

The Impact of Religious Education Subjects on the Formation of Muslim Girls' Identity: A Comparative Study of Girls' Secondary School in Kedah, Malaysia and Leeds, Britain

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Abstract

The Religious Education (RE) subject is one of the ways to transmit beliefs, practices, and values as well as to develop an Islamic identity to the students. The literature on Islamic schools and students' identity points to the continuing importance of Islamic education subjects. The main aim of this study is to explore how the RE subjects shaped students' identity at schools. The methodologies employed are participant observations and 72 semi-structured interviews. Thereafter this study embarks on two case studies; Maktab Mahmud Alor Setar, Kedah, Malaysia and New Horizon Community School (NHCS), Leeds, the United Kingdom as they offered Islamic education for Muslim girls. Although the ideas of culture, belief and policy have influenced the wider framework, the findings show that in different contexts and countries majority of the students agree that the RE has influenced their identities. This study also shows the negotiations that take place between the culture, belief, policy and the Islamic schools in the formation of girl's identities, the process of inculcation of self-identity and how different it is in comparison to Leeds. This study helps the Islamic schools to offer a better syllabus for RE subjects, guide the students to be a good Muslim and make the RE's syllabuses suitable to the contemporary society.

Keywords: Muslim girls; Identity; Islamic schools; RE Subjects.



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1. Introduction

The role of Muslim schools in the development of Muslim identities is increasingly evident (Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Halstead, 2005; Ishak, 1995; Tamuri *et al.*, 2004). This is because Islamic schools offer Islamic curriculum such as the RE subjects in which the students can learn Islam in depth, create social and emotional stability (Sound Vision Staff Writer, 2017). The emphasis upon the need to encourage students to be Islamic, educated, brave and active is clearly viewed as making a positive contribution to the community, and to be producing good mothers for the next generation. As argued in the Bihesti Zewar (Metcalf, 1997), Thanawi and his fellow reformist *ulama* wanted to make women knowledgeable, educated and able to stand against the conservative opinion of the time¹. Maulana insists that education can enhance a girl's *izzat* (honour) of the family and 'central to that role is knowledge of her place in relation to other human beings and to Allah' (Metcalf (1997). Metcalf in her book commented about this view of Thanawi saying:

His defense was that only an educated girl could fulfil her role properly, know what is owed to herself and to others, and know her proper relation to God. Nothing inherent limited her from developing intellectual skills or from cultivating the highest ideals of moral virtues (Metcalf, 1997).

It is thus apparent that women are highly regarded and esteemed in Islamic society, as they are encouraged to participate actively for its betterment. This is referring to a Muslim woman who is Islamic, educated, brave and active like Khadijah R.A and Aisyah R.A.

However, in contemporary time, due to the influences of modernization, globalization, and secularization, it is necessary for Muslim students to understand how to behave in society. In other words, students must be aware of the values and virtues that society wants as they face new life demands. The question that arises from this is how to make students concern with their Islamic identity in such a rapidly changing world? According to Lickona (1992), Nik Rosila (2013), people should be taught both academics and virtue or good character in order to live a noble life. The approach of implementing the national and Islamic curriculum, and environmental ethos is in-line with the primary purpose of Islamic education – that is, to produce a 'good [wo]man' and the 'true Islamic [wo]man' – 'the *insan kamil*' (a perfect true Islamic person). The curriculum of the school enhances the girls' self-esteem and inspires

¹ The conservatists viewed that women should stay at home and fully adhere the *izzat* and *sharam*.

confidence in them about their culture and future, aiming to advance pupils' personal and social development, which are regarded as the most essential educational goals (Mustafa, 1999).

In the light of the above, this research examines the role of RE subjects in the formation of Muslim girls' students' identities both in Kedah and Leeds. In order to investigate the RE subjects, which Muslim girls' students' study and within which they articulate their identity, this research examines how they interact with this subject and how their identity is structured by it. The study also explores other concepts which may potentially shape their experiences, including ideas of culture, belief and policy within the wider framework of these influencing factors. As Knott and Khokher (1993) note, the process of identity formation is not static but ongoing; however, further details may reveal the choice of schools, the environment, the family background, and similar options that have influenced someone's associations and identities.

2. Identity and Muslim Women Identity

Identity formation or individuation is the development of a distinct personality or identity of an individual apart from that of others. It is a continuous process of the persistent entity in a particular stage of life in which individual characteristics are possessed and by which a person is recognized or known (such as the establishment of a reputation). Many psychologists have explained the different stages of identity formation based on specific theories developed by them. In this vein, there is the popular Eriksson psychosocial theory, which is connected with how a person forms his/her personality based on interaction with his/her society. There is also the psychosexual development theory by Sigmund Freud where he talks about how identity is formed as a result of the sexuality of the child especially the interaction of the child with the mother. Mary Ainsworth talks about the attachment theory which has to do with trust that the child gained as a result of attachment to the parent especially the mother in infancy. According to her, the success or otherwise of this attachment goes a long way in shaping the child's future development. The Social Learning theory is also an important theory which talks about the place of role models in the life of the child since children learn by imitation. The success of this learning through the role model results in a positive assessment by the child and a failure of it leads to negative assessment and this invariably affects the child's personality. Jane Piaget and other cognitive psychologists talk about how cognitive reasoning plays a role in the formation of the identity of a child. At the adolescent stage, they point out that the child reasons beyond concrete things and this usually lead to the realisation by the child that he/she has a future to prepare. This, they held marks the beginning of identity crisis in the child as he/she grapples with his/her identity formation what to be in the future. James Marcia's theory holds that identity crisis starts at the adolescent stage when an individual realises the need to form his/her identity which will prepare him/her to face the challenges of adulthood. This causes the individual to explore different roles, lifestyles and career choices. Through this process, we can know whether an individual achieves success or not when he/she gained a clear understanding of his/her strength and weaknesses and a clear set of personal standard.

