Chapter 8
Teachers' Perceptions of Islamic Religious Education in Arab High Schools in Israel

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ABSTRACT

In this multiple case study, the authors explore the purposes and significance of Islamic religious education as it is viewed and interpreted by Arab and Muslim teachers in Arab high schools in Israel. It interrogates how the Muslim teachers locate themselves and their pedagogy within a continuum of salafi (conservative) versus liberal conceptions of tarbiyya (the spiritual aspects of Islam) and ta`dib (the moral aspects of Islam) and why they do so. The results show that teachers support the salafi rather than the liberal conceptions of Islamic education. This means that they focus on the naql (the transmission of religious knowledge) rather than aql (rational thinking) in teaching the moral aspects of Islam. Also, teachers avoid the dealing with the intellectual diversity within Islam, the discussion of contemporary issues, and the tenets of other Abrahamic religions. They conclude that this may lead to religious illiteracy and argue that liberal Islamic education with critical and reflective reasoning is much appropriate for living in multicultural and multi-faith society.

INTRODUCTION

This study explores Muslim teachers' perceptions of Islamic education in Arab and secondary schools in Israel, of their own roles as Islamic educators, and of the aims of Islamic religious education in general. White (2009) emphasizes the need to do

more research in order to illuminate how teachers' religious identities impacts their views of schooling and their pedagogies. Another study has found that teachers' religious orientations influence their conceptions of citizenship education and their methods of teaching for democracy and national identity (author, 2013). In other words, teachers' religious orientations may influence their motivation to teach, their way of structuring their disciplines, their responsibilities towards their students, and their conceptualization of the purposes of education (White, 2010).

Very little is known about religious education in Arab schools in Israel. To date, most studies of Arab education have criticized civic and historical education from a critical multicultural perspective (Abu-Saad, 2006; Abu-Asba, 2001; Agbaria, 2010; Al-Haj, 1995; Makkawi, 2002; Pinson, 2007). Few studies have examined Islamic religious education in Arab schools (Agbaria, 2012; Mahajna & Kfir, 2013). According to Mahajna and Kfir (2013), religious education is a marginalized subject in the school's curriculum as students usually study one elective unit of Islamic studies (one hour per week starting from tenth until twelfth grade) compared to 3-5 units in other compulsory subjects. However, the situation has changed since 2014. In order to graduate, all Muslim students are now required to pass a matriculation (*Bagrut*) exam on Islamic religious education. For this purpose, a new textbook has been developed.

Agbaria (2012) finds that teaching Islam in Arab schools does not meet the needs of the Arab minority in Israel in terms of developing Muslim students' sense of collective community or their national (Palestinian) identity (Agbaria, 2012). This, Agbaria argues, serves the state's agenda in controlling and marginalizing Arab citizens through education for conformity, compliance, and discipline. Agbaria's work is important but limited to analyzing the official or explicit curriculum in Arab schools whereas the current study examines the taught or perceived curriculum (Goodlad, Klein, & Tye, 1979; Joseph, 2000). The taught curriculum, according to Joseph (2000) is "what individual teachers focus upon and choose to emphasize— often the choices represent teachers' knowledge, beliefs about how subjects should be taught, assumptions about students' needs, and interests in certain subjects" (p. 5). In addition, Agbaria's findings discuss the "what" of the curriculum and do not explore teachers' perceptions of how their practices serve their instructional goals. In other words, it does not focus on the role of teachers as possible social agents and intellectuals (Giroux, 1988) who may transform the curriculum based on their prior knowledge, their students' needs, and their personal ideologies. The current study aims to overcome the limitations of these studies by exploring the insider perspective on Islamic religious education as perceived and articulated by the teachers themselves. Before explaining the research procedures, we will explain in the next section the meanings of religious education from an Islamic perspective.

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