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## Young Muslim Women Participating in School Sport

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### Abstract

This paper explores the participation of Muslim girls in Health, Physical Education (HPE) and Sports in Brisbane Muslim and non-Muslim schools. The debate of Muslim women's participation in sports is strongly entwined with firmly held beliefs inherited through culture, religion, politics and tradition regarding the female body. Specifically, this study examines how Muslim female students interpret their participation in HPE and other school sporting activities. Muslim women experience certain difficulties, including undertaking strenuous exercise during the fasting month of Ramadan, mixed-gender participation and problematic dress codes. Additionally, because of reasons of religious and cultural ethnicity, they could confront certain constrictions in extracurricular activities. This paper seeks to develop an understanding of the importance of HPE and other sporting activities in the lives of Muslim girls accompanied by the views of parents and teachers; informed by in-depth, open-ended and semi-structured interviews with Muslim girls, their parents and teachers from Muslim and non-Muslim schools of Brisbane. Essentially, this paper presents the views of high school girls about their own involvement in HPE and other sporting activities. A phenomenological approach is adopted and the data is analysed using the Grounded Theory approach. Some of the findings of this study reveal that Muslim girls who attended the non-Muslim schools, in general are struggling between the cultural and religious limitations when it comes to their participation in sporting activities. The schools are making efforts to accommodate the needs of Muslim students but appear to be constrained by views of Muslim modesty impacting on their capacity to undertake many of the activities associated with HPE/Sport. However, this study reveals that the Muslim girls in Islamic schools are interested in participating in sport. Indeed, female students and their parents are very happy with their participation and encourage it. The insights gained from this study contribute to fostering a better understanding of the challenges Muslim girls face when it comes to their participation in HPE/Sport. Furthermore, it could also assist school leaders to make changes in educational settings, so as to enable Muslim girls to participate in HPE/Sport.

**Keywords: Physical Education, Sports, and Muslim Girls**

## Introduction

There is a strong sense in the literature that participation in extra school activities, such as sport, can be beneficial for students in terms of their engagement, sense of belonging, identity and other aspects of personal development. The context of school is seen to be a significant social influence in the lives of young students. Brown and Evans (2002) reported that a strong sense of connection between students and their school setting was highly related to school achievement, with lessened problem behaviours and a lessened dropout rate. Finn (1989) found that there were many aspects of the school environment that could help students to achieve a sense of attachment with their school and that to participate in extra-curricular activities was considered as the best way for young people to connect with their school.

Studies conducted in the past (e.g Gerber, 1996; Parish, 1984) have suggested that participation rates in extracurricular activities might vary by ethnicity, with some minorities being significantly less likely to be involved than others. These studies suggest that particular ethnic groups might not be receiving the benefits that extracurricular involvement seems to propose. Studies conducted by Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola (1999) and Vernez, Krop, & Rydell (1999) showed that schools need to be increasingly concerned with enhancing school attachment among minority students. They noted that due to rapid increase in diversity and changes in the immigration patterns, the population trends will have the potential to reinforce achievement and retention differences among ethnic groups (Davalos et al., 1999; Vernez et al., 1999)

By international standards, Australia is a young developing country that is still looking for skilled migrants, many of whom come from Muslim backgrounds (Muslim Youth Summits Report, 2007). Not only are there significant differences in religious beliefs and customs between Muslim migrants and the dominant Australian religious context, but there are also considerable differences culturally – between Muslims and non-Muslims, but also within the Muslim communities. This diversity of immigrants may be helping Australia to achieve economic benefits; it has simultaneously created great challenges for educational authorities to meet the needs of minorities (Mansouri & Kamp, 2007). Yasmeeen (2008) reported that it is very difficult for minorities to settle down in a host culture that does not recognize their cultural backgrounds.

