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Article Description: This article reports findings from a qualitative case study of an Islamic school in the United States that counters religious extremism through the promotion and development of an American Muslim identity in its students, an ideology that advances the idea that an individual can be wholly American and wholly Muslim without any incongruity.

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Abstract

Background/Context: Current estimates show 2,500 Islamic State (IS) jihadists are from the United States, Australia, and Western Europe. How and in what ways formal schooling influences the radicalization process and the development of extremist worldviews is yet to be fully understood. There is little research that explores how religious schooling educates against radical thought and behavior and this article reports findings from a qualitative case study of an Islamic school in the United States that counters religious extremism through the promotion and development of an American Muslim identity in its students, an ideology that advances the idea that an individual can be wholly American and wholly Muslim without any incongruity.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of the Study: The purpose of this research was to explore one American Islamic school's efforts to counter religious extremism through the promotion and development of an American Muslim identity in its students. Two research questions guided this inquiry: (1) How does one American Islamic school attempt to develop and promote anti-extremist beliefs and behaviors through their development of an American Muslim identity in its students? (2) How is this reflective of Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model?

Research Design: For this qualitative case study, data were gathered and analyzed using Lynn Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model, which contrasts formal education that teaches anti-extremism to education that may teach extremist worldviews.

Findings/Results: The findings suggested that this Islamic school's focus on American Muslim identity reflected the components and values put forth in Davies' framework that supported anti-extremist education and thereby thwarted extremist ideologies of single-truths, silencing, obedience, utopian excellence, political ignorance, and pure identities. Establishing a 'good fit'

for teachers, parents and students were essential and parents with extremist or fundamentalist ideologies tended to disenroll their children. This study also suggested that Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model may be a useful framework for exploring religious education.

Conclusions/Recommendations: The school's administrators believed in the need to re-envision the American Muslim community—moderate in outlook, resonant with American values, participative with community, and supportive and welcoming of diversity. In doing so, the school delivered an anti-extremist education that promoted social integration, democratic values, and acceptance of diversity. This moderate outlook is counter to prevailing stereotypes and thus it is imperative that research continues to explore the role formal schooling plays in educating for or against extremism.

Keywords: American Muslim Identity, Islamic education, Religious Extremism, Critical Idealism

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The terrorist group, Islamic State (IS), regularly posts brutal videos of horrendous acts against those they perceive as infidels in order to establish a hardline Sunni caliphate with an anti-Western interpretation of Islam. Yet, IS's brutal acts have not impeded Western fighters from joining the group. Current estimates show 2,500 IS jihadists are from the United States, Australia, and Western Europe. Yet, how and in what ways formal schooling influences the radicalization process and the development of extremist worldviews is yet to be fully understood. The purpose of this research was to explore one American Islamic school's efforts to counter religious extremism through the promotion and development of an American Muslim identity in its students. We began to ask questions about their educational approach using Lynn Davies' Critical Idealism XvX model, which delineates education into four quadrants: scaffolding, process, value system, and knowledge. This study is a unique contribution to extant scholarship on education that counters violent extremism and the ways in which the development and promotion of an American Muslim identity may thwart religious extremist worldviews.

ISLAMIC EDUCATION

Parents choose Islamic education for various reasons, some of which include, but are not limited to: the desire to protect children from activities viewed as un-Islamic; to provide rigorous academic preparation; to provide a safe environment; and deliver an education in line with *tawhid*, or the scriptural and prophetic sayings that confirm that all knowledge comes from *Allah*, or God. Islamic schools strive to meet these varied needs by integrating Islamic values throughout school curricula and adding additional classes in Arabic, *Qur'an*, and Islamic studies. Muslim parents expect Islamic schooling to provide for both academic and social development

within the value system of their faith. Yet, Islamic schools are not united in outlook, purpose, and goals. Consequently, critics of Islam often question how Muslim students are educated in post-9/11 America and Islamophobia continues to situate Islamic schooling in the periphery of American education.