The above shows that the issue of identity formation and the factors that shape identity can be viewed from different angles depending on the perspective of the observer. It is in the light of this that this paper looks at the issue from the point of view of Islam and how the Islamic subjects (what we called the RE) have helped in shaping Muslim girls/women's identity. However, as explained in the introduction, by Muslim women identity we mean an identity that can be formed through Islamic schools, especially where the RE subjects are taught. The issue is what impact does the RE subjects have on the identity formation of Muslim girls' students who are learning the subjects? As Al-Qaradawi (1997) said, the Muslim women identity is formed when a Muslim woman subscribes to the Islamic Ideal which requires her to cover the *aurah* and perform religious obligations such as pray, fast, and give charity. As Allah says in the Quran "...So their Lord accepted their prayers, (saying): I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you whether male or female. You proceed one from another." Hence, since these things mentioned by Sheikh Al-Qaradawi are contained in the RE subjects, to what extent have they impacted the identity formation of the Muslim girls in these schools? The emphasis upon the need to encourage students to be Islamic, educated, brave and active is clearly viewed as making a positive contribution to the community. Therefore, by identity, we mean the formation of Muslim women identity as a result of learning the RE subjects in the schools under study. Thus, the thrust of this paper is to see how the RE subjects have helped shaped the formation of the Muslim girls' identity in the two schools under study.

3. Methods

A qualitative approach using the comparative case study design was employed in developing the study. This research employed participant observations and semi-structured interviews. Thereafter it concerned with the comparison of two case studies, each of which examines matters of the RE subjects in the formation of Muslim girls' identity.

3.1. Case Studies

This study embarks on two case studies; Maktab Mahmud (MM) in Alor Setar, Malaysia and New Horizon Community School (NHCS) in Leeds, the United Kingdom as they offered Islamic education for Muslim girls. MM and NHCS have been chosen because of their similar nature in setting such as Islamic curriculum, Islamic ethos and Islamic role model. This will enable the researchers to investigate the opinions of girls in both schools who are involved in the research and how they construct their Islamic identity in the school settings. Using these different

case studies also enable the researchers to obtain multiple perspectives, responses, and insights into the experience of two different contexts; Muslim and non-Muslim society.

In order to explore and understand their social lives as Muslim girls and women, sufficient time is required at the case-study sites – Maktab Mahmud (MM) and New Horizon Community School (NHCS). However, as MM and NHCS are school structured setting, the researchers' presence there for any period longer than the three months may have started to hinder or interfere with the schools' time, the students' learning, and the staff's duties. Hence, the period of observation and interview was pegged at three months. However, despite the limited time spent at the different institutions, rich data was collected at all these sites in an intensive way of data collection. Thus, the researchers routinely collected and wrote up the data, recording the observations, reflections and any developing theories in the notebook.

4. Instrument

4.1. Participant Observation

Participant observations were used to explore and support the data collected from the interviews. It can be used 'as the only technique or jointly with other techniques' (Sarantakos, 1997). In this case, it combines with other techniques, as participant observation can also serve as 'a technique for verifying or nullifying data provided in face-to-face encounters' (Hancock, 1998). It also used 'written descriptions' as an observation technique. 'Written descriptions' mean that the researcher records observations of people, teaching and learning process, the RE syllabus and all of the life in these institutions by making notes of what the researchers observed (Hancock, 1998).

In fact, this observation can be used as a justification for what the researchers have gained from the interviews. The students' identity needs to be investigated in real-life contexts, where 'the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Bell, 1999; Nga, 2009; Yin, 1991) hence the presence of the researchers in the school premises and observation of the day to day activities of the students' within the premises. In fact, neither the RE subjects, nor the experiences, feelings, behaviors and identity of the respondents could have been investigated in depth without the researcher's presence within the data 'sets'.

