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Experiences of Anti-Blackness in Islamic Educational Spaces: Implications for Islamic Teacher Education

Shyla González-Doğan 

Educational Studies, Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85281, USA; shyla.dogan@asu.edu

Abstract: This paper is an initial examination of anti-Blackness within a specifically Muslim context, and it presents the experiences of some Black community members who attended one U.S. city's primary local mosque's weekend school program and who either attended or had children who attended the city's sole Islamic school. During this ethnographic project, 18 participants who identified as part of the Muslim community of the city were interviewed; semi-structured interviews and snowball sampling were used to obtain data. Research participants included parents of children in the Islamic school or weekend school program at the affiliated mosque, former students of the Islamic school or the mosque's weekend school program, and former or current leaders in the community. The findings demonstrate that anti-Blackness in Islamic community spaces often manifests through the targeting of Black children for perceived misbehavior in educational spaces and through practices of exclusion toward Black community members. The findings also indicate that there is a need for increased education and training related to anti-Blackness and a need for the implementation of an anti-racist pedagogy in Islamic educational settings.

Keywords: Islamic education; anti-Blackness; racism; religious education; teacher training; anti-racist pedagogy



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1. Introduction

The murder of George Floyd by former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, and the subsequent outrage that followed, revealed just some of the life-threatening and life-altering issues that impact the Black community in the U.S. as a result of anti-Blackness [1]. Research on anti-Blackness and its relationship to the White population in the U.S. is growing [2–7], but less attention has been paid to anti-Blackness within populations that are neither White nor Black. Muslim communities in the U.S., for instance, are not immune to anti-Blackness, though it is an anathema to the teachings of Islam. Black Muslims in the U.S. often face anti-Blackness in their local religious and educational spaces, where many individuals within the Muslim community in the U.S. are, indeed, neither White nor Black. The study highlighted in this paper sought to better understand the extent to which race is made to matter in Islamic educational spaces and how the perception of anti-Blackness can impact Black community members' relationship to the wider Muslim community.

To be clear, it is incorrect to refer to a Muslim community as if it is monolithic group. While being Muslim in the U.S. has historically been understood to mean being non-White [8], there are Muslims of every ethnic and racial make-up throughout the U.S. and globally. The Muslim population of the U.S., like the transnational Muslim population, is highly diverse; that being said, many Muslims are non-White, and Islam in the U.S. has its roots in the Black community [9–11].

This paper is an examination of anti-Blackness within a specifically Muslim context, and it presents the experiences of some Black community members who attended one U.S. city's primary local mosque and who either attended or had children who attended the city's sole Islamic school. The findings of this research demonstrate that the targeting of

Black children for misbehavior and exclusionary practices are two of the ways in which anti-Blackness manifests in these spaces. It is necessary for Muslim communities to contend with anti-Blackness, because experiences like those discussed in this paper are alienating families while also failing the socio-religious expectations of the concept of the ummah, a violation that in turn undermines Islamic teachings overall. While there are various methods that can be utilized to confront and tackle the issue of anti-Black racism in Islamic schools, teacher training and the implementation of an anti-racist pedagogy are essential first steps. This paper will examine how these can be utilized to ensure that Islamic educational spaces challenge anti-Blackness in the educational environment.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. *Mis-Education, Re-Education, and Education in the Era of Post-Colonial Religion [12]: Sister Clara Muhammad Schools and Islamic Schools after 1960*

The Nation of Islam (NOI), under the leadership of Noble Drew Ali and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, provided a new interpretation of Islam that saw Islam as a “basis for an alternative modality of American Blackness” [13]. The NOI took the notion of this alternative modality and established the first recorded Islamic school in the U.S. in the 1930s [14]. It was born from the vision of the wife of Elijah Muhammad, Clara Muhammad, when she began home-schooling her children [15]. The homeschool initiative led to the establishment of the University of Islam Schools (UofI), later renamed the Clara Muhammad Schools [15,16].

Central to the mission of the schools was re-education, which emphasized pride in being Black, learning professional skills, and pursuing intellectual endeavors [16]. The schools ultimately epitomized the concept of self-empowerment that was foundational to the NOI and elevated Black bodies and lives [15]. The school curriculum was altered after the death of Elijah and Clara Muhammad and was brought closer to mainstream Islam [15].

