Gender Issues in Islamic Schools: A Case Study in the United States

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Introduction

The education of girls involves many variables related to gender. Discrimination against girls in educational settings can be sensed by the students and reflected in their academic achievement.
“The classroom setting reproduces gender inequality. From elementary school through higher education, female students receive less active instruction, both in the quantity and in the quality of teacher time and attention” (Kimmel, 2000).
Cultural and religious factors influence the educational experiences of girls, including Muslim girls educated in Islamic schools located in the United States.
Islamic education has gone through comparable adaptations and changes to merge into the American society and culture. Traditionally, Islam gives equal rights to men and women in education; however, Islam prescribes that boys and girls be educated separately.
Islamic Education in the U.S.

But Islamic education in the United States has been adapted to the American education paradigm and culture, which encourage boys and girls to be educated together and treated equally in schools.
"... fair and just toward both men and women, to show preference to neither, and concern for both. All research, programs, products, actions, and attitudes that work toward eliminating gender as a limiting characteristic promote gender equity" (Koch & Irby, 2002).
Gender in Islam

- First, Islam teaches about the existence of gender roles and differences, because males and females are different.
- Yet, Islam also reserves equal rights for both in almost all aspects of life, including education.
West and Zimmerman (1987) explored the effects of social expectations for men and women: how each should behave and who should control and have power to lead these societies. According to “doing gender” paradigm.
The goal of this study was to seek plausible explanations of how boys and girls interact formally and informally during the day, how they create difference, and how they interact with teachers and principals.
Research Questions

1. What gender distinctions operate in the curriculum in Islamic schools in the United States?

2. How does the advising or career counseling provided to boys and girls in Islamic schools in the United States reinforce gender difference?
3. To what extent are certain teachers’ different instructional styles related to teachers’ and students’ genders in Islamic schools in the United States?

4. To what extent do teachers reinforce gender differences in classrooms in Islamic schools?

5. How do girls and boys differ in their academic performance in the two Islamic schools?
Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze the data.
Methodology

- This descriptive study utilized a case study design. The researcher studied two independent case studies in two different small Islamic private schools.

- This type of methodology is the best approach to deal with a complex setting involving gender, cultural, and religious issues.
Methodology

The case study utilized separate focus groups of students, also including observations in classrooms and interviews with teachers and principals of the two Islamic high schools.
The study used a quantitative approach to answer the research question on the academic achievement of the students. The researcher:

- obtained the students’ grades
- explored and explained the differences between boys’ and girls’ academic achievement
- related the findings to “doing gender” in the school.
Methodology

- Interviews were transcribed and
- The NVivo software program facilitated the analysis of the qualitative data by identifying various themes and establishing connections and relationships among them.
Methodology

Quantitatively, the researcher used descriptive statistics to compare academic achievement between girls and boys in the same school and between boys and girls in the two schools.
Study Sites

This study at two Islamic private schools in the U.S. Midwest.
Subjects

- **School A**: 7 teachers and 4 focus groups of students from 8th to 10th grades, and the principal.

- **School B**: 6 teachers and 4 focus groups of students from 8th to 10th grades, and the principal.
Comparison between the two schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Islamic/Private</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>male teachers</td>
<td>female teachers</td>
<td>different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freedom for students</td>
<td>strict with students</td>
<td></td>
<td>different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family relations</td>
<td>family relations</td>
<td>family relations</td>
<td>same</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Comparison between the two schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Differences</td>
<td>50% African Americans</td>
<td>95% Arabs</td>
<td>different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>little Arabic language</td>
<td>fluent in Arabic language</td>
<td>different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mostly newly converts</td>
<td>born Muslims</td>
<td>different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Style</td>
<td>Muslim, non-Arab principal</td>
<td>Muslim, Arab principal</td>
<td>different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>flexible</td>
<td>strict</td>
<td>different</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 1: What gender distinctions operate in the curriculum in Islamic schools in the United States?