4.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

This study decided to use semi-structured interviews to collect data, as this method offer opportunities for both control and openness. This instrument worked well as the process was informal and depended a great deal on the responses of the person being interviewed. Generally, no specific instrument was used in this research, but, for the interview sessions, the researchers referred to a set of questions, a pen and a notebook and uses a voice recorder. The respondents at each school were categorized into four groups:

- 1) One (1) governor
- 2) One (1) head teacher
- 3) Four (4) teachers
- 4) Thirty (30) students (aged between 15 and 16)

5. Results

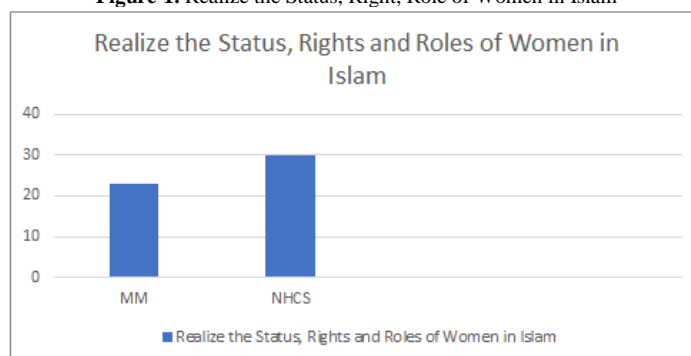
5.1. Data From the Interview

The data gathered at both schools indicated that majority of the students agreed that teaching and learning the RE subjects at these schools have given rise to two significant contributions in the formation of their identity. First, they make them realized the status, right and role of women in Islam and, second they have improved their attitude and identity as Muslims.

5.1.1. Realize the Status, Right and Role of Women in Islam

Most of the students agree that the RE subjects at these schools have made them realize the status, rights, roles of women in Islam which lead them to be a *Muslimah* (a practicing Muslim). The graph below shows that about 23 out of 30 respondents of MM and all of the respondents at NHCS agree that the RE subjects have led them to realize the status, rights and roles of women in Islam and this has led them to be a good *Muslimah* and influenced them in their identity formation.

Figure-1. Realize the Status, Right, Role of Women in Islam



5.1.2. At MM, One of the Students, Auni Said That

I am happy to study RE subjects. I learn a lot about Islam from these subjects. For example, in Sirah we learn about the history of Islam, our prophets, the wife of the prophet like Khadijah, Aisyah and so on. They were strong, brave and educated women. I have been inspired to be like them. Before, many people said that women should stay at home, be busy with house chores and the upbringing of the children. But actually, Islam has upgraded the status of women. Women also can be involved in the society, do dakwah and gain knowledge as what the wife of the prophet did before.

5.1.3. Zakirah Insisted That

The RE subjects really help me in character building. At the same time, it has motivated me to be a good muslimah. Women should not stay at home only, but women should go outside and give something back to Islam. This is parallel to women's fitrah, not against the limitation of women as ruled by Islam. This means that women must be active and strong but at the same time, the Muslim women must know how to do muamalah between genders, cover the aurah and preserve the status of Muslim women.

5.1.4. Meanwhile, At NHCS, Salsabila Held That

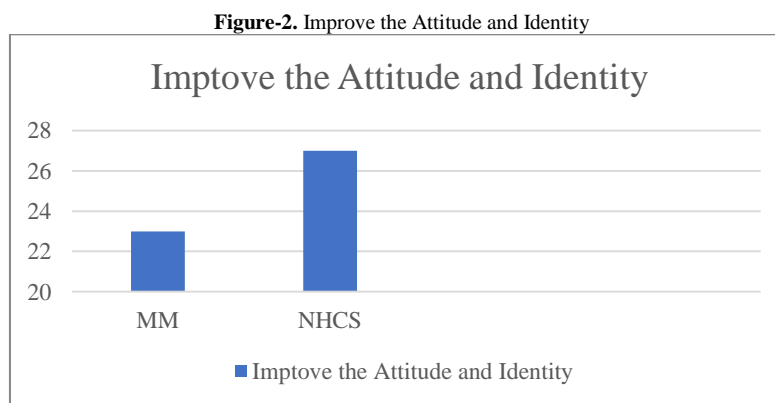
There is no discrimination about women in Islam. Islam has improved the status of women. In fact, we have a lot of sirah that talk about the importance and the role on women in Islam, for example about Saidatina Khadijah, Aishah, Fatimah, Asma Abu Bakar and others. So, by sitting in this class, it lifted my motivation to be like them inshaallah.

5.1.5. Nada Added That

Many people said that Muslim women are depressed, passive and being marginalised in the society. It is because they do not know the truth of Islam. They cannot differentiate between tradition and Islamic texts. So, by learning these subjects I know that the rights of women are equal to those of men. But of course, those rights are relevant to the women's fitrah and limitation.

5.2. Improve the Attitude and Identity

The graph below shows the numbers of respondents who agreed that the RE subjects have influenced their attitude and identity. There were about 23 out of 30 respondents of MM and 27 out of 30 respondents at NHCS.



At MM, the RE subjects impacted on the pupils' characters and aim to make them better people, better Muslim girls and thus to become better Muslim women. Such teaching aims to have an impact on them as people, rather than to just help them to achieve academic success. The RE teacher, Jamilah, 36 years old, said that:

These RE subjects give impact to the students' character. The purpose of the RE itself is to produce a good Muslim and encourage the students to be better people and better Muslimah. This is what I want in every student. I want them to succeed in character and morals and at the same time they succeed academically.

5.2.1. A teacher Said That

It does not matter how successful the person is, if they are not successful in their deen, then they are not successful in this world. The objective of MM is to produce insan kamil. I always remind my students in the class about this matter. I think I am more grateful if my students are good in akhlak, humble, and full of respect. The RE subjects are really important for every student (Rahimah).