With the rise in immigration of Muslims from other parts of the world to the U.S., particularly after the 1960s, Islamic education took a turn away from issues of civil rights and toward the needs of the ummah and the desire for a revitalization of Islam, a period that Sherman Jackson refers to as the era of “post-colonial religion”, a reference to the fact that many of these immigrants came from countries that were formerly colonized or former colonies [12,15]. Efforts were made by the immigrant Muslim communities to align Islamic schools with Western education models to facilitate integration while also ensuring that young people would have a Muslim identity [15]. There has been an ultimate divergence among these two large groups of Muslims in the U.S., and while much of this may be based on opinions around integration and where, geographically, sympathies should lie, at least some of it is perceived to be based on race.

2.2. *Anti-Blackness and Aspirational Whiteness*

The benefits of Whiteness and the drawbacks of an association with Blackness have not escaped members of the U.S. Muslim community, particularly those who may feel that their relationship to the U.S. is tenuous. As Karim writes, “the fear of not being accepted, of not making it in America, always looms and lingers. Why associate with the native underclass when one’s immigrant status already threatens one’s assimilation?” [17]. In other words, if Blackness prevents one from attaining the “American dream”, the best option is to associate oneself as closely as possible with Whiteness or, in other words, uphold anti-Blackness.

Anti-Blackness posits that the Black body is outside of humanity because of a perpetual slave status being imposed upon Black individuals [18]. Patterson points out that the slavery of Black individuals in the Americas was a form of death and the life of a slave was only in existence as service to the slave master [19]. As Grimes writes, “while other forms of asymmetrical power relations may bear a resemblance to certain aspects of the master-slave relationship, the slave suffers a reality beyond analogy” [20]. Anti-Blackness is incomparable to other forms of racism, because the nature of the slavery of Black individuals in the Americas is also incomparable. Grimes further comments that “because slave status

had been associated with a body type, the association between slavery and blackness could live on even after slavery itself had been abolished" [20]. The mistreatment of Black individuals in the U.S. is directly related to their being Black and to associations with slavery and, therefore, social death. Anti-Blackness is different from other forms of racism, because Black people are deemed to be different from other human beings, including other non-White groups.

There is a long history in the U.S. of denying rights and citizenship based on racial status [21]. Aspirational Whiteness has led many non-Black Muslims in U.S. Muslim communities to be cautious of being associated with Blackness, as the ramifications of such associations are well understood through historical and modern examples [13,17,22]. In many Muslim communities throughout the U.S., there is a tendency to avoid calling racism what it is, a reluctance to embrace Black members of the community, and a resistance to Black leadership [23,24]. Abdurraqib points out that while immigrant Muslims toe the line between depicting Black American struggles as "like their struggles—to assimilate, to belong", they also put "distance" between themselves and Black American Muslims as a means "to make a case for their assimilation and belonging in mainstream society" [25,26]. Abdurraqib's analysis brings attention to the fact that "Whiteness" in the U.S. provides particular privileges that non-White people simply do not have [27]. People of color and those from minoritized communities are not oblivious to the role that White privilege plays in U.S. society, even if White members of society have been socialized to remain oblivious to that fact. However, anti-racist pedagogy can be used in Islamic schools as a promising alternative to what has been the status quo in many places. Given that it targets learners, there is an opportunity for significant growth.

2.3. Anti-Racist Pedagogy

The relationship between race, ill treatment in society, and a lack of opportunities is grounded in anti-Blackness and is part of the environment of institutions in the U.S., including those that are designed for educational purposes [3]. Anti-racist pedagogy aims to combat racism by connecting the classroom to the wider systems in society in order to bring about social change [28]. Unlike other methods for incorporating race into the classroom, such as multiculturalism [29] or diversity approaches, anti-racist pedagogy is based on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and emphasizes "the analysis of structural racism, power relations, and social justice" [28]. Gloria Ladson-Billings wrote that "racism is a permanent fixture of American life" [30], and the acknowledgement of this fact on the part of the educator is the first step toward an anti-racist pedagogy being implemented in a classroom [3,31]. This is the precursor to examining what is taught in classrooms and, just as importantly, *how* content is taught [28]. Anti-racist pedagogy includes the intentional teaching of critical thinking skills around race, power, and privilege [28]. Kishimoto (2018) highlights that an anti-racist pedagogy is incorporated into the classroom by challenging Eurocentrism through the purposeful centering of the voices and experiences of people of color (POC), deconstructing myths such as "the American Dream", and challenging the idea of ultimate truth, thus encouraging students to make connections to course content and providing students with greater autonomy. One goal of this method is that educators and learners develop a sense of community when critical thinking and autonomy of learners is fostered. Further, anti-racist pedagogy seeks to assist students in recognizing that deficit models of POC are incorrect and that POC have both agency and potential. [28].