Curriculum in the two Islamic schools is almost the same for both boys and girls. Both schools use the state curriculum that is taught in public schools, with modifications and the addition of Islamic studies, which includes learning the Qur’an and the Arabic language.
Question 2: How does the advising or career counseling provided to boys and girls in Islamic schools in the United States reinforce gender difference?

The responses to this question provided by teachers, principals, boys, and girls in the two Islamic schools confirmed that boys and girls are advised equally in most cases. The two Islamic schools lack the resources to provide a professional advisor or counselor. Instead, boys and girls seek counseling and advice from their teachers and principals, who provide informal counseling.
Question 3: To what extent are certain teachers’ different instructional styles related to students’ genders in the two Islamic schools in the United States?

The qualitative analysis of the interviews and focus groups revealed that all school rules are written and everyone in the two school abides by them, whether teachers, principals, boys, or girls.
Question 4: To what extent do teachers reinforce gender in classrooms in Islamic schools?

This study revealed biases and favoritism from some female teachers towards boys, and from male teachers towards girls. Teachers, boys, and girls all addressed this issue and confirmed it in many occasions. The unjust behavior and treatment from teachers towards boys and girls ranged from praising them differently, punishing them differently, and advising and counseling them differently.
Question 5: How do girls and boys perform academically in Islamic schools in the United States?

This study reveals a perception of greater academic achievement of girls over boys. As a group, girls were perceived as excelling while boys are perceived as performing more poorly than girls.
Findings: Factor 1

1. **Equal treatment**: which includes

- Access to facilities
- Treatment of boys and girls inside the classroom
- and treatment of boys and girls outside the classroom.
Qualitative Findings

- Both boys and girls have equal access to school facilities in both schools.
Equal Treatment of Boys and Girls inside the Classroom

Institutionally, boys and girls seemed to be receiving the same education from the same teachers, using the same curriculum inside the classrooms in the two Islamic schools.
The conclusion across the two cases is that there is no clear pattern for both schools in the treatment of girls and boys outside the classroom. There is no pattern across the two schools, or across all respondents.
Findings: Factor 2

2. Academic achievement: which includes

- Both boys’ and girls’ academic achievement in general
- Academic achievement due to individual student effort
- and differences between boys’ and girls’ academic achievement.
Boys’ and Girls’ Academic Achievement

- The cross case analysis concludes that there is a pattern of good academic achievement for girls in both schools.

- Girls are excelling more than boys in both schools.
Academic Achievement Due to Individual Student’s Effort

The cross case pattern results confirm that academic achievement is due to individual student effort.
Boys and Girls Differ in their Academic Achievement

Teachers, boys, and girls all confirmed that boys and girls differ in their academic achievement. The cross case pattern then, also confirms that boys and girls differ in their academic achievement.
Quantitative Findings

- The analysis shows that boys and girls belonging to a certain school resulted in good academic achievement (School B is doing better than School A).

- Gender has no effect according to quantitative results.
Conclusions

- Gender does seem to play a role in the two Islamic schools in that boys and girls are segregated, and girls are perceived as excelling, which is partly attributed to motivation which might relate to different expectations for success.
However, individual differences in treatment by gender and occasional incidences of gender discrimination did not reveal patterns that would suggest systematic patterns of gender discrimination in terms of equal treatment.
Conclusions

- Gender differences are divided into two levels: institutional and individual levels.
  - Institutional: segregation between boys and girls
  - Individual: some teachers do gender
Conclusions

- The practice of segregating boys from girls in Islamic schools, a main characteristic of the role of gender in Islamic schools, comes from applying Islamic law, which requires the two genders to be separated in such situations.
Recommendations

First, The researcher proposes the idea of single-gender schooling for Muslim boys and girls. Most teachers and the two principals expressed their positive feelings toward this suggestion.
Second, The researcher advises the two principals to provide workshops and training sessions for their teachers in different subjects related to teaching methods, gender roles, and other differences.
Finally, the findings of this study suggest that boys and girls need more formal advising and counseling sessions in their schools. The researcher advises the two principals to make employing an appropriate advisor/counselor from both genders a priority.
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