5.2.2. In the Students' Perspective, Nuha, 16 Years Old Commented That

I have got an excellent result in PT3 and I have got an offer from a boarding school. But I refuse to study there because in here I got both, dunia and akhirat knowledge. My parent wants me to be an educated and a religious daughter.

When Asked about the subject which influenced them the most in character building. Most of the students responded that *Usul al-Din* and *al-Shariah* have a big influence on them in forming Muslim Identity. Below are the responses.

5.2.3. Bahirah Said

I love all the subjects, but the ones that influence me a lot are Usul al- Din and al- Shariah. For example, in Usul al- din, I learn Tauhid, Tafsir, Hadis, Sirah and Akhlak. In Tauhid we learn about the oneness of god, Tafsir- the intrepertation of Quran, Hadis- everything about words of the prophet, Sirah-the history of Islam and Akhlak- adab and manner. All of these subjects give significant impact to the characters in the sense that they give lesson and ibrah to the students. Specifically for akhlak, it teaches us how to behave accordingly based on the Quran and Sunnah. In Sirah, we learn about the history of Islam, the men and women behind the succes of spreading Islam.

5.2.4. Najihah Commented That

The subjects that influenced me a lot are Usul al- Din and al- Shariah. In Usuludin we learn everything about Islam such as Tauhid, Sirah, Tafsir, Akhlak and Hadis. On the other hand, in Shariah, we learn about Fiqh Ibadat, Fiqh Munakahat, Fiqh Mua amalat and Fiqh Jinayat. This Shariah is focusing on the dos and don'ts in islam. We should learn those things because this is our law and it acts as a guidance for us to live in this world.

5.2.5. Qistina also Added That

In this subject (Usuludin) especially for Sirah and Akhlak, they really teach us on how to be a good Muslimah. In Sirah for example, the story of Khadijah and Aishah have really inspired me as a woman. I become more motivated to be a good Muslimah who is also active, brave and strong just like them.

On the other hand, at NHCS, an extensive programme of study on Islamic beliefs and practices can develop confident Muslim attitudes, personalities and understandings. The deputy head teacher, who teaches Islamic studies, gave great importance to these RE subjects and stated during an interview that:

The girls need to know about Islamic worship because it's something that they must put into practice, so we try to be as practical as possible. I think that knowledge they can use straight away [is most important, such as] Fiqh of Ibadah (worship) salah, wudu', and how to perform Hajj. Basic principles [need to be known], such as Aqidah [belief] how to strengthen the iman, belief in angels, belief in books, etc. [They also need to know about] Sirah – the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the history of Islam and the caliphs that came after. It is basic understanding, but with a deep understanding of the prophet and his influence on Muslims. [Also] Akhlaq is a big focus and priority for these girls because they are children and can go away with good adab/ akhlaq and Islamic knowledge (Aisha).

5.2.6. One Student Commented That

This school is important because it provides a national curriculum within an Islamic environment. Children have an education within all subjects – Science, Maths, English, History, and Geography. It doesn't matter what the subject is, but it needs to be linked to Islam so that we understand that Islam is not just about praying five times a day, [and] it's not just about tahajjud [night prayer] and fasting. We need to have the knowledge for ourselves so that we are better people and we can practice our Deen (religion) (Rashda, mother, 34 years old).

When I raised the issue about the role of the school in terms of implementing Islamic education, the Deputy Head Teacher asserted that an inadequate Islamic education could be detrimental to this generation of children, and that is the most worrying issue to address at NHCS:

As far as I am concerned, it does not matter how successful the person is, if they are not successful in their deen, then they are not successful in this world. I think it's obviously detrimental if they can live in an Islamic school without understanding Islam – detrimental to them, their future, their families and their children. It's really sad if they do not understand Islam properly.

Teacher, 42, was concerned about the impact on children's behaviour when they do not get adequate Islamic education:

They can easily be influenced if they don't have a proper Islamic education. For example, I know Muslims who are not being educated in the Islamic education system – the family does not understand their deen, [and] they get involved in un-Islamic things. But they think it's okay [and that] there is no harm in it – because they don't know what halal and haram are and can't see the harm.

5.2.7. Rekha, Teacher, 45, Claimed That

Many parents came to me and said that their daughters have great improvement in behaviour and attitude towards parents and the other family members. This would mean that she could take all of herself (with good manners) to school and bring it all of herself at home.

However, apart from shaping the identity, they were also concerned about the attack from 'within' Islam in the form of Islamic extremism, and that they wanted 'moderate' Islamic education as a defence against what they perceived as immorality:

I am worried about the future of our children. There are a lot of horrible things happening. Some people go towards extremism. So, I want to show the children the middle way ... Balance means not too extreme and not too far away from our religion (Sonia, a teacher, 37 years old).

5.2.8. Aisha, A 34 Year-Old Teacher, Held That

Islamic education is very important, especially living in England. We are surrounded by an unhealthy environment. So, it is important for institutions, and classes to teach about Islam. Alhamdulillah, a lot are going on to get people to know what the deen (Islam) is and to not move people far away from their deen. It is very difficult for children out there.

5.2.9. She Also Added That

It is important that they are educated about their religion because it is a huge part of their identity, which they are now old enough to consciously take the decision to follow. In addition, research² has shown that those Muslims who are more educated about Islam are less likely to fall into violent extremism.