This article elucidates upon the complexities of anti-Blackness that manifest in non-White spaces and how non-White environments, in this case Islamic ones, are not immune to anti-Blackness. Furthermore, this work examines the ways in which teacher training and anti-racist pedagogy in Islamic schools can be used to, at a minimum, reduce anti-Black practices.

3. Methodology

3.1. Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in a location chosen by each participant. Interviews were audio-recorded verbatim, and participants signed waivers agreeing to the interview prior to it taking place. IRB was approved, and all procedures followed IRB expectations. Questions focused on school experiences, relationships between stakeholders within the community, and how issues were managed by the school or mosque representatives. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, but some went as long as two hours. All data were stored on a secure password-protected computer.

There were inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants. Interviews were held with members of the community who were 18 years or older. Participants had to be former students, a parent of a student who had attended the school and/or weekend school program, or a current or former leader in the community in some capacity. There was some overlap between many of these identities. It was not out of the ordinary that a participant was a current or former parent of a child that attended the full-time school or weekend school program and also had some form of leadership role in the community. It should be noted that most families enrolled their children in both educational programs simultaneously in order to maximize the knowledge that their children would gain about Islam. Much of the participant selection was performed through snowball sampling, a sampling method that gains new research participants through contacts provided by current research participants [32]; however, I also personally knew many of the participants.

This research was conducted using grounded theory (GT). GT allows for findings to be grounded in the data and for themes to emerge, which then leads to the formation of a theory about a phenomenon [33] (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Charmaz [34] (2005) states that “as we learn how our research participants make sense of their experiences, we begin to make analytic sense of their meanings and actions”. Patterns of behavior are sought out and then examined (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method has been selected because, ideally, fewer assumptions are made about the research findings, and instead, the findings are expected to emerge from the research data. As Corley [35] (2015) posits, GT “is engaging a phenomenon from the perspective of those living it”. Furthermore, theory is produced because of the data that are collected and, therefore, it is literally grounded in the data. The view of the situation or conditions based on the researchers’ opinions or theories is not nearly as insightful, important, or aware as the perspectives and insights offered by the individuals in the situation or impacted by the conditions. GT was selected for this study specifically for this reason. In this study, while I could have predicted that there are anti-Black sentiments in some Islamic educational settings, I could not have predicted the ways in which those sentiments impacted the interviewees, their relationship to their local Muslim community, and in some cases their relationship to Islam.

3.2. Data Analysis

Interviews were coded using the GT method. There were three layers of coding: open, axial, and selective coding. Williams and Moser (2019) [36] point out how these forms of coding are related: “the open, axial, and selective coding strategy enables a cyclical and evolving data loop in which the researcher interacts, is constantly comparing data and applying data reduction, and consolidation techniques. This process entails detailed analysis and comparison of data in order to ensure accuracy and develop a view of what the data means [36]. Again, GT was partially chosen as a means of avoiding preconceived notions, but the way in which data were analyzed also allowed for accuracy checks throughout the data analysis portion of the project. Codes such as “exclusion”, “racial bias”, and “outsider” emerged from the data, among many others. A theory of anti-Blackness in majority non-White Muslim communities and its relationship to community belonging, organizational inclusion, and the diminished association with abandonment of religion was developed. All participants received a copy of their interview transcription

to allow them to make changes if they felt it was necessary. No participant requested a follow-up interview or requested that changes be made to the initial data collected.

3.3. Setting

The city in which the research sites are located is a smaller-sized U.S. city with a high population of refugees and immigrants that hail from a wide array of countries. The city has two popular mosques; this research focuses on community members who attended the more centrally located institution. The mosque runs a weekend school program and was affiliated with the local Islamic school. This was the sole Islamic school in the city.

The school closed during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures and never reopened. While the school was significantly impacted by the global pandemic, it had also struggled financially for several years. Beyond just the financial challenges, which many Islamic schools face [37], there were allegations of racism and discrimination that impacted the reputation and enrollment numbers of the school. While the school has always had a diverse student body, most of the students tended to identify as Arab, primarily from families that were originally from the Levant region, or were from families of Somali heritage who were originally from Somalia.

3.4. Participants

Some participants in this study were former parents and students of the city's only K-5 Islamic school and the weekend school program operated by one of the two local mosques in the city. All participants had attended the city's Islamic institutions, and some were or had been in positions of leadership. All research participants self-identified as "Black". Many of the participants were originally from the continent of Africa, specifically from five countries.