What is of interest to the authors of this paper is the impact of these cultural and religious differences on adolescent girls and their participation in HPE/Sport. The debate around Muslim womens' participation in sports is strongly entwined with firmly held beliefs inherited through culture, religion, politics and tradition regarding the female body (Hargreaves, 2013). As noted, in the earlier sections of this paper, it has been discovered that participating in school sporting

activities could positively influence the lives of the students (Blomfield & Barber, 2011). Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the role of sporting activities in schools and its relationship to student development (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Almari (2013) has noted that the identity of Muslim students faces challenges as a result of the inherent complex nature of belonging to a minority group in dominant Western society. Also, Knez et.al (2012) asserted that research which understands young Muslim women and physical activity through a deficit framework fails to consider the difference and diversity within the lives of these young women. To this end, this paper explores young Muslim women's experience in sport offered as part of the secondary school curriculum. This paper forms part of a much larger project exploring young Muslim women's experience in non-Muslim settings but in this paper, the focus is on the sport experiences, or lack thereof.

### Physical education/Sports and Identity of Muslim girls

In this section, we discuss issues associated with Islam and its outcomes on the identity of Muslim students with the aim of understanding the level of influence that it has on female students involved in sporting activities in schools. As noted earlier, there is a notable debate in relation to Muslim women's participation in sports being influenced by factors such as culture, religion, politics and tradition regarding the female body (Hargreaves, 2013). Muslims who were born and raised in western society, usually use the word 'hijab' to signify their head covering, and in fact, this word is symbolic of a complete dress code (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006; Zine, 2006). The hijab represents significant social, political and cultural meaning for Muslim students (Zine, 2006). Zine (2006) delineates the significance of Islamic dress as being a symbol of religious and social values in society. Moreover, Ahmed (2002) states that wearing the headscarf (hijab) is the most precise and eloquent depiction of modesty, which a Muslim woman must express in public. Sattar (1987) depicts women in Muslim society as people who must preserve their dignity, and that of their family, with their deeds and behaviour. The family's dignity and morality lies in the sexual purity of their children. It is a girl's first and foremost duty to keep herself away from any physical relation with men until marriage and it is for this reason that girls are restricted interaction with males. One way that this is achieved is via the practice whereby when Muslim women leave home, they cover their heads and bodies, wearing headscarves and long clothes. It is expected that Muslim women at all times display modest and dignified behaviour when outside the home (Sattar, 1987).

The public display of modesty expected of Muslim women through their dress code transfers to the context of school, and for the purposes of this paper, into sport and HPE. As a result of this dress code and cultural/religious practices, Muslim women almost certainly will experience certain difficulties. These difficulties include: undertaking strenuous exercise during the fasting month of Ramadan when they are unable to eat or drink during the day; participating in mixed-gender

activities since it is inappropriate to mix with young men; and the conflict between HPE dress codes and Islamic dress codes. These dress codes can vary considerably from subtle head scarves through to burkas (full covering of the body). Additionally, because of religious and cultural ethnicity, they could confront certain restrictions during extracurricular activities (Dagkas & Benn, 2006).

### Identity formation

Mansouri and Wood (2008) have identified identity formation as a key issue for migrant youth. They argued that this issue remains dominant in second and third generation Muslim youth; it is not affected by how long they have been living in another country. The researchers have found that the migrant youth become more aware of the changing intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic aspects during their journey towards cultural-identity formation, as compared to their non-migrant peers (Mansouri & Wood, 2008). It is speculated by many educators that cultural and religious affiliation plays an important role in bringing improvement in the school performance of immigrant students (Deyhale, 1995; Gibson, 1997; Noble & Tabar, 2002). Gibson (1997) found that young people usually performed well when they have identified strongly with their family, peers and community. Similarly, Deyhle (1995) found that students who are most securely rooted in their conventional and traditional culture are frequently the most academically successful. By contrast, those students who attend school feeling they have been marginalized by their culture, or by those students who have experienced racism are at maximum risk of failure in school. Within this context, it becomes important to consider the impact of students' identity in relation to their religion and their relationship with schooling.

Brown and Evans (2002) assert that while the relationship between students' positive development and school sporting activities seems to be broadly held, there is lack of significant discussion that has concentrated on how this correlation may differ among ethnic groups in Western societies and the impact that this has on education. Many studies have found that the impact of participating in extra curricula activities varies across ethnicities and genders (Simpkins, O'Donnell, Delgado, & Becnel, 2011; Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003). In considering the specific contexts and needs of Muslim girls in schools, it has been noted that they can particularly experience more difficulty when participating in Western school sporting activities because of cultural differences and religious needs than their non-Muslim peers (Dagkas & Benn, 2006).