5.2.10. The School's Governor Claimed That

Lessons to be learned by pupils (such as aqidah, sirah and akhlak) impact their character to make them better people, better Muslim girls, and then better Muslim women. It impacts them as people rather than just [providing] academic success. They have success of their character and morals. The importance of Islamic education is obviously, if it is successful, then it would impact their character, which is the hope of teaching in Islamic schools (Dr. Razaq Raj).

Whilst interviewing the students, majority of the students agreed that these RE subjects have shaped their identity in the sense that some topics being discussed are related to their day-to-day lives. The interviews showed that they perceived a large improvement in their behavior by attending this school:

At the beginning, it was very good, it was the first time I met many Muslims friends. Previously I was at a school where there were hardly any Muslims. [The] first time I saw a lot of girls in hijab, I saw everybody was praying and it helped me. I felt more comfortable to practice Islam. Then, I slowly learnt about Islam (the RE subjects) and changed my behaviour. Alhamdulillah... I hope I can istiqomah (hold on to practicing what she learnt)... (Karimah, student, 16 years old).

6. Data from the Observation

6.1. Maktab Mahmud

MM provides an Integrated Islamic curriculum known as KBD (Kurikulum Bersepadu Dini), comprising *Usul al-Din, al-Shariah, al-Lughah al-Arabiah al-Mu'asirah, al-Manahij al-Ulum al-Islamiyyah* and *al-Adab wa al-Balaghah*. It is believed that this KBD can help in the shaping of students' identity at school.

The Islamic ethos is also integrated into the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Teachers have created an Islamic atmosphere in the classroom by trying to integrate the values of Islam in the teaching. For example, throughout the observation of a form four class for *Shariah Al-Islamiyyah* lesson, the researchers observed that the lesson began and ended with *du'a* (supplicatory prayers) and recitation. The students were well-behaved and gave the teacher their full attention. They listened carefully to the teachers and gave full attention to the class without any command from the teacher. In many lessons, the teachers made links with Islamic values. Before the teacher leaves the class, every student shakes hands with the teacher. This environment is rarely seen in other schools. During interviews, the students answered the questions politely, frequently saying *assalamualaikum* (peace be upon you) during the first meeting, *bismillah* (in the name of Allah) before answering the first question of the interview, and *salam* (peace) after finishing the interview.

The MM school fully implements the Integrated Curriculum (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah, KBSM) and Integrated Islamic Curriculum, (Kurikulum Bersepadu Dini, KBD) and adheres very closely to the attainment targets and programmes of study. The KBD was designed by Curriculum Board Committee, Ministry of Education (MOE), Advisory Board of Education and Religious Education (LEPAI, Lembaga Penasihat Pelajaran dan Pendidikan Agama Islam), and Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, (JAKIM, Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia). The KBD was introduced to the State Religious School, (SAN, Sekolah Agama Negeri), Private

² <http://www.defendtheprophet.com/new-terrorism-adviser-takes-a-broad-tent-approach>. (Retrieved on 14 March 2014).

Religious School (SAR, Sekolah Agama Rakyat) and Government-Aided Religious School (SABK, Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan) in 2015. The MOE, JAKIM and LEPAI have provided textbooks for KBD subjects and all these textbooks are written in Arabic. The use of Arabic language is significant to show the privilege of Islam and the Islamic terminologies.

This KBD was planned in order to produce *muthaqqaf ulama* or Muslim scholars in the future. The MOE believes that through this KBD the students can preserve, sustain and prevent Islam from deviant teachings such as the Islamic State Militants (IS) or DAESH³.

In the KBD, the five main strands of *Usul al-Din*, *al-Shariah*, *al- Lughah al-Arabiah al- Mu'asirah*, *al- Manahij al-Ulum al-Islamiyyah* and *al- Adab wa al-Balaghah* are infused into the curriculum. These five subjects represent fundamental knowledge that every Muslim is expected to learn. When asked about the importance of these subjects, a teacher commented that:

These KBD subjects are very important to the students especially nowadays where there are a lot of bad examples and bad influences. So, subjects such as Usul al- Din and al- Shariah taught them how to preserve their Islamic identity, to be a good muslimah while al- Lughah al- Arabiah al- Mu'asirah, al- Manahij al-Ulum al- Islamiyyah and al- Adab wa al- Balaghah are the heritage and privilege of Islam that every Muslim should learn and preserve. So, by learning KBD they can be truly Muslims as a Malay idiom says, "merentung buluh biar dari rebungunya" This is our main concern.. I hope the students do not only learn but practice Islam in their life. I think this knowledge is not for themselves per se, but they can spread it to their family and their community in the future. Insha Allah.. (Aminah, 42 years old).

6.2. New Horizon Community School

The NHCS provides Islamic curriculum together with the national curriculum. The Islamic curriculum comprises Islamic studies, Arabic and *Quranic* studies. The Islamic curriculum and Islamic ethos and environment have distinguished this school from mainstream schools in Leeds. It is believed that the RE subjects can help in shaping students' identity at the school.