Table 1 below provides more detailed information about the participants. All categories are applicable at the time of the interview, and all names are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants. One group of participants were all from the same family. The family is originally from Somalia, but some family members have been in the U.S. for decades.

Table 1. Primary research participants.

Name	Family Origin	Time in U.S.	Approximate Age Range
Muhammad	Sudan	10 years and has lived in various other parts of the Middle East	Mid-late 30s
Yusuf	Burundi	12–15 years	Late 30s
Mansour	Senegal	Almost his entire life. His family came when he was a toddler.	Late 20s to early 30s
Hamza	Somalia	13 years	Late 20s to early 30s
Asif (Member of family)	Somalia	35 years in the city but has lived in other parts of the U.S. and world	Late 40s
Naima (Member of family)	Somalia	20 years in the city but has lived in other parts of the U.S. and world	Early 50s
Mustafa (Member of family)	Somalia	26 years in the city but has lived in other parts of the U.S. and world	Early 50s
Yahye (Member of family)	Somalia/U.S.	Almost entire life	20s
Yacquub (Member of family)	Somalia/U.S.	Almost entire life	20s
Khadija (Member of family)	Somalia	20 years in the city but has lived in other parts of the U.S. and world	Elderly
Hafsa (Member of family)	Somalia/U.S.	Lived in the city off and on for 7 years and lived in various other countries	Early 20s

Table 1. Cont.

Name	Family Origin	Time in U.S.	Approximate Age Range
Hammad	Ghana	11 years	Late 30s to early 40s
Kaamil	Sudan	Lived in the city for two years, also lived in another state and the Caribbean	Early 30s
Muhsin	Sudan	5 years	Mid to late 30s
Mahmoud	Sudan	13 years	Mid 30s
Juan	U.S.	Entire life	50s
Hashem	Sudan	4 years and has also lived in the Middle East and Europe	Early 40s
Tahir	Senegal	8 years	Early 30s

4. Results

Research participants provided insights into why Islamic educational institutions or programs were chosen for their families. They also provided useful information regarding how their experiences diverged from their expectations of the programs that they or their children were involved in. This research yielded two primary findings: (1) Black students tend to be singled out for behavioral issues, and (2) there is a perception that Black people are unwanted in community spaces. To best understand what is taken away when the environment in Islamic spaces feels exclusionary, one must first understand what role these spaces play in the life of Muslim attendees.

Based on the available research about Islamic schools in the U.S., most parents put their children in Islamic schools to ensure that their children gain a strong Muslim identity. Interview participants confirmed this. One research participant and former student of the local full-time Islamic school, Aisha, explained this through her own understanding about why her parents put her in an Islamic school. Aisha was eighteen at the time of this research and is of Somali heritage. Her family left a refugee camp in Kenya for the U.S. and has lived in the city included in this study for a number of years. When asked why her parents chose an Islamic school setting for her education, she said, “I think it was for cultural reasons. It’s to help us learn our religion because we are not in an Islamic country”. For her family, the school was viewed as a viable alternative to what being in a majority “Islamic country” would offer to the individual.

This was a common theme among participants. One participant, Ali, had his children in the local full-time Islamic school, and when asked why he made that choice, he said that he wanted his children “to learn the culture”.

Asif is part of the Ali family and works at a local university. He has lived in the city for roughly 15 years and in the U.S. for over 30. He has lived in several other states, primarily in the northeast. He made an interesting statement about the role that the mosque itself plays in daily life for many Muslims: “The mosque is the center of the community, help, normally prayer recitation, and a place to pray. But also, a place to find information, a place to find help if you need help, especially burial grounds and things like that”.

However, participants in these institutions also explained that their experiences were not always indicative of what they expected to find in Islamic settings. For many, aside from simply providing access to a religious community, Islamic schools were expected to also prevent the assumed damage that can be caused in the public school system. The perceived threats from traditional public school settings include racism, and anti-Blackness in particular. However, the realities for the participants in this research appeared to differ from the stated intentions.

4.1. Singling Students Out

One significant finding of this research is that Black children are frequently singled out in classes—often for misbehavior. A similar situation occurs in non-Islamic schools. Black

boys are often targeted for discipline, as schools fail to support their development [38]. However, Islamic schools are seen by many Muslims as a haven and therefore, such experiences are unexpected in the Islamic schooling environment.