In the following sections, we discuss some of the issues around the participation of Muslim girls in sport and HPE.

### Restrictions on Participating in Sport

Among non-Muslims there appears to be a misconception that Muslim parents do not let their

daughters participate in sports and extracurricular activities. However, many studies (Fleming, 1994; Raval, 1989) have begun to criticize ethnocentric-based research that has given rise to stereotypes such as ‘Muslim parents force their daughters not to participate in sports’ and ‘sports holds less importance in the lives of Asians’. There appears to be a tension between two diverse views with regard to the parental views on their daughter’s participation in sport/HPE. Even though Muslim parents do not actively force their daughters to participate in sport, at the same time they do not encourage them either. Meanwhile, in the wider community, there appears to be a low level of importance given to the participation of Muslim girls in sport. Fleming’s (1991, 1994) studies into Muslim youth in Asia detail how physical education and sport in schools is given low priority. De Knop et al. (1993) support Fleming’s research, where a study was conducted into the effect of Islam on participation in physical education by Muslim schoolgirls. In their study, they reported that Muslim secondary school girls do have difficulty in participating in physical education often because the schools do not take their needs into consideration. It was observed that, in western societies, schools can play an important role in encouraging Muslim girls to participate in sport, and they will happily participate if certain conditions prevail. As Knop et al. (1993) describe, parents are willing to permit their daughters to participate in school sport as schools can play a vital role in encouraging the participation of Muslim girls in sport in the wider society. This research also found that Muslim parents seem more tolerant in regard to school-related sporting activities and physical education, compared to their daughters’ participation in general sports.

Many Muslim girls consider that they would enjoy swimming as part of physical education, however, due to their apprehension about the wearing of swimming costumes, and what they could wear that comes within the limits of their religion, they are not able to take part in these activities (Benn, 1996). Benn’s research (1996) into female students in a Bachelor of Education course in the UK brought forth stories related to Muslim students who participated in swimming. The informants in her study stated that, although students were encouraged to dress in whatever clothing they were comfortable in, for example, leggings and leotards or bodysuits, the participants thought that tight clothing revealing the shape of the body was a problem. Some students decided to wear t-shirts if needed, however were warned that increased clothing could make swimming more problematic, and possibly even dangerous. Those in all-female groups had varying views about acceptable dress for swimming. For those Muslim women who had opted to stay in their established mixed-gender groups, swimming would have been a serious religious transgression. The continued influence of parents is evident in this statement by one of the informants of Benn’s study that said: ‘my parents did say they didn’t want me to swim, as it was a mixed group. They said see if you can get into an all-girls group ... it (is to do with) the way you dress in swimming’ (Benn, 1996, p. 13).

It can be seen that parents may not be the perceived issue in terms of Muslim girls’ participation in

some sporting activities. Rather participation in some sports, such as swimming, may be constrained more by cultural norms – such as dress code and interactions with the opposite gender and also the possibility of the inflexibility of school practices. It appears that some young women are keen to participate but are limited by these norms.

#### Participation in extracurricular activities more challenging for Muslim girls than Muslim boys

It is apparent that Muslim girls are likely to face more difficulties in their efforts to participate in sports and extracurricular activities than Muslim boys. According to studies by Carrington and Williams (1988), both Muslim boys and girls of secondary school age are often faced with a dilemma when the time comes to participate in sports and physical education. The fact that they are Muslim reinforces the differences between boys and girls, and causes the girls to encounter more problems than the boys. Their attitudes and beliefs are heightened during these school years, and it is obvious that girls have a more difficult time at high school than do boys. The cultural and religious traditions of Islam, which allot vary specific roles to males and females, inherently controlling their conduct, dress and behaviour, can cause conflict and consternation when it comes to participation in sport, especially for girls.

