2011; McParland, 2011; Selley, 2011a; Siddiqui, H., 2011b, 2011c; Warmington, 2011; Yuen, 2011a

> You know, in the press they talked about favouring the Muslim religion, and no-no other religions get any credence in the school. Well that's-garbage. I mean, we have a Christmas tree in December, it's in the office for all to see, we do a Christmas concert- all the Muslim students participate in the Christmas concert and they have a good time. It's-it's showing RESPECT for each other, it's all about that. And uh, so when they say you know, well they took the religion out of the schools, no no, we do a Christmas concert. We-every holy day of every religion, we announce in the announcements. We make people care what they are, we explain what the-the days are about. It's not- (laughs), it's not about uh- we're not indoctrinating people in a religion in school, but we're making people aware and getting them to VALUE all religions.

As noted in Chapter 2, the accommodation of, or even the perceived need to accommodate, non-dominant religious groups, particularly Muslims, is an oft contentious issue, especially in public schools (Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011; Goldstein, 2000; Sensoy, 2009a). Accommodations such as those being made at PGMS are seen as an encroaching threat on longstanding Christian values, norms, and traditions. For example, Ron Banerjee, the director of the Canadian Hindu Advocacy and one of the staunchest opponents of the PGMS prayers told a reporter that the prayers are indicative of the "Islamification of society," while protesters in the background held signs with slogans such as "Don't use my taxes to promote Shariah law" (D'Souza, 2011). Other news reports also described protesters who were opposing the prayers and the accommodation of Muslim students due to their views of Islam as patriarchal, violent, and incongruent with Canadian values:

> Some of those opposing prayer in school carried placards denouncing "gender apartheid" in the school and accusing the board policy of being "inconsistent with Canadian policy." They shouted into a bullhorn about Allah and suicide bombers as the Canadian anthem was played (Godfrey, 2011b, para.5).

These views of the Muslim students at PGMS, and those being accommodating elsewhere, reflect the larger view of Muslims as a problem, as discussed by Bayoumi (2009) and Sensoy and Stonebanks (2009). Sensoy and Stonebanks reflect on this "problem discourse" noting that,

> [f]rom the Crusades to Gulf War 2, we, as that diverse group of people that represents the West's *Islamic World,* whether "over there" or "right here" [or] "home grown" are a problem, and perhaps nowhere does this problem discourse play out more intricately than in schools and other non-formal locations of education" (2009, p. x).

This opinion of Muslims (and others requesting accommodation) as a problem has fuelled the objections to the PGMS prayers, and other cases of religious accommodation. Muslim students requesting accommodation are viewed as a problem and a threat, who should either return to where they (presumably) came from, or modify, even reject, their religious practices and beliefs in order to assimilate and adopt Western norms. This is evidenced in the media and public reaction to the PGMS prayers, particularly in the debate about the female students at the school.

Overall however, despite the protests at school board headquarters, continued media and public debate and controversy, and threats of legal action, Michael and the LODSB have remained staunchly in support of the prayers. In our interview, Michael was resolute that the prayers would continue, stating that

> I think it's like- it's a win win for both sides, it's, it's uh, uh- students are given the opportunity to pray when they need to, but it's also accommodating the school, in terms of, with the prayer in min-occurring, maximizing the instructional time along with it, and ensuring their safety. It's a no brainer.

The Disconnect between PGMS' Perceptions of the Prayers and those of the Prayers' Detractors

A major theme which arose frequently during the interviews, as well as throughout the data analysis was the participants' concern and disappointment in how Muslims and Islam have been portrayed by both the media and members of the public in the response to the PGMS prayers. This was not particularly surprising, due to the protests held at LODSB headquarters, the longevity of the media coverage and debate, and the misinformation printed in many of the

articles about the prayers. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 2, much of the existing literature on the subject of the media's depiction of Muslims and Islam has noted the post-colonial stereotypes and misconceptions which are prevalent in a great deal of the Western news media's coverage of events or stories involving Muslims, Arabs, or Islam (Said, 1997, 2003, Shaheen, 1984, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2008, et al.).

Unlike the students I interviewed, the adults participating in this study, particularly Michael and Afzal, have been featured in numerous news items about the prayers. Shazia appreciated that there was some media coverage in support of the prayers, particularly the work of a particular Toronto newspaper columnist named Haroon Siddiqui. She was also grateful for the fact that members of the media regularly approached her husband Afzal to seek his perspective on the prayers. However, while Afzal was frequently approached by the media, and other members of the school community or those in support of the prayers were also interviewed or quoted, Shazia believed that their responses and points of view were underrepresented, particularly in comparison to the responses of the prayers' detractors. She stated that while those on both sides of the prayer issue (both for and against) may be interviewed for the same amount of time, "...[of] that 10 minutes, they'll show 10 minutes of them and 2 minutes of mine," meaning that the prayers' supporters point of view would be truncated while that of the other interviewees who objected to the prayers would be published in more depth.

Michael however, who was interviewed and quoted in a great deal of the news coverage of the prayers, had a slightly different perspective. While Michael believed that there was misinformation in "a lot" of the media coverage, he also felt that many of the articles published were "fair," stating that "even those papers that didn't agree with us, when they did interview us, we did get our position out, and they were reported accurately." He went on to state that he

would continue to allow the prayers regardless of what was said in the media coverage, saying that,

> [t]he media hears what they want to hear. I don't know. I just know the thing to do is- who cares about the media (pause) and just go ahead and do what we have to do. Um, uh, you know, do what's right. And, and again, I firmly believe that the majority of people in the media believe what we're doing is right. I, I honestly don't believe-uh-that- like I think that we're presenting a very logical solution to a problem that benefits not only the Muslim students, but benefits the school. And- isn't that what creates a great community? The fact that we can actually solve problems rather than simply ignore them, and you know, let things fester? Basically, you know, the press always- the people who initiate all of this nonsense saying that it was the 'Muslims taking over, and basically taking over the school'- it's not that at ALL. It was the school approaching them and saying 'look, this is what we need to do, what do you think?'

Overall, the interviews revealed that all of the participants did, to varying degrees, harbor concerns about the media coverage, particularly due to the fact that there had been no issue with the PGMS prayers beforehand, and some of the students interviewed, as well as Shazia and Afzal, saw the extensive media coverage as an intrusion. The participants also had much to say in response to the objections and arguments against the prayers, in both the media and especially in the public's reaction to the prayers.