While Aisha attended the local Islamic school, she had long since aged out, but she did have siblings that were still attending the school. Aisha made claims about discrimination in the classrooms.

“In the school setting, kids are being treated differently. I don’t know. My brothers and sisters, they, complain about being treated differently than the other children. . .they would do something, and the other kids would also do something, but the teacher would mainly pick on them. Like they get in trouble from it.”

Aisha pointed out that the teacher was non-Black and of Arab origin. Aisha’s comments are supported by claims made by other participants as well, including parents.

Ahmed is also of Somali heritage, and he came to the U.S. as a refugee. At one time, he had all his children in the local Islamic school. However, when asked about his experiences with the school, he did not have many positive responses. “Teachers were calling me all the time—your kids did this; your kids did that”. This led him to believe that his children were being singled out. He removed his children from the Islamic school and enrolled them in the public school system. He described his family’s experiences with the local public school as “much better”. Some of the racialized experiences of parents were even far more blatant than those of Aisha or Ahmed.

Naima had a markedly negative experience related to her son, and it greatly affected her relationship with the Muslim community in the city. Naima has lived in the city for over 25 years. She has been part of the community off and on during that time. She currently attends primarily during holiday events, though she describes her relationship to the Muslim community as “deeper” than it appears. She explained the experience that led to her distancing herself from the community, although she would be quick to add that she had familial obligations that also resulted in her being less involved than she would have preferred. When her oldest son was six years old, he attended the local Islamic school. While in attendance, he was called the n-word, and she removed him from the school after the incident. In describing her reaction to the event, she said:

I think what was hurtful to me was when he was finally called the n-word, it was in that space. . .Yeah, yeah and it was a shock. I look back now that I am fifty-four and I should’ve handled it better. My memory is poor now, but something happened at the school where the hours I think became such that we couldn’t go there cause we needed, we were both either working or in school and we needed the hours to be what they had been and the hours were shortened somehow at the school and so we pulled him out regretfully. But I think what [we] might have taken away was ‘wow, that was a really not so nice space for him.’ And I was living in an apartment complex and a Pakistani lady asked why we weren’t at the school anymore and I told her, and she was a little older than me and she chided me and she said, “the school doesn’t belong to that family or that child who said that. What’s wrong with you? You know it’s bigger than that. You don’t deprive your child of religious or the Muslim experience or the masjid experience just because of that one incident”. And I understood at the time that she was correct.

Although she mentions scheduling as a partial issue, the incident certainly contributed to her desire to remove her son. Naima essentially felt that she had two equally problematic options: (1) accept that her son would face racial slurs at school but allow him to continue in order to have him in an Islamic environment or (2) pull him out of the school in order to protect him and completely forgo the Islamic environment. She chose the latter and expressed personal guilt for having made that decision, though she felt that the alternative was not acceptable either. Thus, even years later, the anti-Blackness experienced in an Islamic school, a space that was expected to be welcoming, caused distress. This distress was not simply from the memory of the incident of the slur but also experienced as a

deep personal conflict around the appropriate behavior and commitments to intersectional identities—in this case Black and Muslim. Naima’s regret expresses the profound difficulty of her choice and the emotional hardship surrounding the decisions of how best to protect and raise her child.

When I asked Naima why she never brought it to the attention of the administration, she essentially said that there was no point to do so and highlighted the fact that she is aware of the existence of racist attitudes toward Black people. Essentially, she felt that it was useless to speak to the administration, and so, since she had no faith in their ability or desire to handle the situation, she removed her son.

So, I’m a Somali female raised in many different countries and Arab attitudes to African people or Black people, when they’re bad—you know that fact, that racism exists, was not news to me. We’d lived in Egypt. We’d lived in Yemen. Um, um, (pauses) I love the Arabic language, I love Arabic culture. I don’t blame the people. I’m not saying (pauses). . .but the fact that there are racialized ideologies out there and that you could be impacted by that was nothing new to me. And I just think, I’ll be honest with you, I think you are (pauses). . .what hurts is that when you don’t expect it in the places and spaces. . .I don’t—you know if it happened on the streets of [the city of research]—alright. So, as much as I’m acting all sophisticated, ‘ah, these things happen’, clearly, we ran for the hills and never looked back.

From this statement, Naima highlights two distinct issues that she recognizes: (1) there is racism that is pervasive toward those of darker complexion in “Arab” countries, and (2) Islamic educational spaces in the U.S. are seen as a place of refuge from the racialized ideologies outside of them—at least in the U.S. Naima’s disappointment came with the realization that her second belief simply did not hold true. She did not expect it in that space and that was more hurtful than if the experience had happened anywhere else in her city of residence.