Throughout the observation at this school, every day begins with morning tutor time, where the pupils start the day by listening to the glorious *Quran*, offering praise to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), making references to *Hadith* and how Muslims can all work to improve life by following the beautiful *sunnah* (Prophet Muhammad actions). Meanwhile, the observation in year 11 class for Islamic studies and *Quranic* studies, witnessed that the students have to recite *du'a* (prayers) before and after lessons. The students were well behaved and gave the teacher their full attention. When the teacher says Prophet Muhammad *Sallallahu alaihi wassalam* (Peace be upon him), all the students will automatically and congregationally answer '*sallallahu alaihi wassalam*' without any command from the teacher. This response appears to have become a norm rather than something that they do because the teacher expects it of them. At the age of 16 years old, their maturity and knowledge about Islam is well presented through their behaviour as they understand and articulate Islam, rich with ethics and manners. During interviews, students answered the questions politely, frequently saying *assalamualaikum* (peace be upon you) during the first meeting, *bismillah* (in the name of Allah) before answering the first question of the interview, *jazakillah* (thank you) and *salaam* (peace) after finishing the interview. They also frequently used *Alhamdulillah* (thanks be to God) and *mashaAllah* (as God wills) when they expressed feelings during the interviews. The level of their politeness and respect for the researchers were probably increased more than usual because the researchers were outsiders at this school.

Similarly, the teachers created an Islamic atmosphere in the classroom by integrating the values of Islam in the topics being discussed. For example, in a Year 11 class, the teacher played *nasheed* songs that were related to the themes of the day, as well as a song from Yusuf Islam's album⁴ 'Your Mother' on Mother's Day, which in the UK is typically a secular celebration. In many lessons, the teachers made links with Islamic values.

The New Horizon Community School fully implements the National Curriculum and adheres very closely to the attainment targets and programmes of study set therein for core and foundation subjects. However, the content of the Islamic curriculum is decided by the teachers themselves. The national curriculum guidelines are followed at Key Stage 4 (KS4) for all GSCE (General Certificate for Secondary Education) subjects, using course syllabi produced and recognized by examination bodies such as Edexcel⁵, Assessment and Qualifications Alliance⁶ (AQA) and Oxford Cambridge RSA examination board⁷ (OCR).

In the Islamic curriculum, the four main strands of *Hadith*, *Fiqh*, *Aqidah* and *Sirah* are infused into the curriculum. These four subjects represent fundamental knowledge that every Muslim is expected to learn. During Key Stage 3 (KS3) (Years 7, 8 and 9), the pupils will follow an extensive programme of study on Islamic beliefs and practices so that they can develop confident Muslim attitudes, personalities and understandings.

³ Acronym of the group's full Arabic name, al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham, translated as "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (or the Levant).

⁴ From the album 'I look I see', which was released in 2005.

⁵ Edexcel is a multinational education and examination body owned by Pearson. Pearson Edexcel, the only privately owned examination board in the UK.

⁶ AQA compiles specifications and holds examinations in various subjects at GCSE. AQA is a registered charity and independent of the government

⁷ is an examination board that sets examinations and awards qualifications (including GCSEs and A-levels)

There are marked differences between the forms that Islamic education takes at state schools and at NHCS, as the teaching aims are not the same. In state schools, Islam is taught as an individual subject, but at NHCS it is taught as a responsibility to Allah rather than a responsibility to the school. Thus, it aims to develop the understanding of Islam and the application of Islamic principles to everyday life. The deputy headteacher and Islamic Studies teacher, Aisha, stressed this point during an interview:

In state school, Islam is taught as a topic about one religion rather than a practised way of life. We teach Islam as a practical way of life. In mainstream schools, Islam is taught as a topic, with a constraint of time to teach it. We live in a country that has religious freedom, so we have the freedom to practice our religion and we have the right to set up Islamic schools like this one.

In fact, the teaching of Islam in state schools is poor because of lack of good reference resources and that although the state provision of teaching Islam is improving, it is still purely exam-oriented. A teacher said that:

Some of the books I have seen are very good now, [but] some of them [that I saw] when I was at school were not very good, because they didn't have correct information. Nowadays, the books are getting better, but again I think they just taught the topic that will come out in the exam and not about the rest of it. It is a very tiny percentage, very little (Sakina, 31 years old).

The exam board specifies certain books and recommends others, as well as providing teacher guides for these books. These are key resources for KS 4. For KS 3, there are several resources, one of the most useful being 'What Islam is All About'. This book is published by Noorart Inc., based in America, and written by an American Muslim – Yahiya Emerick⁸. It is designed for young adult readers, and has a good introduction to Islam, discussing a lot of the key topics, with detailed sections on belief, the spiritual mentality of Muslims, Islam's history, functions, manners and so on. One teacher observed:

I use it to plan my lesson. This book does not follow the national curriculum but is focused only on Islam. Indeed, this is a very good textbook to explain the key concepts that girls need to learn about (Aisha, Islamic studies teacher, 26 years old).

In addition to fundamental knowledge about Islam, the students are also taught Arabic. As the *Quran* is written in Arabic and Islam is revealed by Allah through the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Arabic, the language is equally important to the texts in understanding Islam. As the Arabic studies teacher argued:

When somebody asks you: what is Islam? Islam is al-Quran and al-Hadith. Quran is the words of Allah and hadith is the words of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which came by revelation by Allah through the angel to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). So, both came originally in Arabic. So, if we are talking about keeping the identity of the girls or Muslims – keeping them all the time as Muslims – we must teach them what Allah SWT said (Nuha, Arabic and Quranic teacher, 35 years old).