Islamophobia and Discrimination in the Response to the PGMS Prayers

All of the participants noted that the reaction of the public, particularly certain groups and individuals who were especially acrimonious towards the prayers, was of concern. Of these individuals and groups who spoke out against the accommodation of Muslim students in Ontario's public schools, Ron Banerjee, the leader of the Canadian Hindu Advocacy (CHA) has been the most prominent, due to his statements in the media (Banerjee, 2011), press conferences, and his presence at a various publicized events, including the protests against the LODSB. A number of journalists (Fatah, 2012; Hammer, 2011; Morrow, 2011; Talbot, 2011b; Teitel, 2011; Siddiqui, H., 2011a, 2011b, 2011c) have noted that the CHA is considered a fringe organization

which is regularly speaks out against Islam and Sikhism (Morrow, 2011). Furthermore, Talbot (2011b) reports that "Canada's largest Hindu group, Canadian Hindu Network, says the views of the Canadian Hindu Advocacy are not representative of mainstream Hindus." Fatah (2012), Siddiqui, H. (2011b) and Teitel (2011) have also noted that Banerjee has made discriminatory remarks about Islam and Muslims publicly, including one particularly inflammatory statement made when he spoke at an event in support of Geert Wilders, a Dutch polition "famous for comparing the Koran to *Mein Kampf*" (Teitel, 2011):

> During a speech at a 2010 rally for right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders, Mr. Banerjee said Islam is less a religion than an ideology, and that Islamic civilization had contributed "less to human advancement than a pack of donkeys" (Fatah, 2012, p. 3).

Similar sentiments were expressed regularly by Banerjee at the protests against the LODSB where he is quoted as shouting "No Islam in our schools! Never, never, never!"(Vu, 2011, para.2), as well as in statements and interviews with the media, where he said the efforts against the prayers are meant "to repeal brazen attempts to Islamize" (Toronto Star, 2011, para.2) the Lake Ontario District School Board. These attitudes were also prevalent among the hundred or so individuals (Kallinowski, 2011, para.3) who attended the first protest against the LODSB, where those present, "…waved signs that warned of "creeping jihad" and proclaimed "Islam must be reformed or banned." They chanted — "No Islam in our schools"; "No Mohamed in our schools"; "No Sharia law in our country" (Kallinowski, 2011, para.1-2).

Madiha, a Religious Studies major at York University who was previously unaffiliated with PGMS, became involved in a confrontation at the protest held against the prayers on July 25th, 2011, which was widely reported and photographed in the news media, and was also videotaped and uploaded on YouTube. Although Madiha says that she was approached by others prior to the verbal altercation, with protesters telling her to "go back to where she came from" it

was when one woman in particular confronted Madiha that a crowd began to gather around them and the subsequent events were then recorded and photographed. The video makes evident how emotional and heated the debate had become, with the woman angrily telling Madiha that she "does not know Islam," and that Islam and Shariah law promote spousal abuse, polygamy, and violence against Jews and Christians (Heatchem, 2011). Others soon became involved in the exchange, with many stating that they are no longer permitted to practice Christianity in schools, while others repeatedly told Madiha that she was not a "real Muslim" due to the fact that she does not wear the hijab and stated that she did not want Shariah law to replace Canadian law. Another man then returned to the subject of the prayers, yelling that he didn't want "that crap" taught in schools because "Islam is a satanic cult" (Heatchem, 2011). The confrontation lasted for over ten minutes, with Madiha attempting to refute many of the protesters' claims (although at some points she simply remained silent and nodding) and stating that religious freedom and prayer in schools are a right and that the LODSB deserves to be supported and recognized for allowing the PGMS prayers to continue. However, as she was greatly outnumbered throughout the confrontation and due to the fact that she stayed relatively calm throughout the exchange and remained at the scene, she was deemed to be "brave" (Heatchem, 2011) by some, and even Michael, who saw the video online, stated that she "did a really good job."

Reflecting on the incident, which is also what spurred her to organize the Appreciation Day rally in support of the LODSB, Madiha says that,

> For me it wasn't difficult, just because I've always been taught to like stay calm and like, I've always been raised like that, to be patient you know, and that's how like Islam teaches you as well. And like also, I've been working at like a call centre for more than three years and the people who yell at me at the phone, I've learned from that. Like when they yell at me and they swear at me, I'm like okay, thank you very much, right? So that's how like I also displayed that when I was there. So when she was talking to me I also had respect for her as well and I was like 'okay, miss' and I was trying to understand

> her view because I like listening first. Also, like me learning religious studies, I wanna know other people's view. But especially since she just had negative things to say, it was just like, this is going nowhere. Especially when someone's so ignorant and close minded, it's like, you can't argue. So you just let them keep going like this, and you try to get your arguments in. Especially since I was getting cut off a LOT, I couldn't really say much so I just remained there. And then a lot of people seemed to have questions and even though they'd ask me questions, they still weren't satisfied.

Based on her experience, Madiha believes that there was a great deal of Islamophobia fuelling the protests against the prayers, although she notes that overall, the media coverage of the prayers at PGMS was balanced:

> Um, there was good and bad. But I feel like the majority of the media has got it and understood okay, they left it alone and they thought okay, yea, this didn't-SOME people didn't agree still and others did and thought 'okay, it should be allowed' but I think the media now is-they don't really care about the issue anymore.

Madiha, Shazia, and all of the students I interviewed were also troubled by the actions and behavior of some of the prayers' detractors who were present at the Appreciation Rally held in support of the LODSB, which Madiha helped to organize. When the participants were asked if they had ever faced religious or cultural discrimination they all replied that while they hadn't at school, they were exposed to some prejudicial attitudes and remarks at the Appreciation Rally. Both Esa and Jameela noted that opponents of the prayers were "screaming and saying stuff" while Aliya and Jameela, as noted earlier, explained that one of the men who approached them assumed that they would face violence at the hands of their fathers if they were to take off their hijabs.

Many of the prejudicial attitudes towards Islam and Muslims that were brought up in the confrontation between Madiha and the protesters and also at the Appreciation Day rally were also evident in the comments left in response to articles about the PGMS prayers which were posted online. None of the students or participants mentioned these comments however, and I

chose not to bring them up, due to the fact that many of them were particularly discriminatory and contained hateful and often explicit language.

Many of the sentiments and arguments presented by the prayers' detractors at the protests reflect the view of Muslims as "the new enemy within" (Zine, 2012, p. 1). Zine (2012) further notes that, "[d]riven by media sensationalism, narrow and limiting constructions of Muslims are commonly purveyed, reproducing Orientalist archetypes of illiberal and anti-democratic foreigners that test the limits of Canadian multiculturalism" (p.1).