Naima added that such occurrences are particularly terrible because of the impression that Muslim families try to give their children about both Islam and the Muslim community. “You can just imagine whatever a Muslim family is saying to their children about whatever it is to be Muslim and then the child goes there and says, ‘wow!’ (laughs and rolls eyes)”.

Naima’s realization that U.S. Islamic educational spaces are not the safe havens so many Muslims assume them to be, at least for some, is a realization that many Black Muslims have been grappling with. Yet, many non-Black Muslims are still unaware of this fact because they have not experienced those issues directly.

4.2. *Unwanted*

The security that Muslim educational spaces provide for Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries cannot be overstated, and it is especially impactful for those whose bodies and identities are minoritized in more than one way. Naima addressed this when discussing race in general as it pertains to the Muslim community overall and the need to talk about these topics in an open forum. She also addressed the deeper reasoning behind why she never asked anyone to discuss her son having been called the n-word at school.

N: We’re in a country that’s struggling with race. Why would we assume that, that we are immune as a Muslim community? Right? And for our children’s sake if nothing else I think we’ve got to just develop language and be okay with that and not assume perfection and not front. You know what I mean? I, I just think it’s crazy to be saying that there are no problems. What we should be saying is ‘but we work on them’.

R: Right.

N: And I think that, to do, to have that conversation in the masjid, it’s to help our children further figure out how to navigate this culture. As having people, when you add, if you were to add an immigrant identity to a Muslim identity,

right? And in addition to that you're Black—those are three things that they are navigating. So, I think the masjid could be a very cool place to help students think this through, but I think ignoring it is the most toxic thing we can do.

R: Do you think it has been slightly ignored?

N: Oh yeah! People don't want to deal with it at all. I never even bothered bringing it up [to institutional leaders]. I just disappeared.

R: Yeah, that's right, your own experience.

N: Yeah, yeah, yeah that's to the degree that I didn't expect—I didn't even give them an option to fix things. I just assumed, 'Oh, like that is it? Oh well'.

The fact that Naima felt that it was useless to try and find some resolution is extremely troubling, and it facilitated pushing her and her family away from the community in many respects.

Hamza is originally from Somalia and is a parent of a child who attended the local Islamic school. However, he can be described as a leader in the greater Muslim community, having served on the board of one of the mosques and been a teacher in the weekend school. He also often acts as a liaison between the Islamic institutions in the city and the Somali community. Hamza pointed out some of the most salient issues that occurred at the local Islamic school.

The Islamic school struggled financially, and many families could not afford to pay tuition. However, they received an outside scholarship for attendance, and the school received the money to cover tuition charges. A large population of the students came from Somali families, and many of those families originally came to the U.S. as refugees. Hamza expressed that there were issues with some changes made at the school, and he felt that those changes were based on race.

At one time, the Somali community—all of them withdraw their kids. Because they [members of the school board] come [up] with a plan. . . they sat down and they said, 'you know what, [the school], all the kids going there are African kids. Arab kids—maybe [there is] only ten. So, they say, 'what's the benefit for us?' You see? Honestly, they sat down, and they talked about this. They said, 'you know what? These African kids that are going there, most of them are Somali kids. Their parents won't afford to pay if we raise the tuition. . .' So, everybody withdraw their kids. . . And [the school] was like seven kids. I'm like, 'now happily you guys can enjoy your school'.

From Hamza's perspective, the focus on increasing finances was deemed to be related to a perception that the Somali families received too much of a financial "break" that had no benefit to the Arab community members. He found this highly racialized and offensive. Some participants felt that this is indicative of a desire among Arabs to distance themselves from Black members of the community. This relates closely to feelings of exclusion that many participants expressed. Furthermore, an important point here is that the school was composed of primarily Somali families and their children. However, the leadership and power were concentrated in the hands of non-Black Muslims who were mostly of Arab origin. Even when Black people/kids are in the majority, the Muslim environment, at least in this setting, skews power towards non-Black community members, and anti-Blackness prevails.