A study conducted by Benn and Dagkas (2006) describe in detail the tensions between Islamic cultural practices and physical education. Some examples they give include dress codes for women, mixed/single-gender groupings, attitudes related to privacy and modesty, extra-curricular activities, fasting during Ramadan, swimming and dancing. They particularly remarked on the above mentioned Islamic requirements for modesty and privacy, which do not permit the wearing of short skirts or shorts for girls, or public changing rooms with public showers. According to Islamic codes, Muslim pupils should be segregated; however no consideration is given to this in many secondary schools. During the month of Ramadan Muslims are required to fast from sunrise to sunset, not only abstaining from food, but also from water or other liquids, and as a result, students' lower levels of energy and dehydration can be risk factors in any situation, let alone sporting and other physical activities (Dagkas & Benn, 2006).

Bashir-Ali and Elnour's (2003) research has found that in order to avoid any kind of direct contact with male, Muslim girls possibly will avoid any kind of social events. They could even avoid any contact at all with males in their school setting. The result of this kind of attitude, cultural philosophies and customs about avoiding any direct eye contact, shaking hands or touching males and speaking loudly, are possibly misunderstood by male teachers and also by non-Muslims in the Western society. Bashir-Ali and Elnour have explained that Muslim girls also do not feel comfortable if they have to make any kind of interaction, or have to sit with them in classroom settings. These cultural norms also transfer to many of the physical activities associated with sport and HPE.

Alamri (2013) has conducted a study on the participation of Muslim female students in Sporting Activities in Australian Public High Schools, her study concluded that due to the cultural and religious requirements, Muslim female students may limit or even prevent themselves from fully engaging in some school sporting activities. She found that the strong attachment to an Islamic identity of Muslim girls and the inflexible policies and rules of school sporting activities make it challenging for them to participate. She uncovered two important barriers for Muslim girls in schools in relation to their participation in school sporting activities: the Islamic dress code and restrictions on interaction with the males. She suggests that it is very important for the schools in multicultural societies to consider the cultural differences and understand religious needs, specifically about the Islamic dress code for Muslim girls. Evidently, there appears to be a gap in academic literature exploring the experiences of young Muslim women in the specific context of Australian Schools and the Australian National Curriculum, and what actually engages and motivates them to participate in HPE/Sport, as opposed to just revealing the barriers they face. Clearly, there is a need for this study, as there is little research surrounding the motivation and engagement aspects of young Muslim Women in HPE/Sport in school contexts.

For this study, we were keen to explore the experiences of young Australian Muslim women in schools, particularly around exactly what intrinsically and extrinsically either drives or deters them from engaging and achieving in the HPE curriculum in the context of the Australian National Curriculum. Out of the larger study, it became clear that participation in sport/HPE was a very clear issue for most of the participants.

## Methodology

This paper draws on data collected for a PhD project, which is exploring the school experiences of Muslim girls who are attending Muslim and non-Muslim schools in Brisbane. It focuses specifically on the participation of Muslim girls in school sporting activities. This is a qualitative study in which the *phenomenological* method is used to explore the lived experiences of young Muslim girls. The main aim of a phenomenological approach is to highlight the explicit and to identify the phenomena from the subject in context (Lester, 1999). It is an approach that collects information and perceptions via qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and observations being primarily concerned with the direct experience of the participants. This study as it aims to retrieve qualitative data directly from the participants' personal experiences in context and therefore a phenomenological approach is most applicable for this study. A phenomenological approach is adopted and the data is analysed using the Grounded Theory approach. The aim of the Phenomenological approach is to capture the explicit phenomena as to how it is perceived by the participants in context and this is achieved via direct interviews, discussions and observations (Lester, 1999). In addition the Grounded Theory has also been adopted to analyse the data. The Grounded approach is a qualitative approach developed initially by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960's and is primarily concerned with the process of developing theories about specific phenomena that is of interest to the researcher (Trochim, 2006). Hence, the Phenomenological and Grounded theory approach is most applicable for underpinning this study. Forty (40) Muslim girls from different ethnic backgrounds (age 13 to 19) were chosen for this study. Twenty girls are selected from non-Muslim schools and twenty girls are recruited from Muslim schools in Brisbane. The rationale behind interviewing girls from Muslim schools is to be able to make a comparison to non-Muslim schools. Girls were recruited by displaying notices in different mosques in Brisbane, asking for volunteers. Other participants were selected from local community gatherings. A snowballing technique is also being used to source participants for this study. Snowballing is considered to be a type of purposive sampling (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2004). In this method, participants or informants with whom contact has already been made, use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in, or contribute to the study (Creswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ulin et al., 2004). Snowball sampling is often used to find and recruit 'hidden populations' and occurs when researchers cannot get easy access to participants through other sampling strategies (Ulin et al., 2004).