Of course, the majority of the prayers' detractors, particularly in the media, did not use such inflammatory rhetoric and many, as noted, recognized the CHA as being extreme in their views of Islam and Muslims. However, the opinions of individuals such as Banerjee are by no means isolated (as evidenced by the hundreds of comments left in response to online news items about the prayers as well as the sentiments of some of the protesters), and it is of concern to Michael that individuals with "anti-Islamic" views, were given so much attention in the media coverage of the prayers:

> [i]t really disturbs me. To the point where you like, where we get phone calls, uh, from people, "you should be ashamed of yourself, accommodating one religion and not others"- like, all this twisted nonsense. And…you argue with [the most extreme of the prayers' detractors] or whoever else, they'll just argue with you irrationally. But, um…given our ability- given um, ah- the opportunity to explain our position rationally- many of those people who called us, we changed their minds...So, having the opportunity to make sure that people really listen to what our position is, is important. What's wrong with it though is that those people who initiate it, they don't WANT to listen, they don't want the truth. They'll twist the truth...

Michael continued:

> Everybody has the right to their opinion, fine. Just don't bother anybody, don't hurt anybody. Say what you want, but don't-don't degrade anybody, and that's what gets me. He also noted that he received "tons" of calls from individuals who were opposed to the

prayers once the media coverage began in the summer, many of which went to voice mail.

However he explained that when he did pick up the phone, it was often it simply a matter of discussing the issue with the caller and explaining the school and board's position:

> …when we're given the opportunity to explain to those people who called, because often it was just the messages, but when given the opportunity to EXPLAIN, they actually understood. And, and again, it was just a matter of looking at the other side. And that's what Canada is supposed to be about, you know. You don't have to AGREE with the other side but at least listen to the other side. And at least try to understand where the other side is coming from.

Michael then stated his belief that the majority of Canadians support the school, or do not necessary have a position one way or the other, saying, "I firmly believe that the majority of people don't even care- [they] see it as a non-issue." While Michael noted that there were certain individuals who wanted to "make a big issue" of the prayers, he went on to state that,

> I believe most Canadians think we're right or don't care. Like basically, 'you know what, let them do what they wanna do, who cares.' And-and I don't think that's apathy, it's basically whatever- you know what has to happen happens. It's not hurting anybody, it's not hurting anybody! If it HURTS somebody, I understand why people should object. If it doesn't hurt anybody, why object? It's simple. It's all common sense, it's about decency, it's not about believing anything. It's just what's right.

Michael also shared that at the school's annual "Curriculum Night," an event held in September for parents which in previous years has had a low turnout, was well attended this past September, of 2011. Impressed by the number of parents who attended the event, Michael said that he approached some of them and they told him that they were there to "show respect" and solidarity for the school and the prayers. He continued,

> ...[a]nd I thought that was very interesting. So there was a positive effect. So, um, to me- I want the school to be the hub of the community, I want this school to be um, something of pride to the community, and- and almost like a gathering place for the community. And , the funny part is that the negative stuff in the press allowed us to do that- to strengthen that- from the school's point of view it's a perfect thing. I have no problem with the negative st-press. It's true, it's true. And just having so many parents show up for once- it's just amazing. So that's a good thing.

Continued Support for the Prayers amongst the PGMS Community

Despite the disconnect between some of the media coverage and much of the public's discourse and perspectives on the prayers, Michael and the students all expressed their resolute support for the prayers. It was clear that all of the participants took great pride in the fact that such an arrangement was taking place at PGMS. Michael reiterated his belief that the school community and prayers were exemplary of ideal Canadian values:

> If we're trying to promote understanding, and- and if we're a microcosm of society and what we want Canada to be, where we respect everybody's uh, backgrounds and uh, value everybody for who they are, ABSOLUTELY. As a school we need to be able to do that.

It is also interesting to note that despite the debate about the prayers taking place in a public school, and some individuals' beliefs that religious practice should only take place in private faith-based schools (Blizzard, 2011; Elghawaby, 2011; Gurney, Kay, & Libin, 2011; Heatchem, 2011; Sweet, 1997) all of the students refuted these arguments, and expressed their support for PGMS and public education in general. Jameela replied,

> Well, in a public school there's a lot of people there from different religions, we're a multicultural school and sometimes you can talk to other people about it, like they tell you about their religion and you tell them about yours. So um, that's an advantage.

Similarily, Aliya stated that Pine Grove is "a very diverse place and we get to meet people from like, all different- from all around the world and we have many different things to share with each other." All of the students interviewed believed that living in Canada and attending a public school allowed them to practice their faith, while at the same time being exposed to a variety of other cultures, beliefs, and values. They also shared the belief that this religious diversity fosters respect and pluralism, and despite the controversy, they viewed the prayers at PGMS as a positive and essential part of their educational experience. Interestingly, all of the students, particularly Esa, Zainab, and Zaki, were aware of the fact that the PGMS

administration and the LODSB were exceptional in their ongoing and vocal support for the prayers taking place at PGMS. While all of the students believed that such prayers should be permitted in all schools, and that PGMS is a positive example and model for all Canadian public schools, they were aware of the fact that other schools and/or boards may not have remained as staunchly and resolutely supportive in the face of such intense media and public debate and controversy.

Chapter Summary

Both the analysis of the media coverage and the interviews with community members and students make evident that the prayers held at Pine Grove Middle School have been the source of extensive controversy, debate, and discussion, in both media and public discourses.

While much of the debate centered on the longstanding issue of the role of religion in public schools, as well as the perceived mistreatment of female students (and Muslim women in general), the research also reveals that some of the opposition to the prayers was motivated by underlying prejudices, stereotypes, and Islamophobia.

Additionally, much of the media coverage maintained stereotypical and postcolonial depictions of Islam and Muslims, depictions and messages which were then reflected in the attitudes and statements of the prayers' opponents. Due to the disconnect and polarization between some of the prayers' more extreme detractors and staunchest proponents, many of the participants faced discrimination and harassment, particularly at the protests and rallies both against, and in support of the LODSB.

As of yet, the controversy and media attention has, for the most part, passed and the prayers continue to be held as usual, without hindrance. The reaction to the prayers however, does indicate that there is still a great deal of contention and disagreement when it comes to the

issue of religious accommodation, and as Ontario's demographics continue to change, these tensions and concerns must be addressed. This will be considered in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

A number of issues have been addressed in this thesis, including the religious accommodation of non-dominant religious groups in civic institutions, the Canadian public's increasingly negative perception of Islam and Muslims (Boswell, 2011, 2012; Lilley, 2010), and the Western media's "othering" of Islam and Muslims. The intense, drawn out media and public attention and debate surrounding the prayers at Pine Grove Middle School (PGMS) has highlighted how inextricably intertwined these issues are, and also how controversial they can become.