5. Discussion

5.1. *Anti-Blackness and the Absence of Safety*

The main findings of this research are that (1) Black children are frequently singled out—often for what is deemed to be misbehavior—and (2) among Black community members, there is a perception of exclusion or a sense of being unwanted. While none of the spaces discussed in this study openly promise inclusion, the concept of the ummah, with its focus on community, ideally, between all Muslims regardless of other aspects of identity,

likely led those affiliated with them to believe that they would be inclusive. In theory, the concept of the ummah emphasizes a familial relationship between Muslims, and whether the ummah is conceived of as a united community that happens to be heterogeneous, or as a set of communities bound by Islam as the commonality that leads them to operate in relation to one another [39,40], the participants in this study had a perception that the treatment they experienced was less than acceptable or Islamic.

The results of this research demonstrate the ways that anti-Blackness can manifest in spaces that are meant to serve as a protection from the already hostile world outside of them. Naima discusses how the circumstances feel different when experiences of racism are had in a Muslim-majority country. This is because the incident can be related to the prejudices of the individual, but a sense of solidarity with other Muslims is not shattered. However, in a Muslim space in the U.S. context, the experience is isolating because it is a space for a minority group, and the perceived “safe space” is removed and leaves one to question if nowhere is safe.

Many Black Muslims are forced to choose between the Islamophobic and anti-Black society outside of the Muslim community or the anti-Black elements within the Muslim community. Consequently, this research shows that there are two reactions to these experiences: (1) abstain from attending or (2) accept that there is a diminished sense of security and abstain from seeking community. Both options point to a failure of leaders to provide the safe space that these spaces theoretically aspire to offer. The assumption that school leaders would ignore racial issues shows that there is a lack of trust toward leaders—at least among Black community members. When conflict occurred, nearly all participants chose not to bring it up, because they did not feel that their needs and perspectives would be taken into consideration.

5.2. Islamic Educational Spaces and Anti-Racist Pedagogy

In terms of educational spaces, it is important to better understand the need for recognition of internal biases toward Black students and their families. Todd, Thiem, and Neel (2016) found that the age of a Black male has no bearing on whether a non-Black person sees them as threatening or not [41]. Their research found that even Black boys as young as five years old can be deemed a threat. Small et al. (2012) [42] found that Black infants were similarly demonized, with Black infants more likely than White infants to have negative stereotypes, such as being “fussy”, associated with them. As Naima said, the U.S. is a country struggling with race, and one cannot assume that Muslims are not similarly struggling. Being Muslim does not preclude one from being impacted by the dominant racial hierarchy in the U.S., and the same is true for being non-White. An individual can be non-White and still anti-Black.

Anti-racist pedagogy is a means by which students can become critical thinkers and reflect on the status quo in society [28]. It focuses on “racial content, pedagogy, and organizing” [28]. More specifically, the teacher recognizes their own positionality, students work to understand their position and collaborate with others, and, finally, it encourages students to “organize” for an end to racism for the greater good. It is not simply an intellectual endeavor; it is a call to action [43].

Self-inquiry by educators is the first step to implementing anti-racist pedagogy, as teachers must engage in a process that Le Grange refers to as “unlearning and relearning” [44]. Educators must acknowledge the existence of racism and anti-Blackness and an interrogation into its presence within the educational institution [45]. Drawing from the work of Larkin et al. [46], Daniel (2022) suggests that teachers must come to a greater understanding of the “sociopolitical and racial realities of black learners” [45]. Furthermore, oppression needs to be understood from “the epistemic perspective of the marginalized” [45]. Therefore, it is imperative that, in addition to self and institutional examination, teachers familiarize themselves with research and theories that are generated by or in tandem with those from the Black community. This also offers an opportunity to collaborate with Black

community members about their experiences and exhibits a form of solidarity between different ethnic and racial communities.

Self-inquiry and institutional interrogation can give way to curricular changes. The curriculum must be evaluated as part of wider changes but with an eye toward solidarity [47]. Islamic schools vary in the way that they teach about Islam, but there are commonalities, namely, the teaching of religious knowledge and the teaching of the Quran [48]. Beyond that, according to Memon and Abdalla, Islamic schools tend to select one of the following curricular orientations: (1) an Appended Orientation that is in line with the state curriculum but with Islam as an added element, (2) an Integrated Curriculum Orientation that infuses Islam throughout the curriculum, (3) a Ground Orientation or a focus on an Islamic worldview, (4) a Character Orientation or a focus on building Islamic character, or (5) a Civic Engagement Orientation or a focus on civic engagement as a means to actively behave as a Muslim [48]. Each of these has the possibility for an anti-racist curriculum and pedagogical approach through the infusion of anti-racism [49].