Ten teachers were interviewed to gain better understanding of the experiences of the girls in the classrooms. Five teachers are recruited from Muslim schools and five teachers are selected from

non-Muslim schools. They were invited to share their experiences of teaching female Muslim students in their classes. They were invited to talk about the school facilities that are available to Muslim students. Moreover, the researcher asked about the challenges that confront Muslim students while they are in school. In addition, they were encouraged to give their views for the betterment of these girls' school experiences.

Ten parents were also interviewed to find out what parents have to say about the experiences of their daughters in schools. Interviews with the parents of these girls enabled the researcher to gather a broader perspective their daughters' school experiences. Parents were invited to openly share their experiences of sending their daughters to Muslim/non-Muslim schools. In addition, they were also invited to discuss the facilities that are available to their children in school, which enable them to carry out their religious duties. Moreover, they were encouraged to talk about the challenges that their daughters might confront in the school.

### **Semi-structured and in-depth interviews**

The choice of conducting this study with Muslim girls is personal, as the researcher strongly identifies with them on religious and cultural level, hence, these shared values creates an unspoken bond that is enhanced with mutual respect, understanding and acceptance between the researcher and the study participants. Furthermore, the researcher and the research participants also possess unique shared experiences in the context of being members of a minority group in Australian educational institutions. The investigator identified with the participants throughout the whole research process bearing in mind Stern's (2009) words, "If you really want to know what is going on, you have to feel it..." Accordingly, a subjective approach has been adopted throughout the research process because, as Stern (2009) asserted, there is no place for objectivity in qualitative research. Furthermore, semi-structured and in-depth interviews would be conducted for this study (Berg, 2004; Glaser, 1965, 1992; Hutchinson, 1986). The term semi-structured, which is also described as focused interviews, refers to a situation where a researcher comes with a series of questions which arise in the general form of an interview plan, allowing variables in the series of questions and the way in which they are presented and asked (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010; Phyllis Noerager Stern & Pyles, 1986). A semi-structured format was used in the interviews, with open-ended questions, inclusive of observations to provide access to the experiences of these girls in the context of the research aims. In-depth interviews are conducted when an investigator wants to know about a person's thoughts and behaviours and in the quest for exploring new issues in depth (Aslan, 2009). Furthermore, it enabled the researcher to gain comprehensive information about informants' beliefs, behaviour and experiences.

Each participant was interviewed once. Each interview went for the duration of 30 to 40 minutes.

Most of the interviews took place at the homes of the participants. The interviews started informally by asking participants their age, name and country of origin. The rest of the interview consisted of questions related to their experiences in non-Muslim schools and Muslim school, and about their likes and dislikes. However, the interview questions were broad enough to provide room for the participants to freely express their opinions and talk about their experiences. The interviews were tape-recorded and are transcribed verbatim.

## Findings & Discussion

This section of the paper presents the Muslim girls' experiences of HPE and other sport activities in a selection of Muslim and non-Muslim schools in Brisbane. The data has been analysed using the Grounded Theory approach. In the process of the collection of data, the researcher has coded the data, exercising constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965). The results are presented and organised according to the categories that emerged from the rich data.

### Attitudes and Contextual limitations

An analysis of the data indicated that all the girls from both the Muslim schools and the non-Muslim schools said that they loved to play sports and they used to take part in sports when they were in primary school. Some of the participants of this study also reported that they stopped taking part in sports when they commenced high school because of the limitations of their dress code; the fact that sports often comprised of mixed gendered groups; that there were often male coaches; and lastly, that there were few other Muslims taking part in sports. The girls said that they felt embarrassing or uncomfortable wearing the *hijab* and long pants and running in front of boys and male coaches. They felt that if there were other Muslim girls who were fully covered and playing sport, that they would have not minded to participate, because it would give them confidence in knowing that they were not alone. As Sania said:

I tried basketball in grade 8, but then I dropped the idea to play basketball now, I did not feel comfortable, and I was the only girl who is playing in scarf, but if there would have some other girl like me I would not have dropped the idea...(laughs)... it's not they don't let me feel so...like it looks so weird to run wearing scarf and long pants and I was new with scarf thing so I just couldn't carry it on' (Sania, 17).