The news media both influences, and is influenced by public opinion. Furthermore, in today's digital age where news is readily available via a number of different outlets and sources, the news media serves not only to report current events, but to also at times exacerbate them. This was particularly evident in the coverage of the prayers at PGMS. The weekly prayers in the school's cafeteria had been taking place since 2007, without incident, until the media attention began in June 2011. The extensive coverage of the prayers by the news media, regardless of whether it was for, or against the prayers, only served to elongate and intensify the debate about them, while the Muslim (or other) students at PGMS themselves remained largely unheard from throughout the controversy.

The purpose of this study was to break this silence, whether self-imposed or otherwise, and learn about the prayers from the perspectives of the school community, with a particular interest in hearing from the students who attended the prayers which were at the centre of so much debate. Additionally, I was interested in examining what, if any, effect that the extensive debate about the prayers, both in the media and also in the public discourse, had on the students,

as well as other members of the PGMS community. Finally, the media coverage itself was critically examined to look for common themes, arguments, and statements about the prayers, as well as Islam and Muslims in general.

PGMS was selected as the subject of this study due to the fact that the widespread media and public reaction to the prayers taking place at the school highlighted the underlying concerns and issues surrounding the accommodation of non-dominant religious groups (particularly Muslims) in Ontario's public schools. Additionally, the content and tone evident in much of the media coverage of the prayers was a prime example of the Orientalist discourse which dominates much of the Western media's coverage of Muslims and Islam (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008; Rezai-Rashti, 1994, 1999; Said, 1997, 2003; Sensoy, 2009). This research study has been built upon postcolonial theory and anti-racism education. The theoretical framework of this thesis draws heavily from Edward Said's work, particularly *Orientalism* (1979, 2003) and *Covering Islam* (1997), which focus on the Eastern, Orientalist, "Other" and the manner in which Muslims and Islam are depicted in Western news media coverage, respectively.

A qualitative case study was deemed as the most suitable methodological approach for this thesis. The data in this study was triangulated, consisting of semi-structured interviews with students, members of the school's administration, and community members, as well as a critical analysis of the news media coverage. Interviews were chosen as the ideal method of gathering data in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the students' perspective of the prayers, and allow them to explain their feelings, experiences, and beliefs. The research participants were selected due to their involvement in the school and/or the prayers which are held at PGMS.

I interviewed eight individuals, the majority of whom are, or were, members of the PGMS community, and all of whom are involved in some way with the prayers. I conducted

semi-structured interviews with these participants, three adults and five students. The adults- Shazia, a former PGMS parent and current volunteer in organizing and overseeing the prayers, Michael, the principal of PGMS, Madiha, a first-year university student and activist who organized a rally in support of the PGMS prayers, offered valuable insight, particularly about the prayers and how and why they were held, and also about their opinions about the media coverage. The focus of this study however, was on the opinions, experiences, and point of view of the PGMS students whom I interviewed. The responses of Esa, Aliya, Jameela, Zaki, and Zainab, all current students who were attending the prayers on a regular basis, were especially significant and meaningful, as they provided a deeper understanding of the prayers from the point of view of those who were actually participating in them. Additionally, this study was the first opportunity that these students were presented with to share their in-depth perspectives on the prayers publicly, and many of their responses, particularly those of the female students, served as counterstories to how they have been depicted and portrayed in the news media coverage of the prayers.

In addition to these interviews, I conducted a critical analysis of sixty-two (print and online) news items and three television news reports on the topic of the PGMS prayers. All of the articles, columns, opinion pieces, and television reports were taken from community and national newspapers, as well as the websites of major news outlets from across Canada. Nearly all of the articles studied appeared both in online and print editions of the newspapers/magazines from which they were sourced.

The research results had been divided into four themes: 1) The debate over religious prayers taking place at Pine Grove Middle School 2) The oppressed Muslim girl in the media's coverage of the PGMS prayers 3) Misinformation and Misconceptions in the media coverage of

the PGMS prayers 4) The disconnect and polarization between PGMS' perceptions of the prayers and those of the prayers' detractors.

The interviews revealed that the participants, particularly the students and the community volunteers, felt a significant amount of frustration and disappointment with the media's coverage of the prayers at PGMS. They were especially concerned about what they saw as a disproportionate amount of media attention being given to the prayers' detractors, particularly those who were particularly virulent and outspoken in their objections to the prayers. Additionally, the fact that misinformation was reported in the news media coverage was also considered to be problematic, particularly to the principal of PGMS and the other adults interviewed.

The students were especially upset with how they, as Muslims, had been portrayed in the news media coverage of the PGMS prayers, and the female students took exception to the fact that they were spoken for and were perceived as oppressed and discriminated against. All of the students resented that they were underrepresented in the news coverage, although some of them stated that due to the fact that the media coverage surrounding the prayers had already lasted over seven months (at the time of the interviews), they were unlikely to comment if they were approached now, as they felt that it was best just to leave the issue alone so that the prayers could continue as they had before the debate began.

However while there were concerns expressed about the media coverage of the prayers, all of the participants acknowledged that their side had been represented (although not enough, in the opinion of most of the interviewees) in the media coverage of the prayers. All of the participants stated that regardless of what the media and public had to say about the accommodations being made at PGMS, they remained staunchly in support of the school

administration and the prayers. Additionally, all of the participants were adamant that while they took issue with some of the news media coverage of the prayers, it was more important to them that the school and the LODSB continue to do "the right thing" by supporting the prayers and allowing for them to go on.

The analysis of the sixty-two print news media items and three television news reports on the topic of the prayers found that while the majority of opinion pieces and editorials were opposed to the prayers, the media coverage itself was relatively balanced, with both sides of the debate represented in the majority of the articles cited. However, a matter of great concern is the fact that much of the news media coverage contained false or misleading information about the prayers, and/or printed (false) statements made by some of the prayers' detractors without any verification or clarification of the accuracy of this information.

In addition to the above findings, it was evident throughout the analysis of data that that there is a glaring disconnect between the prayers' proponents (particularly the students and members of the school's administration whom I interviewed) and the prayers' most vocal opponents who expressed their objections in the media, opinion pieces, and at the protests held at school board headquarters. Aside from the individuals who called PGMS and expressed their objections and concerns to Michael, there was relatively little communication between the prayers' supporters and detractors. When the two sides did interact, it was often heated and unproductive, particularly when confrontations (which were described to me by the interviewees, and were also recorded and posted online) arose at the protests, or in televised news program debates and interviews on the issue of the PGMS prayers. Even an event held by the LODSB for members of the public on the topic of religious accommodation became impassioned, as noted by Hopper (2011) who wrote, "[w]hat was advertised as a "discussion" on the issue of Muslim

prayers...quickly turned into an emotionally charged speaker's corner" (2011, para.1). Regardless of these concerns, the news coverage and even public debate in response to the prayers has abated in recent months, and as a result, the prayers at PGMS continue virtually unchanged. It now remains to be seen if the controversy over the prayers (or other incidences of religious accommodation) will arise once again.