The lessons in Islamic studies, Arabic studies and *Quranic* Studies impact on the pupils' characters and aim to make them better people, better Muslim girls and thus to become better Muslim women. Such teaching aims to have an impact on them as people, rather than to just help them to achieve academic success. However, in NHCS, students hope to be successful worldly and, in the hereafter, as both the school and parents wish them to.

7. Discussion

The RE subjects at both schools indicated that majority of the students agreed that the teaching and learning of the RE subjects at these schools have shaped their Muslim women identity. However, the number at NHCS is slightly higher than the MM. This is due to the UK's context, policy, belief, and culture. The UK is a non-Muslim country, thus, RE subjects have played an important role in the formation of Muslim women identity in the sense that they offer the learning of the substance of Islamic knowledge in a formal, structured and systematic way. Although the RE subjects are basically theoretical, nonetheless, they are aimed at practice. [Tajul Ariffin Nordin \(1997\)](#) and [Khurshid Ahmad \(1979\)](#) describe the Islamic Education as spiritual and physical guidance based on the laws of Islam leading to the formation of the Muslim women identity according to Islamic criteria. Apart from the available Islamic curriculum, the teachers at MM and NHCS try to infuse the *Quran* and *hadith* into topics in the existing curriculum, as well as Muslims' historical contributions to science, geography, mathematics, and history, thus producing integrated Islamic and secular knowledge.

Throughout the interviews, focus groups and participant observation, this research indicated that majority of the students agreed that teaching and learning the RE subjects at these schools has given rise to two significant contributions in the formation of their identity. First, they make them realized the status, right and role of women in Islam and, second, they have improved their attitude and identity as Muslims.

7.1. Realize the Status, Rights and Roles of Women in Islam

Most of the students agreed that the RE subjects at these schools have made them realized the status, rights, roles of women in Islam which lead them to be a good *Muslimah*.

The number of NHCS is higher than the MM because Muslim Pakistani women in Leeds in the past struggled to undo men's monopoly on religious understanding, to get back the rights that they are entitled to under Islam, and to break out of the cultural boundaries that have ensnared them. In the past, Muslim women were discriminated against

⁸ 'He is a former President of the Islamic Foundation of North America, vice-principal at an Islamic school, and a Muslim author. He has written many articles that have been published in local as well as national magazines, both in North America and abroad'. See http://www.noorart.com/figures/yahiya_emerick (Retrieved on 24 April, 2014)

and prevented from having an education. Majority of the traditionalists (from South Asia) viewed female education as challenging the notion of *izzat* and *sharam*⁹ (Ansari, 2004; Haw, 1998; Jawad and Benn, 2003; Lewis, 1994/2004); (Breen, 2018; Din, 2017; Haw, 2011). Due to the generational change, civilization and modernization, Muslim parents are now aware of the importance of education for their daughters. Thus, Shah (2009) perceives single-sex schooling to exist because of 'the nexus of socio-cultural and political maneuvers bound up with colonialism and reinforced by the active and effective traditions within subcultures as well as the religious Islamic discourses' (Haw, 1998).

Moreover, the provision of facilities for Muslim women in Britain to pray and pursue an Islamic education has a notoriously bad history, with many mosques still having restrictions against women using them at all. Maqsood (2005) suggests that the lack of services for women in some mosques today is because they are seen as 'prayer clubs for men' that do not provide rooms for women to worship and learn Islam. Jawad strongly insists that 'the worst deprivation of all was the denial of their [women's] right to receive education' (Benn, 1998).

According to a case study by the Faith Matters organisation in 2010, only 100 out of 486 mosques across the United Kingdom meet 4 or 5 of the criteria required to qualify as excellent mosques. Faith Matters' looked at five key areas that women wanted to see within mosques – separate prayer spaces for women; services and activities geared towards women; an *Imam* accessible to women; the inclusion of women in decision-making; and at least one woman holding an office on the mosque committees (Faith, 2010). According to Brown (2002), the effort to create a 'women-friendly' environment inside the mosque has been actively promoted by the British government since 2005 as a part of its 'Preventing Violent Extremism' (PVE) strategy, but still few mosques have adequate space for women from the community to meet together, even for prayer or Islamic study.

Thus, through this RE subjects, students learn that the positions of women were highly valued and respected in early Islamic societies. Women were encouraged to earn knowledge and to be involved in the social and political sphere. Mawdudi (1979) emphasizes that 'so far as the acquisition of knowledge and cultural training is concerned, Islam does not allow any distinction between man and woman'.

7.2. Improve the Attitude and Identity

Both schools agreed that the RE subjects improved their attitude and identity. Importantly, the RE subjects are in tandem with the development of the Islamic identity of the students as well as in-line with the primary purpose of Islamic education – to produce a 'good [wo]man' and the 'true Islamic [wo]man' – 'the *insan kamil*' (true Islamic person). Therefore, they can contribute to the *ummah* in the future.