Hafsa and Rihanna shared quite similar feelings:

I like sports, I want to participate but I don't feel comfortable, like we are not allowed to wear stockings in summer, and if I wear long pants it's very hot to play with and I can't wear shorts too, so I just don't... (Hafsa, 16).

I participate quite less...once I tried to participate with my long pants but they didn't allow me to like that...then I quit...for me I left because it's not only girls thing, when I am running and playing. I don't like those boys are looking at me or the coach; who is also male (Rihanna, 18, student non/Muslim school?).

Rihanna's concerns are similar to those expressed by the participants in Bashir-Ali and Elnour's study (2003) that found that in order to avoid any kind of direct contact with male, Muslim girls were likely to avoid any kind of social events. They could even avoid any contact at all with male in their school setting. Even though in non-Muslim schools PE code allowed the wearing of modest clothing but that it was feeling 'different' and maybe uncomfortable that reduced the girls enjoyment and comfort.

All participants expressed a desire to participate in sports as they liked sports but they could not participate because of what they felt were unfavourable conditions. This was of primary concern for the Muslim girls attending non-Muslim schools, however, it was still also prevalent in the girls at Muslim schools. Some of these issues related to aspects of their culture where it was inappropriate to wear shorts, to play with boys or to swim in a pool with mixed swimmers or to be trained by a male coach. The girls said that they would love to play sports if there were all-girl team/s with female coaches. They said they want to take part in swimming but again however were prevented by issues with wearing swimming costumes and swimming in pools used by both boys and girls. It has been found that Muslim girls do not participate in sports because they do not feel comfortable even though they love sports and want to be part of school sports. This is aptly summed up with Alishba expressed:

I really wanted to do sports in school but as I get older, I started feeling that I am not comfortable with the surroundings, I started thinking that I look funny to run in the ground with hijab and especially when it is really warm day and I also do not like that boys are also there'. (Alishba, student, non-Muslim school)

Alishba's views are representative of the views of other girls who are going to non-Muslim schools. The majority of the girls who are attending state or other private schools talked about the possibilities of gendered-segregated PE. All of the girls expressed the wish of having all girls playing ground and pool where boys cannot see them.

## Support from Parents

The study has revealed that the more the favourable conditions in the school for sports the more parents are willing to let her daughters participate in the sports. Because of the cultural and religious limitations, many of the parents did not allow nor encourage their daughter to participate in school sports. The views of the parents can be represented in the comments of Alishba's mother where she said that she would not like her daughter to have to wear shorts if it is the condition to participate in sports. She said she would rather forbid her to play. In contrast to this view, a teacher at a state school said that Muslim girls did not participate in sports and did not feel comfortable while playing various sports, as he thought that their parents or community pressures restricted them so that they cannot experience other worldviews. He said:

Some Muslim girls do not feel comfortable because some of their parents do not allow their daughters to wear pants. I have seen that girls are having these issues but no one has ever approached me to talk about it. I have seen a lot of Muslim students that are very fit, very sporty and they are wearing their Hijab and long pants in a very comfortable way. I really do not know how they do it, but they are feel they are very comfortable wearing them. Some of them, feel shy and reluctant to run on the field as they may not want to upset their families or the Muslim community, even though they may really want to participate in sports, they are often feeling pressure from their parents and the Muslim community. (Andrew, Maths teacher)

Andrew's views about the Muslim girls' participation and interest is from the perspective that Muslim girls want to go participate but because of family pressures they quit playing as they do not want to disappoint their parents. Similarly Alishba's mother's views tend to agree with Benn et al's (2011) research in UK that suggests that Muslim girls embody their faith and that this can impact on their willingness to engage in sporting activities. Benn et al (2011) stressed the need for educational researchers and teachers to accept and respect the diversity of Muslim women's opinion in terms of how they choose to participate in physical activities. It appears from the data that while there is perception that Muslim girls do not want to participate in sport for a range of reasons, there is the possibility that changes could be made to allow access to many sports that could respect and acknowledge the religious and cultural limitations imposed on Muslim girls and recognise that there are possibilities for change.