Limitations

Firstly, I have limited research experience and this is the first graduate level research study which I have conducted. In terms of the study itself, I knew that in selecting a qualitative case study as my methodology, the findings were never meant to be generalizable to a larger population, particularly as this study involved individuals from only one school. Furthermore, even from PGMS, the school which was sampled, the eight individuals who were interviewed are by no means meant to represent the entire school community. Of the entire student population at PGMS, numbering over 1,000, only five were selected. Additionally, it was requested that students interested in participating be regular attendees of the prayers in order to gauge their firsthand experiences and perspectives on the accommodations being made at the school.

Michael, who was the only non-Muslim participant, was interviewed to represent the school's perspective on the prayers and the media and public reaction to them. Thus, none of the prayers' opponents were represented in this study, aside from what they had stated and/or written in the news media coverage about the prayers.

However, from the onset, as has been stated in this thesis, the purpose of this study was to hear from Muslim students at PGMS who attend the prayers regularly, and see what, if any, impact that the media coverage had had on them. In that sense, the five students interviewed

were able to provide a wealth of valuable information and insight, as were the adult members of the PGMS community. I also hope that the results of this study will encourage further research which may be broader in scope.

Another primary limitation of this study is the fact that the participants were referred to me by members of the PGMS community, one of whom is involved in organizing the prayers and was herself an interviewee. These community volunteers have been heavily invested in the prayers for several years, helping to both initiate them and also ensure that they are organized and held on a weekly basis. These volunteers were given the task of recruiting students who may be interested in participating in this study, and then passing on their parents' contact information to me. While this was due to conditions placed on this study by the Research Ethics Board, it also raises concerns about purposive sampling. Moreover, as I spoke to students and other members of the PGMS community who had agreed to participate, they also volunteered to recruit additional students for me. Thus, in addition to concerns about purposive sampling, the fact that some of the interviewees were selected by individuals who are directly involved in the prayers indicates a potential for bias in the participants' responses.

Furthermore, although the researcher's own personal bias is a pressing concern for those conducting positivist quantitative research studies, I acknowledge that as a qualitative researcher using critical analysis, I "eschew any pretense of open-mindedness or objectivity" (Patton, 2002, p. 548). As Patton further notes, "*critical theory* approaches fieldwork and analysis with an explicit agenda of elucidating power, economic, and social inequalities (2002, p. 548). Since I myself am a Muslim woman who wears the hijab, and have experienced discrimination, misunderstanding, and roadblocks to accommodation (at all levels of education), I do have a personal interest and passion for this particular topic. Thus, is it is inevitable that my own

personal views, experiences, and opinions may have influenced my interpretation of data, and this in itself is actually a characteristic of critical ethnographic research.

It is important to note however that while I was aware of the fact that my views and experiences influence my interpretation of data, I was conscious of this throughout the collection and analysis of data. I took precautions to be careful in the wording of my questions posed to students, as I did not want to influence their responses. Questions (both written and oral) were worded as neutrally as neutral as possible and were not leading or suggestive. I also did not discuss my own views or opinions with, or in front of students before interviews had taken place, to avoid the possibility of influencing or altering their responses.

Finally, the PGMS students interviewed were all quite young, aged from twelve to thirteen. While their responses were thoughtful, sincere, and informative, due to their age and level of development, they did not possess the same level of experience, cognition, and articulation as the adult interviewees. It may have been helpful to have had some supplementary means of obtaining data from the students, such as art based activities or additional interviews.

Implications for Future Research

This thesis has served to raise many more questions and concerns than it has attempted to answer. While the scope of this study was focused on the religious accommodations made at a single public school in Ontario, and the media's reactions to these accommodations, the intense controversy surrounding the prayers at PGMS has raised a number of issues which can, and should, be researched further.

Firstly, in the course of this study, I learned that while approximately 400 students attend the prayers on a weekly basis, there are over 900 Muslim students at PGMS. It would be interesting and revelatory to interview a sample of these students, and learn, through interviews,

their reasons for not attending the prayers, particularly as there had been speculation in the media coverage and amongst the prayers' detractors (Teitel, 2011) that despite the fact that the prayers are voluntary, students may feel peer or community pressure to take part in the prayers against their will, or to follow an interpretation of Islam which they themselves do not align themselves with (Fatah, 2012; Teitel, 2011).

This study also highlighted the fact that the role of religion in public schools is one that is still fiercely supported and contested, with a great deal of debate and emotion on both sides of the issue. The Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) has addressed the need to accommodate religious minorities, most recently as a part of the PPM No. 119 (2009b), and the Lake Ontario District School Board (LODSB)'s religious accommodation policies have been in place since 2000 (MacDonald, 2011), long before the province's mandate. Despite these efforts however, the controversy surrounding the PGMS prayers has made it increasingly evident that religious accommodation and the role/expectations of Muslim students in Ontario's public schools is one of great contention. This is a concern which urgently needs to be addressed, particularly with Ontario's (and Canada's) changing demographics, and thus, increasing religious and cultural diversity. In view of these issues, there are broader policy implications as well which may stem from this, or similar research. For example, will the guidelines for religious education and accommodation in the Education Act, such as those in Reg. 298, eventually be revised, particularly given the new religious accommodation guidelines which are being implemented in accordance with PPM No. 119 (2009b)? If not, then how will prayers be accommodated in schools with predominantly Muslim student populations, where devout students request to pray during school hours (at least during the winter months)? Will the LODSB, and other school boards whose accommodation guidelines currently allow for prayer during class time and/or

during school hours be legally challenged, as has been threatened, or will they continue to defend and follow their board's guidelines, citing the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Ontario Human Rights Code? While Christian and Jewish weekly holy days (Sunday and Saturday respectively) are already accommodated in the current school calendar, Muslim students, like all others, must attend school on Fridays, and thus may argue that their only option is to pray at school or risk sacrificing their education. This was an argument presented by the parent volunteers whom I interviewed and spoke with. As contentious as these issues and questions have already proven to be, they are valid and pressing concerns that have already been raised in the debate over the prayers at PGMS.