Again, the number of the NHCS respondents who agreed to the statement is higher than the MM because of the NHCS's context as earlier explained. The RE subjects do not teach about identity formation *per se*, but how to maintain the Islamic culture and values especially for the NHCS's students who live in a non-Muslim country. According to Haw (1998); Din (2017), parents are most concerned about the 'inadequate Islamic education in the state system, the issue of how a minority maintains the integrity of its cultural identity' was paramount. These are major factors for Muslim parents in Leeds wanting an Islamic school for their children, especially regarding the issue of Islamic education, value and culture.

These NHCS students need to negotiate between religion and the host society so that they can be a good Muslim and a good citizen. The respondents were aware that Islam incorporates an ethical value-system, and that they can get into trouble if an Islamic education is not transmitted to them properly. From the data gathered, many of the students agreed that the RE subjects should be coherent between the values promoted in the *Quran* and those taught at school whilst providing stronger Islamic influences to them so that they can live successfully within the community in which they find themselves. By doing this, they have a framework based on religious traditions and find common values to which all can adhere.

Muslim girls generally want moderate Islamic education and they believe this will defend them against the immorality of society whilst also protecting them from the threat of extremism. One of the '7/7' bombers was from Beeston in south Leeds. This bad reputation has become a major concern because it may influence children's behaviour. When asked about their solutions to this problem, the majority of these respondents said that Islamic education provides the best way to deal with this social problem, as well as with outside influences such as westernisation and secularisation.

The central role of Muslims in imparting appropriate Islamic knowledge and practices to their children has also frequently been at the centre of government policy and political debate (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). In 2006, John Reid (a former British Home Secretary) called upon Muslim parents to keep an eye on their children in order to protect them from being influenced by religious extremists and terrorist activity (Gilliat-Ray, 2010); (Breen, 2018). This sort of appeal has been opposed by many Muslim parents, who view it as displaying a form of prejudice and Islamophobia. However, it could be interpreted differently – as a call for parents to take precautions to protect their children from the threat within the Islamic religion, as well as from bad influences such as uncommon and/or un-Islamic values, norms and cultures.

Importantly, students in NHCS need to know how to negotiate between tradition and their societal context, understand how to translate Islam and the *Quran* within their everyday lives in Britain without there being any contradictions. Similarly, Meijer (2009) argues that the Islamic curriculum in Islamic schools should pay more attention to the practicality of the *Quran* and Islam in situational context – i.e. learning to distinguish between what is consistent with Islamic values and what is not. However, during an interview with Muslim educationalist, Mr.

⁹ As I explained in Chapter One.

Akram Khan Cheema¹⁰ suggested that the curriculum for all Muslim children should be embedded within seven aspects of culture: spiritual, academic, moral, cultural, social, emotional and physical. The curriculum at MM and NHCS can be viewed as representing a combination of Meijer (2009) and Khan Cheema's approaches and aims to produce young Muslims with Islamic identity.

Thus, MM and NHCS have emerged in response to the perception that religious knowledge is necessary for both organizing daily life and for preparing for life in the hereafter. Majority of the students believe that they live in this world temporarily, as a test by Allah, and aim for an eternal life in the hereafter. It is commonly believed that robust knowledge and faith is required in order to face all of Allah's tests. Strong knowledge and faith are therefore required and MM and NHCS are seen as one of the appropriate channels for achieving this end.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

The RE subjects have played an important role in the formation of students' identity. Throughout the case studies, it is shown that the RE subjects are more influential in the NHCS than at MM. This is because of Leeds's context particularly and British government policy generally where there is the influence of policy, culture and belief of the British and Muslim society all at once. However, in any Muslim context; majority or minority, all Muslim educational institutions have the same general aims and objectives of education for Muslim girls, which are to help them become good Muslims, good citizens and good mothers for the future generations. In fact, the RE subjects have made both the MM and NHCS different, yet privilege and special as compares to other state schools in Kedah and Leeds.

Thus, this study gives an overall view about the RE subjects and the process of the inculcation of Islamic identity and how different it is comparatively in Kedah and Leeds. The study gives useful information that will help the teachers, the school's governors and policymakers to revise the Islamic curriculum offered in schools and guide the students to be a good Muslim and citizen. Hence, it is the Muslim responsibility to preserve Islamic curriculum in line with the findings of this work and make it caters to the needs of the young generations so that they will not suffer from immoral and un-Islamic influences in the future.

Most of the literature on Islamic education and Islamic school and Islamic identity agrees that Muslim institutions have the potential to provide a good impact on their students if they manage the school appropriately in terms of resources and curricula (Meijer, 2009); Osler and Hussain (1995). Building on this, what follows is the researchers' investigation of the perceptions of respondents at MM and NHCS regarding the importance of RE subjects and Islamic identity. The interviews and observation at MM and NHCS show the concerns that the respondents have with the Ministry of Education, Malaysia and British state education system to the present day. Particularly, the respondents are most concerned about the role and values of Islamic education in the state system, the issue of how to develop and sustain an Islamic identity, maintain the integrity of its cultural identity, and the role of Islamic schools in reinforcing the teaching of Islamic education and its values.

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¹⁰ An interview was conducted with Akram Khan Cheema at his house in Bingley, Bradford on 24th September 2014.

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