AMERICAN MUSLIM IDENTITY

Reflective of the different types of Islamic education in the United States is the diversity found within the American Muslim population. This is due in large part by differences in faith traditions, national origins, cultural norms and mores, language, social class, race, political understandings, and notions of gender. Social complexities influence how and in what ways Muslims living in the United States negotiate their identities and although American Muslim identity appears to be hybrid, that being Muslim and American, it is complex and includes the interrelationships among individuals' multiple group identities as well as the external perceptions and labels attributed to them that influence how Muslims see themselves in the United States. Moderate Muslim Americans are identifying with their religion (Islam) rather than their ethnicity (Arab-American) or home country (Pakistani-American). This shift occurred as a response to the 9/11 attacks where moderate Muslims see Islam in no way counter to American values. Yet, in spite of these more moderate views, Islamic radicalization and extremism are growing.

THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research was to explore one American Islamic school's efforts to counter religious extremism through the promotion and development of an American Muslim identity in its students. This article is part of a larger study centered on issues related to Islamic school leadership, American Muslim identity, and Islamic school and religious pluralism. While collecting data, we noticed the influence of the Al-Noor School's mission to develop American

Muslim students that are engaged citizens of their local communities and the world. They referred to this as fostering an American Muslim identity, one whose sense of being is wholly American and wholly Muslim. We began to ask questions about their education approach using Lynn Davies' Critical Idealism XvX model that argues for education that teaches students to be critical consumers and to question metanarratives in contrast to more normative approaches to education. Davies' model is grounded by four foundational components: scaffolding, knowledge, value system, and process, which guided data collection and analysis. Davies' Critical Idealism XvX Model calls for education as the way to counter extremism and radicalization by encouraging dialogue, democratic participation, and deliberation.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study took place in a pre-school through 8th grade private Islamic school in a mid-size city in a western U.S. state. Data collection focused on the following research questions: How does one American Islamic school attempt to develop and promote anti-extremist beliefs and behaviors through their development of an American Muslim identity in its students? How is this reflective of Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model? Data collection took place over four separate one-week visits and follow-up phone interviews over the course of a year and a half. This school was purposefully selected because it was the first Islamic school to receive regional and national accreditation and its vision and mission statements articulated the school's focus on developing an American Muslim identity in its students. Observations took place during each visit. Interview questions were nuanced based on the participant's role as leader, teacher, student, or parent. In situ data collection allowed us to gain a better understanding of how Al-Noor School promoted and developed in its students an American Muslim identity as a way to counter religious extremism.

FINDINGS

The presentation of the findings is organized around the Critical Idealism XvX Model: scaffolding, knowledge, value system, and process.

Scaffolding

Although the individuals interviewed did not directly use the term scaffolding, they spoke of the importance of providing learning supports and targeted instruction as a way to help students move toward independent learning. At Al-Noor, lessons and activities included the anti-extremist components of integrated learning, emphasis on hybridity, and stressing commonalities between groups. The school did not stream or track students, although the administration did not feel that the school was yet 'good enough' and that they were always striving to be better. The students we spoke to felt that they were active participants in their learning and were allowed to construct their own meanings about topics presented.

Knowledge

Al-Noor School's elementary curricula introduced students to the basics of Islam and Arabic along with the traditional subjects of reading, language arts, hand writing, math, social studies, science, physical education, music and art. At the middle school levels, 5th through 8th grades, the curricula built on the learning experiences of the elementary years, and encouraged critical thinking skills, problem solving, leadership, physical and mental wellness, service, intellectual integrity, and social maturity. As Islam teaches that all knowledge comes from *Allah*, or God, both religious and secular teachings were intertwined throughout the curricula. Yet, within the curricula conflict about religious teachings and understandings often occurred.

Value System

Al-Noor School was committed to providing students a firm grounding in moral and ethical values. Each month was dedicated to a specific universal value: responsibility, self-discipline, appreciation, honesty, justice, commitment, generosity, kindness, respect and courage. The aim was to develop student character supported by the *Qur'an* and in accord with social justice principles.