Another area for further research which I am personally greatly interested in is the media's depiction of Muslim women as oppressed and in need of liberation. This has been researched and written about by a number of academics and authors (Abo-Zena, Sahli, & Tobias-Nahi, 2009; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Bayoumi, 2009; et al. [25]), as have articles and research in response to how Muslims and Islam as a whole are depicted in the Western mass media (Bayoumi, 2009; Haque, 2004; Imam, 2009; et al.[26]). The fact that such stereotypes and assumptions are still prevalent in news coverage today clearly indicates that this is an issue and area of study in which more research and public awareness and education initiatives must continue to be invested. This also ties into the need for critical media literacy education in every classroom. As Said (2003) notes, "[o]ur students today are often distracted by the fragmented knowledge available on the internet and in the mass media" (p. xxvi). The problematic depictions

[25] Abo-Zena, Sahli, & Tobias-Nahi, 2009; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Bayoumi, 2009; Imam, 2009; Khan, 2009; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008; Mossali, 2009; Rezai-Rashti, 1994, 1998; Said, 1979, 2003; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2006; Zine, 2001, 2008

[26] Bayoumi, 2009; Haque, 2004; Imam, 2009; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, Marshall & Sensoy, 2009; Said, 1997, 2003; Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009; Shaheen, 1984, 1991, 1997, 2001, 2008; Skalli, 2004; Steinberg, et al., 2010; Watt, 2008

of Muslims and Islam in the media and the effects of this "fragmented" knowledge can lead to ignorance, and unfortunately, even discrimination and prejudice. This was particularly evident in the response to the PGMS prayers, especially in the hundreds of (anonymous) comments left online by readers in response to each of the numerous articles about the prayers which were posted on news outlets' websites.

As noted earlier, stereotypical depictions of Islam and Muslims in the media, and the ignorance and prejudicial attitudes which can develop as a result, can be challenged through media literacy education in schools and other educational programs and resources. Research which can lead to such measures being effectively implemented is direly needed, and can be used to promote pluralism and respect for all religious groups, including but not limited to, Muslims. Furthermore, it is of utmost importance that educators be more conscious and informed of the materials and resources (textbooks, novels, news articles, etc.) which are being used in their classroom. Educators, librarians, curriculum consultants, and others may be unaware that the materials which they are selecting, even those which are acclaimed and/or written by reputable authors, may propagate stereotypes, misinformation, or limited viewpoints of certain groups such as Muslims and/or Islam. Teacher education, at both the preservice level and through professional development, is one suggested means of addressing these concerns. Additionally, educators themselves must both practice, and teach, critical literacy skills, particularly as the lessons and materials which they select and use in their classroom can have a great influence on students' knowledge and perspectives.

It is also worth considering a religious studies course, as Sweet (1997) suggests, at the elementary level, similar to that offered at the secondary level in schools across Ontario. In such a class, students may learn about the basic belief systems and practices of various world

religions. Another option would be to teach this information by integrating it into the curriculum, especially in December when Christmas and other holidays are celebrated in schools. The purpose of this course and/or lessons would not be indoctrination, but rather to promote religious literacy, and ideally, mutual respect and understanding.

Summary

Religion has long been a contentious issue when it comes to the debate about what, if any, role it should have in Ontario's public elementary schools. However, the controversy and attention given to the prayers at PGMS is unprecedented, and it was this media and public reaction to the prayers which motivated me to select the school, and members of its community, as the subject of this thesis. The intent of this study has been to hear firsthand about the experiences and opinions from the individuals who are actively involved in the prayers. A particular focus has been on giving a voice to even a small number of the students who actually attended the prayers, and to learn about their feelings and reactions to the media coverage. This was principally important as the students were spoken for throughout the controversy, and had a number of assumptions made about them, and their faith, in the media.

The literature, as well as a number of the news pieces on the subject reviewed for this study support the interviewees' concerns about how Muslims and Islam are depicted in the media, and also at how objections to religious accommodations can, and do, become particularly heated, even prejudiced, when students from a certain cultural or religious background are involved (Agar, 2011; Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011; Blizzard, 2011; et al.[27]). As the number of Muslims in Ontario's public schools increase, so too does the public's wariness and distrust of them, and of Islam in general (Boswell, 2011, 2012; Lilley, 2010). This study has shown how the

[27] Agar, 2011; Bascaramurty & Friesen, 2011; Blizzard, 2011; Calgary Herald, 2011; Doughart, 2011; Elghawaby, 2011; Gurney, Kay, & Libin, 2011; Hammer, 2011b; Lewis, 2011; McParland, 2011; Selley, 2011a; Siddiqui, H., 2011b, 2011c; Warmington, 2011; Yuen, 2011a

role of religion in public schools has now become especially contentious with the increasing number of accommodations being made for Muslim students. The debate around the PGMS prayers- the public protests, support rallies, the hundreds of (often inflammatory) comments left in response to nearly every article posted online, and the number of opinion pieces both for, and against, the prayers- should serve as an urgent forewarning for individuals at all levels of the education system. As one of the prayers' detractors, *National Post* columnist Selley (2012) notes,

> This is where Canada's long-term focus on equity and inclusiveness and rights has brought us. The [Pine Grove] situation cannot, therefore, be seen in isolation, and neither can the solution — which would likely be awkward, shouty and long, pitting many political allies against each other, very possibly in court. Having seen the way outrage over the "mosqueteria" peaked last summer, fluttered back to life a couple of times in the fall, and then flatlined, I somehow doubt Canadians are up for it (Selley, 2012, para.9)

While, as Selley (2012) mentions, the media coverage has now diminished and the prayers continue virtually unchanged at PGMS, this should not be reason for inaction or complacency. Although the government and administrators have wisely addressed religious accommodation in PPM No. 119, and are now implementing these policies, their responsibilities extend further, as the reaction to the PGMS prayers has indicated. Public statements and waiting for the media coverage to abate do not address the fact that the underlying wariness and range of emotions and convictions which motivated the controversy surrounding the PGMS prayers will inevitably manifest themselves again in other instances of religious accommodation, particularly if Muslims and/or Islam are involved. It is imperative for educators to acknowledge and address this reality, and the sooner that they do so, the better it will be for all stakeholders, particularly Ontario's increasingly diverse student population.