## Access in Muslim and Non- Muslim Schools in Women's Sport

In contrast to the experiences of girls in non-Islamic schools, the general trends in the data indicate that the Muslim girls in the Islamic schools were more able and were more likely to participate in sports in comparison to the girls going to the non-Islamic schools. The girls in Islamic school feel comfortable to participate in any kind of physical activities in schools. They talked about the dress-

codes in Islamic schools. One of the female students said:

In state schools, female students wear the normal uniform for touch football such as shorts and singlets but over here we have sports hijabs and scarves that they have imported from Sweden. Very modest clothing we have here (Irum, Year 12).

In this quote Irum demonstrates her extreme satisfaction with the facilities they enjoy in Islamic school. She said because of the favourable conditions available in her school she could do as much sport as she wants. At the time of the study Irum was also school captain, was very good in studies and she participated in all kind of sports in her school. She said

I just love to do sport and my dad lives for sports, my sister and brother also play sports. I and my sister play basketball and my brother play soccer. Our parents always take us to trainings and other things. He just loves sports and anything related to sports he will say yes to it

The support Irum received from school and family helped her achieve a successful academic and sport-orientated trajectory in her school. Her positive response in respect to how Irum's engagement with school sport enhanced her families' shared experiences and bond is in parallel with Blomfield and Barber's (2011) research that found that participating in school sporting activities could positively influence the lives of the students (Blomfield & Barber, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

The data from this study have revealed a number of interesting trends. Firstly, it has highlighted that participation in extra-curricular activities such as sport/HPE strongly influences students to have more meaningful engagement with school – both academically and socially. Being part of the school community is important to students' sense of belonging and self-worth. Furthermore, this is in parallel alignment with the findings from the results of a randomised community health project conducted in Victoria known as, *The Gatehouse Project*, where Bond, Patton, Glover, Carlin, Butler and Thomas (2004) have highlighted that, it is when students' feel overall higher levels of connectedness to school results in higher success rates in improving health and behaviour problems than any single intervention program. The young women attending non-Islamic schools noted that it was often difficult for them to participate in sport-related activities due to the schools not having segregated sex classes and some issues with what sporting attire would be considered practical but also culturally sensitive. This finding was also noted by Alamri (2013) whose findings also revealed that sport/HPE was not necessarily problematic for Muslim girls but rather the

contextual factors such as dress code, privacy in changing rooms, mixed sex activities and lower levels of teacher knowledge of Islam were the real existing issues that seemed to be affecting Muslim girls' participation levels in non-Muslim school HPE/sport activities. While the young women in these contexts expressed a desire to participate, they did not always feel entirely comfortable participating in sport because it was not completely meeting the religious rules of their culture. Dakas, Benn and Jawad have indicated that participation in sport is a key social issue of concern for Muslim women who wear the hijab in Western schools. In contrast, the young women at the Islamic schools were more likely to be able to participate in sporting activities due to dress codes that fitted with their parents' expectations and their religious rules. This support is hardly surprising given

From this data, it is worthy to consider the implications the orientations of the Islamic school in contrast to the non-Islamic schools of the comments offered by the young women and their families. Firstly, we note that many of the parents were willing to support their daughters to participate in sport if the conditions are favourable and respectful of Islamic traditions. Secondly, we also found that many of the girls were keen to participate in school sport and this finding challenges some of the generalisations and misconceptions that Muslim girls are unable to participate in sports due to their religious and cultural traditions. It appears that neither parental views nor cultural practices limit participation in sport. However, it would appear that there is a need for inclusive practices to be adopted in sport/HPE to allow young Muslim women to have cultural sensitive inclusive access to this area of the curriculum. This indeed, if it is the case that having a strong sense of belonging to the school aids in academic success, then it would be prudent to consider ways in which to increase the possibilities of greater access to schools through building stronger and more inclusive practices in sport/HPE for young Muslim women.

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