Process

The processes put in place by the school administrators at Al-Noor School allowed teachers, parents, and students to wrestle with issues in open and honest ways. Faculty discouraged dualistic thinking. Students were encouraged to not shy away from grappling with issues of politics, gender, and religiosity—which at times could contest personal belief systems.

Emergent Theme: Finding a "good fit"

One additional theme emerged from the analysis of the data which centered on the importance of finding a 'good fit' with teachers and parents and how important this was to building an open and positive school climate and culture. The lower school director discussed waiting to find the right employee as the right teacher wasn't dependent upon his or her being Muslim as long as they could support the mission and vision of the school and uphold its Islamic focus. Fit also extended to parents who viewed the school's focus on developing an American Muslim identity to be in line with their beliefs. Yet, some parents worked against the school's focus on developing an American Muslim identity, which caused friction. For the administrators, establishing a 'good fit' was paramount and parents with extremist or fundamentalist ideologies tended to disenroll their children.

IMPLICATIONS

This research suggested that Davies' Critical Idealism XvX Model may be a useful model to explore religious education. Islamic schools in the United States are not united in outlook, purpose and goals, making large-scale assessment challenging. However, parents chose Al-Noor School because it provided both academic and social development within the value system of Islam. Exploring Al-Noor School through Davies' Critical Idealism XvX model revealed that one Islamic school exemplified American values, with its focus on equality, dignity, dialogue, and respect. This moderate outlook is counter to prevailing stereotypes and thus it is imperative that research continues to explore the role formal schooling plays in educating for or against extremism.

The terrorist group, Islamic State (IS), regularly posts brutal videos of decapitation, crucifixions, immolations, and other horrendous acts against those they perceive as infidels[1] in order to establish a hardline Sunni caliphate with an anti-Western interpretation of Islam (Beauchamp, 2014). Yet, IS's brutal acts have not impeded Western fighters from joining the group (BBC, 2014). Current estimates show 2,500 IS jihadists are from the United States, Australia, and Western Europe (Breslow, 2014). Western individuals become involved in terrorist activities for myriad reasons and the radicalization processes can occur in a multitude of ways (Aly & Strieger, 2012). The concept of radicalization has no single definition (Nasser-Eddine, Garnham, Agostino, & Caluya, 2011). Some view radicalization broadly, seeing it as ideas and ideologies that differ from normative groups (Aly & Strieger, 2012). Others view radicalization more narrowly and understand it in behavioral terms, with the employment of violent acts meant to achieve radical religious objectives and goals (Aly & Strieger, 2012; Bjørgo & Hogan, 2009; Silber & Bhatt, 2007). Yet, how and in what ways formal schooling influences the radicalization process and the development of extremist worldviews is yet to be fully understood (Davies, 2008). There is little research that explores how religious schooling educates against radical thought and behavior, and no research that we could find that explores how Islamic schools educate their students against religious extremism. Accordingly, this qualitative case study explored the efforts of one American Islamic school and their work to develop in their students an American Muslim identity that advocates for broad worldviews and acceptance of difference.

The purpose of this research was to explore one American Islamic school's efforts to counter religious extremism through the promotion and development of an American Muslim identity in its students. This article is part of a larger study centered on issues related to Islamic

school leadership, American Muslim identity, and Islamic school and religious pluralism. While collecting data, we noticed the influence of the Al-Noor[2] School's mission to develop American Muslim students that are engaged citizens of their local communities and the world. They referred to this as fostering an American Muslim identity, one whose sense of being is wholly American and wholly Muslim (Cordoba Initiative, 2012). We began to ask questions about their education approach using Lynn Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX model, which delineates education into four quadrants, namely: scaffolding, process, value system, and knowledge. This study is a unique contribution to extant scholarship on education that counters violent extremism (Aly, Taylor, & Karnovsky, 2014; Miller, 2012) and the ways in which the development and promotion of an American Muslim identity may thwart religious extremist worldviews (Cordoba Initiative, 2012).