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APPENDIX A

MOVING BEYOND THE "MOSQUETERIA:" A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE RELIGIOUS ACCOMODATION OF MUSLIM STUDENTS IN ONTARIO

LETTER OF INFORMATION

Introduction

Assalamualaikum (May peace and blessings be upon you)! My name is Aruba Mahmud and I am a Master of Education candidate at the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario. I am currently conducting research into the Jummah (Friday) prayers held for Muslim students at Valley Park Middle School (VPMS). If you are a current student, recent graduate, parent, council member, or volunteer involved with the prayers at VPMS, and/or have attended these prayers, I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

Purpose of the study

The aims of this study are to:

a) Give students, parents, and other members of the Valley Park Middle School community an opportunity to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences related to the Jummah prayers held at the school over the past few years.

b) To discuss the media coverage (particularly news media coverage such as newspapers and TV news reports) of the prayers, and the feelings and opinions that students, parents, and other members of the Valley Park Middle school have about the media's coverage of the prayers.

If you agree to participate

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to take part in an interview. I will be conducting the interview(s) at a prearranged time and location (for example, the local masjid, library, a coffee shop, your home, or any other location that is convenient for you). Each interview should take no more than one hour. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed into written format.

Confidentiality

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential. I will change the names of all participants interviewed in order to protect their identities, and only I will have access to the recordings of the interviews and the transcriptions of each interview. All of the data collected in my

research will be destroyed once my thesis has been submitted and approved and the study is completed.

Risks & Benefits
There are no known risks to participating in this study. However, because this study involves only one school and the issue has been widely publicized in the media, you should be aware that some people may be able to identify you as a participant in the study. If the possibility of being recognized raises problems for you, you should not participate in this study.

Voluntary Participation
Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time, with no effect on your academic or employment status.

Questions
If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario at 519-661-3036 or ethics@uwo.ca. If you have any questions about this study, please contact Aruba Mahmud at xxx- xxx-xxxx or xxx- xxx-xxxx,. You may also contact my research supervisor Dr. Goli Rezai-Rashti at xxx-xxx-xxxx ext. xxxxx.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Sincerely,

Aruba Mahmud
M.Ed Candidate, the University of Western Ontario

APPENDIX B

MOVING BEYOND THE "MOSQUETERIA:" A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE RELIGIOUS ACCOMODATION OF MUSLIM STUDENTS IN ONTARIO

Aruba Mahmud and Dr. Goli Rezai-Rashti

CONSENT FORM

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

Name (please print):

Signature: Date:

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Date:

APPENDIX C

MOVING BEYOND THE "MOSQUETERIA:" A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE RELIGIOUS ACCOMODATION OF MUSLIM STUDENTS IN ONTARIO

Aruba Mahmud and Dr. Goli Rezai-Rashti

CONSENT FORM

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

Name of child (please print):

Signature of Child:

Name of Parent/Guardian (please print):

Signature: Date:

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent:

Date:

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions for Students

Interview Questions for Current PGMS Students

Participant Name:
Age:
Gender:
Citizenship:
Number of years living in Canada:
Ethnic origin:
Grade:

1. For how many years have you attended Pine Grove Middle School?
2. What role has, and does Islam play in your life?
3. Overall, how would you describe your experience as a Muslim student at PGMS?
4. Do you regularly attend the Friday prayers held weekly in the school cafeteria?
5. If not, can you please tell me why you choose not to attend the prayers?
6. How do you feel about praying at school?
7. What are the advantages of praying at school?
8. What are the disadvantages of praying at school?
9. Have you, or any of your family members, been following the media coverage of the prayers at your school?
10. How do you feel about the media's reaction to the prayers?
11. If you had a chance to speak to the media or tell them your thoughts and opinions about the prayers, what would you say?
12. Have your feelings and/or opinions towards the prayers changed due to the media coverage and reaction to the prayers?
13. Have the feelings of any of your friends and/or family changed due to the media coverage and reaction to the prayers?
14. Did you ever face religious/cultural discrimination from your peers?
15. Did you ever face religious/cultural discrimination from your teacher(s)?
16. Did you ever feel that Islam was a barrier (or made to be a barrier, due to internal or external pressure) to your full inclusion and participation in the classroom?
17. How do you believe your experiences were similar to other religious minority groups?
18. How do you believe that your experiences were different from those of other religious minorities?
19. How did your classmates, teachers, and others in the school community address your religion and/or culture?
20. What do you believe religious accommodations should entail? How would these work in a public school?

For Female Students:

21. What are your feelings about Muslim women praying behind men?
22. If someone were to ask you why you do so, and how you feel about it, what would you tell them?

23. How do you feel about not praying when you are menstruating?
24. If someone were to ask you why you are not praying and/or or sitting with the other female students, and asked you how you feel about it, what would you say?

APPENDIX E

Interview Questions for Community Members and/or Parents

Participant Name:
Age:
Gender:
Citizenship:
Number of years living in Canada:
Ethnic origin:
Occupation:

1. For how many years has your child attended Pine Grove Middle School?
2. What role has, and does Islam play in your life?
3. Overall, how would you describe your experience as a Muslim parent at PGMS?
4. Do you encourage your child to regularly attend the Friday prayers held weekly in the school cafeteria?
5. If not, can you please tell me why?
6. How do you feel about prayers being held at the school?
7. What are the advantages of students praying at school?
8. What are the disadvantages of students praying at the school?
9. Have you, or any of your family members, been following the media coverage of the prayers at your school?
10. How do you feel about the media's reaction to the prayers?
11. If you had a chance to speak to the media or tell them your thoughts and opinions about the prayers, what would you say?
12. Have your feelings and/or opinions towards the prayers changed due to the media coverage and reaction to the prayers?
13. Have the feelings of any of your friends and/or family changed due to the media coverage and reaction to the prayers?
14. Have you ever faced religious/cultural discrimination from the PGMS community (other parents)?
15. Have you ever faced religious/cultural discrimination from PGMS teacher(s)?
16. Have you ever felt that Islam was a barrier (or made to be a barrier, due to internal or external pressure) to your child's full inclusion and participation in the classroom?
17. How do you believe the experiences of Muslim students are similar to other religious minority groups?
18. How do you believe that the experiences of Muslim students are different from those of other religious minorities?
19. What do you believe religious accommodations should entail? How would these work in a public school?
20. What do you feel are the advantages of your child(ren) attending a public school (as opposed to a private Islamic school)
21. What do you feel are the disadvantages of your child(ren) attending a public school (as opposed to a private Islamic school)