An Appended Orientation can use the curriculum of the state and infuse it with anti-racism, and the same can be said for an Integrated Curriculum, which already infuses Islam throughout the curriculum and can also add an emphasis on anti-racism. A Grounded Orientation can include anti-racism as part of the worldview of Islam, as the faith teaches against racial superiority [50]. Character and Civic Engagement Orientations generally have a strong emphasis on engaging with one's faith through active behaviors and deeds. Anti-racism could probably most easily be utilized in these two orientations, as an anti-racist pedagogy emphasizes political activism and social change, and these orientations tend to emphasize action.

Aside from a recognition of biases and examination of curriculum and school practices, it is important to consider the role of teacher training in the implementation of anti-racist pedagogy. Few early career teachers feel comfortable discussing social justice topics in their classrooms out of fear related to a lack of knowledge around the topic [51]. To combat this, teachers should view themselves as co-learners and not experts [51]. However, this may also speak to the race-evasiveness that is predominant in teacher education programs [52]. This has now become a "norm" of teacher education programs [52].

However, anti-racist pedagogy is not essential only for White teachers but for all teachers. While White teachers may need to recognize their own privilege, teachers of color must also work through internalized racism [47]. Furthermore, White-passing non-White individuals might need to acknowledge their privilege and grapple with their own internalized racism. However, if anti-racist pedagogy is not being discussed in teacher training programs, or if teachers have been teaching for an extended period, options seem limited. However, it is the job of the institution to ensure that teachers are properly trained and that all stakeholders are aligned in their desire to implement an anti-racist pedagogy. There is Muslim-run organizations, such as the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative, that offer trainings and workshops on topics related to race and racism.

One should not assume that any of this is easy, particularly since Muslim teachers in Islamic schools have several unique challenges [15]. Their behavior and habits are often scrutinized by parents and community members because they are seen as role models for students [15]. However, while working to model positive Islamic behavior, it should also be emphasized that such behavior includes anti-racism and efforts to establish a more just society.

5.3. Future Research Directions

While this study provides data regarding the ways in which anti-Blackness can manifest in Islamic educational spaces, further research is needed. It is important to engage with community and school leaders and to gain their perspective about anti-Blackness. Furthermore, generational differences should be taken into consideration, as well as power dynamics between different generations. In general, second-generation Muslims with im-

migrant roots are more likely than their parents to question America's moral high ground on various issues [53].

Additionally, geography should be considered. It would be highly useful to have similar studies that compare Islamic schools in different areas of the U.S., particularly in large cities. Many Islamic institutions appear to cater to certain racial or ethnic groups, and language use in the institutions may be a factor [54]. However, it would be helpful to examine how and why communities initially divide based on what often appears to be racial and ethnic lines and how this impacts Islamic educational spaces.

Furthermore, there is also a need to examine the extent to which finances factor into some of the issues discussed in this paper. In what ways do class differences and stereotypes related to class encourage anti-Blackness? In this study, the inability of many Black community members to pay a higher tuition at the local Islamic school was discussed and deemed to be a detriment to the continuance of the school. It would be interesting to know whether the same conversations were had about non-Black families of similar socio-economic status as the Black families.

Lastly, many Muslims treat racial issues as non-existent because of the assumption that the concept of the ummah eradicated racial bias. This research shows the need for an acknowledgement of racial issues in Islamic educational spaces and a plan for how to deal with those issues as they arise. While the concept of the ummah is one that can bind Muslims together, anti-Blackness can also serve to tear communities apart or, at a minimum, cause some members to abandon their relationship with the community. The results of this research show that the Muslim community is not immune to the anti-Blackness outside of Muslim-led institutions and organizations, even if the community might be primarily composed of individuals who are non-White. Greater attention paid to these issues can lead to a useful examination of community interactions and assist in developing trust between community members and Islamic educational spaces.

6. Conclusions

Future researchers should delve more into these issues within a variety of educational spaces to better understand the prevalence of anti-Blackness and the ways that concerns are addressed—or not. Muslim leaders should work with their community members to bring attention to the issue of anti-Blackness and consider how it can be combatted as an entire community. Working with Black Muslim parents and community members would be an excellent place to start.

Naima made it clear that when her son was called the “N” word at the local Islamic school, she did not feel that it would do any good to go to the administration. The assumption that there was no point in speaking with the administration needs to be replaced with a certainty that all stakeholders would express outrage at such an occurrence. If Islamic educational spaces are going to be the haven many stakeholders wish them to be, they should be so for all students equally.

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