We begin with a review of literature and an overview of Islamic education in the United States and American Muslim identity. This is followed by an overview of Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model and a rationale for using it as a conceptual framework. Data collection and analysis techniques are then discussed, which are consistent with qualitative case study research. Inquiry for this study was guided by two research questions: How does one American Islamic school attempt to develop and promote anti-extremist beliefs and behaviors through their development of an American Muslim identity in its students? How is this reflective of Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model? After a subsequent reporting of the key findings related to the conceptual framework, one emergent theme is presented. The article concludes with a discussion of how these findings shed light on how religious schooling can educate against extremism.

Islamic Education in the United States

In the twentieth century, Islam spread and dispersed throughout the United States. Elijah Poole established the Nation of Islam and its corresponding Sister Clara Mohammad School System in New York in the 1930s (Curtis, 2009). Following on the heels of the Black Muslim movement, Muslim immigration increased with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Newly arrived migrants established Islamic schools attached to *masajid* (mosques) as a way to foster community, identity, and provide Islamic-based education for their children (Haddad & Smith, 2009). These two separate Islamic educational systems continue concurrently, with estimates of 235 Islamic schools educating 26,000 to 35,000 students in the United States (Bagby, Perl, & Froehle, 2001).

Parents choose Islamic education for various reasons, some of which include, but are not limited to: the desire to protect children from activities viewed as un-Islamic; to provide rigorous academic preparation; to provide a safe environment; and deliver an education in line with *tawhid*, or the scriptural and prophetic sayings that confirm that all knowledge comes from *Allah,* or God (Haddad & Smith, 2009; Kysilka & Qadri, 1997; *Qur'an*, 96; Siddiiqui, 2011). Islamic schools strive to meet these varied needs by integrating Islamic values throughout school curricula and adding additional classes in Arabic, *Qur'an*, and Islamic studies (Islamic Schools League of America, 2006). Muslim parents expect Islamic schooling to provide for both academic and social development within the value system of their faith (Clauss, Ahmed & Salvaterra, 2013). Yet, Islamic schools are not united in outlook, purpose, and goals. Consequently, critics of Islam often question how Muslim students are educated in post-9/11 America and Islamophobia (Ernst, 2013) continues to situate Islamic schooling in the periphery of American education (Eck, 2001; Haddad & Smith, 2009; Said, 1997).

American Muslim Identity

Reflective of the different types of Islamic education in the United States is the diversity found within the American Muslim population. This is due in large part by differences in faith traditions, national origins, cultural norms and mores, language, social class, race, political understandings, and notions of gender (Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009; Sirin & Fine, 2008). It is through Muslims' participation in mosques where newly arrived immigrants worship alongside second, third, and fourth generation Muslim families, and where they conceptualize and negotiate their individual identities in U.S. society (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Ali (2011) describes this interaction as both forging and forcing individual Muslims to adapt through these communal experiences. Layered on top of this melding is the larger social construction of Muslims as hostile, dangerous, and un-American (Byng, 2008). Television, print, and social media are replete with images of Muslim men with long beards wielding machetes and rifles shouting *Allahu-Akbar*, women *hijabis* ululating and chanting death to America, and suicide bombers killing innocent people (Alsultany, 2012). In conjunction with these images of Islam, is the use of the terms extremism, fundamentalism, and terrorism interchangeably. However, each of these terms is inimitable and not representative of the vast majority of Muslims living in the United States (Haddad, 2011).