APPENDIX F

Questions for PGMS Principal and/or Administration

1. For how many years have you been a teacher and/or working in education?
2. For how many years have you been in the position of principal/administration at PGMS?
3. Were you previously working at the school in another position?
4. When were the first Friday prayers for Muslim students held at PGMS
5. How were the Friday prayers initiated at PGMS?
6. Who initiated the Friday prayers at PGMS?
7. Was the school required to receive the Board's consent for holding the prayers, or was it dealt with solely by school administration?
8. Have you received, at any time, any complaints and/or concerns from students at PGMS about the prayers?
9. Have you received, at any time, any complaints and/or concerns from parents at PGMS about the prayers?
10. Have you received, at any time, any complaints and/or concerns from other members of administration and/or the school board about the prayers?
11. How do you feel about the media coverage about the prayers and the public's reaction?
12. I am aware that you have already spoken to the media about the prayers at PGMS, but if you could once again state your position and/or thoughts and opinions, what would you say?
13. How often does the PGMS review its religious accommodation policy? Is there a set time frame or is it on a case by case basis?
14. Will PGMS be reviewing its policies, and specifically the prayers in light of the media attention and/or public reaction?
15. Approximately how many requests for accommodation does the school receive annually?
16. Are most requests handled at the school level [by parents, teachers, and school administration] or must they be cleared/reported to the board?
17. Does the school collect statistics/information about students' religious background?
18. Have teachers ever been offered/taken a session, or provided teachers with resources on the needs/concerns of religious minorities? If not, would that be something the board would consider? [perhaps could be done in conjunction with local mosque, synagogue, churches, etc.]
19. What do you personally consider to be 'reasonable' accommodation?

APPENDIX G

Ethics Approval

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
FACULTY OF EDUCATION

USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS - ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICE

Review Number:	1109-4
Principal Investigator:	Goli Rezai-Rashti
Student Name:	Aruba Mahmud
Title:	*Moving beyond the mosqueteria: a critical analysis of the media's coverage of the religious accommodation of Muslim students in Ontario schools.*
Expiry Date:	April 30, 2012
Type:	M. Ed. Thesis
Ethics Approval Date:	October 4, 2011.
Revision #:	
Documents Reviewed & Approved:	UWO Protocol, Letter of Information & Consent

This is to notify you that the Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board (REB), which operates under the authority of The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the date noted above. The approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the REB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the study or information/consent documents may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB, except for minor administrative aspects. Participants must receive a copy of the signed information/consent documentation. Investigators must promptly report to the Chair of the Faculty Sub-REB any adverse or unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected, and any new information which may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study. In the event that any changes require a change in the information/consent documentation and/or recruitment advertisement, newly revised documents must be submitted to the Sub-REB for approval.

Dr. Alan Edmunds (Chair)

2011-2012 Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board

Dr. Alan Edmunds	**Faculty of Education (Chair)**
Dr. John Barnett	**Faculty of Education**
Dr. Jason Brown	**Faculty of Education**
Dr. Farahnaz Faez	**Faculty of Education**
Dr. Wayne Martino	**Faculty of Education**
Dr. George Gadanidis	**Faculty of Education**
Dr. Elizabeth Nowicki	**Faculty of Education**
Dr. Immaculate Namukasa	**Faculty of Education**
Dr. Kari Veblen	**Faculty of Music**
Dr. Ruth Wright	**Faculty of Music**
	Faculty of Music
	Faculty of Education, Associate Dean, Graduate Programs & Research *(ex officio)*
Dr. Susan Rodger	**Faculty of Education, UWO Non-Medical Research Ethics Board *(ex officio)***

The Faculty of Education
1137 Western Rd.
London, ON N6G 1G7

Karen Kueneman, Research Officer
Faculty of Education Building
kueneman@uwo.ca
519-661-2111, ext.88561 FAX 519-661-3029

Copy: Office of Research Ethics

APPENDIX H

Proposal Approval

FORM A

Faculty of Education
Graduate Programs & Research Office

Print Form | Reset Form

APPROVAL OF M.Ed. THESIS PROPOSAL

If the proposed research does not involve human subjects or the direct use of their written records, video-tapes, recordings, tests, etc., this signature form, along with ONE copy of the research proposal should be delivered directly to the Graduate Programs & Research Office for final approval.	If the proposed research involves human subjects, this signature form, along with ONE copy of the research proposal and Ethical Review Form signature pages (Section 1.1 to 1.7) must be submitted to the Graduate Programs & Research Office for final approval.

IT IS THE STUDENT'S RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE A COPY OF THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL (INCLUDING REVISIONS) TO THE THESIS SUPERVISOR AND ALL MEMBERS OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE.

Student's Name: Farida Mahmud Student #: 250216697

Field of Study: Graduate Program in Education - M.Ed

Title of Thesis: Moving Beyond the "Moqueberi": A critical analysis of the media's coverage of the accommodation of Muslim students.

Name of Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Goli Rezai-Rashti

Name of Thesis Advisory Committee Member: Dr. Jason Brown

DOES THIS RESEARCH INVOLVE THE USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS: ◉ Yes ○ No

APPROVAL SIGNATURES:

Graduate Student: Date: Sept. 7th '11

Thesis Supervisor: Date: Sept 7, 2011

Advisory Committee: Date: Sept 7/11

Ethical Review Clearance: Date: Oct 4/11

Ethical Review Number: 1109-4

Associate Dean
Graduate Programs & Research: Date: Oct 6, 2011

A STUDENT MAY PROCEED WITH RESEARCH WHEN A COPY OF THIS FORM CONTAINING ALL APPROVAL SIGNATURES HAS BEEN RECEIVED.

A copy of this proposal may be made public and kept on a two-hour reserve in the Faculty of Education Library.

Version Date: January 2010

The University of Western Ontario | Faculty of Education | Graduate Programs & Research Office

CURRICULUM VITAE

Aruba Mahmud

EDUCATION

Bachelor of Education (Dean's List) **2007-2008**
The University of Western Ontario

Bachelor of Arts, Honours Specialization in Visual Arts **2003-2007**
The University of Western Ontario

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Grade 7/8 Teacher **2008-2010**
London Islamic School

- Responsibilities included Grade 7/8 Homeroom duties
- Instructed Grade 7/8 English, History, Geography, and Visual Arts
- Instructed Grade 6 English, Social Studies, and Visual Arts
- Conducted two Professional Development workshops on Visual Arts instruction for all members of teaching staff

Art Class Instructor **2006-2008**
Gallery Lambton

Summer Student & Assistant Art Class Instructor **2004**
Gallery Lambton

ADDITIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

Senior Division, Visual Arts **2009**
Special Education, Part One **2008**

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Ontario Certified Teacher (OCT), Member in Good standing **2008-Present**
Ontario Society for Education through Art (OSEA), Member **2011-2012**

AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

Imperial Oil Education Award Scholarship for Academic Excellence **2003-2007**

Visual Arts Students' Association People's Choice Award **2006**

Western Scholarship of Distinction **2003**