These social complexities influence how and in what ways Muslims living in the United States negotiate their identities (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Although American Muslim identity appears to be hybrid, that being Muslim and American, it is complex and includes the interrelationships among individuals' multiple group identities as well as the external perceptions and labels attributed to them that influence how Muslims see themselves in the United States (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Increasingly, Muslim Americans are identifying with their religion (Islam) rather than their ethnicity (Arab-American) or home country (Pakistani-American). This

shift occurred as a response to the 9/11 attacks and brought Muslims together to create a "fragile collective identity of 'Muslim American'" (Ewing & Hoyler, 2008; Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 5). At the forefront of the work toward a unified Islamic identity in the U.S., Dr. Maher Hathout, in association with the Islamic Center of Southern California, advanced the concept of an American Muslim identity as one in which "home is not where my grandparents are buried but where my grandchildren will grow up" (Campo, 1996; Hathout & Ricci, 2012). Similarly, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf (2004) advocated a moderate Islamic movement focused on a re-envisioned American Muslim community. This movement, under the name Cordoba Initiative advances the ideology of identifying as wholly American and wholly Muslim while supporting democratic processes and values. Both Hathout (2012) and Rauf (2004) supported the development of an American Muslim identity, an identity that is moderate in outlook and in no way incongruous to either Islam or America. Other organizations, such as the American Islamic Forum for Democracy and the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), advocate the similarity between Islamic values and American values. MPAC's vision is to "promote the Islamic and American values of mercy, justice, peace, human dignity, freedom and equality for all" (MPAC, 2014). For moderate American Muslims, American values are Islamic values.

In spite of these more moderate Islamic movements, Islamic radicalization and extremism are growing (Breslow, 2014). To better understand this phenomenon, Lynn Davies (2008) developed the XvX Critical Idealism Model to contrast formal education that teaches anti-extremism to education that teaches its students extremist worldviews. This model guided our qualitative case study by providing the framework to explore Al-Noor School and how and in what ways this school develops in its students an American Muslim identity that advocates for broad worldviews, acceptance of difference, and support of American values.

Davies' Critical Idealism XvX Model

Formal education that counters extremist thought and behavior most commonly centers on the teaching of civic values, citizenship, democracy, and tolerance (Aly, Taylor & Karnovsky, 2014; HM Government, 2011; Monzo, 2006). Yet, imparting these values in schools does not necessarily prevent students from uncritically accepting single truths (Davies, 2008) or having the ability to recognize radical or extremist propaganda. Schools may, through their systems of practice or curricula, unknowingly support or advance extremism. Davies' (2008) XvX Model argues for education that teaches students to be critical consumers and to question metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984) in contrast to more normative approaches to education. Figure 1 details Davies' (2008) XvX model. The left X shows the components of an anti-extremist education and the right X, on the other hand, details an education that may promote extremist thought and reinforce *social divisions.*

Figure 1

Davies' (2008) model is grounded by four foundational components: scaffolding, knowledge, value system, and process. We now will discuss each of these in turn.

Scaffolding. Based on Vygotsky's (1980) Social Development Theory, scaffolding is grounded in the notion that learning is a social activity before it is an individual activity. Teachers—or more knowledgeable others—provide students with targeted and individualized learning supports and instruction needed to learn new concepts with the aim of helping students move toward independent learning (van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010). In scaffolded instruction, students are not passive recipients of knowledge; rather, they are active participants in constructing meaning. Scaffolding differs in schools that educate against extremism and those that foster extremist thought and reinforce social divisions.

Schools focused on anti-extremist education are academically and socially integrated. Educators acknowledge and support the development of hybrid identities (Babha, 1994) and yet there is also an emphasis on commonalities, what is shared, and social unity. Students are not tracked or grouped by ability (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998) and there is a value that schools are 'good enough,' (Skloverket, 2000, p. 89). On the other hand, schools that promote extremist thought and social divisions are segregated. They advance the idea of pure identity (Sen, 2006) and absolutist thinking, such as 'us versus them,' 'believers versus nonbelievers,' and 'right versus wrong,' along with other binary ways of seeing the world (Davies, 2008). Additionally, schools that educate for extremism promote the belief of the possibility of obtaining a perfect utopia or a new world order (Gray, 2007). Thus, how knowledge is co-created and scaffolded in schools has large bearing on whether a school mitigates or develops extremist thinking in its students (Davies, 2008).

Knowledge. Knowledge refers to how individuals come to understand a subject or topic, either through formal education or experiences gained outside of school. Knowledge gained in formal school settings that educates against extremism includes contemporary curricula that address global conflicts and politics. Education against extremism does not shy away from controversial issues but teaches students to develop media literacy (Potter, 2014) and critical thinking skills (Moore & Parker, 2009), which are applied to the analysis of propaganda and media messages. Ambiguity in interpretations and the allowance of more than one meaning is supported. Davies (2008) sees this as a "political citizenship education" or a "politicized education," one that encourages students to become involved and debate complexities and alternative worldviews (p. 159). Yet, including these curricula in formal school settings is for many educational stakeholders problematic and challenging. Lessons on these topics run the risk

of becoming too politicized or being viewed as indoctrination or brainwashing— a chance many schools do not want to take (Davies, 2008).

On the right side of the XvX model, Davies outlines education that supports extremist thought. In these schools, instruction is based on identifying single truths or putting forth an absolutist worldview. This may include a curriculum where students are taught to hate particular groups of people or nation-states (Davies, 2008). Educating for extremism does not encourage political discussions and debate. Rather, students receive an education based on an unchanging and unchangeable reality, which limits their understanding of social complexities, politics, and the workings of the larger world. Education for extremism isolates students. It sets them apart from that which is perceived different and undesirable, and thereby reinforces dichotomous perspectives.

Value System. Davies' (2008) model supports the teaching of values in schools, yet she states that these values should not be grounded in any one religion or belief system. Davies (2008) recommends schools adopt a universal value system based on the United Nation's (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child that sets forth goals for nations to achieve on behalf of their children. These goals include:

- Freedom from violence, abuse, hazardous employment, exploitation, abduction or sale,
- Adequate nutrition,
- Free compulsory primary education,
- Adequate health care,
- Equal treatment regardless of gender, race, or cultural background,

- The right to express opinions and freedom of thought in matters affecting them, and

- Safe exposure/access to leisure, play, culture, and art (Amnesty International, 2013).

For Davies, anti-extremist education values the teaching and promotion of social justice and human rights. Yet, in Davies' (2008) exploration of faith based schools, she found that schools that educate for extremism focus on teaching values rooted in religious beliefs and traditions. They are more isolated and kept separate from others perceived as different, thus limiting their ability to dialogue with others holding dissimilar worldviews. Students in faith based schools tend to be 'locked into' a cultural identity (Sen, 2006) and have feelings of religious superiority (Feinberg, 2003). They also are less autonomous (Davies, 2002; Feinberg, 2003) and may suffer from gender inequities. Moreover, faith based schools that educate for extremism teach students to accept as true one 'right path' grounded in their religious teachings. They are also taught to respect and obey authority figures, leaving little room to question and develop critical thinking skills. This type of education increases intolerance, prejudice, and bigotry. Consequently, faith based education coupled with a value system rooted in religious dogma can promote an education for extremist thought and fanaticism.

Process. School processes refer to how and in what ways the organization of schools and the individuals who work in them help students learn (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Marks & Louis, 1999). In Davies' (2008) model, schooling processes are essential to whether a school educates for or against religious extremism. For schools that educate against extremism, their educational processes reject dualistic thinking. Students and teachers grapple with the possibility of multiple realities (Davies, 2008) and speak freely, openly, and honestly. Davies (2008) locates

these discussions "on the edge of chaos" because anti-extremist education is a complex, messy, and a risky endeavor (p. 171). Education against extremism does not assume relativism; rather, students examine evidence and substantiate their reasoning for or against a 'truth' (Davies, 2008). Thus, by identifying "better reasons," students learn critical thinking and advocacy skills (Davies, 2008, p. 173).

On the other hand, schools that educate for extremist thought silence democratic processes and "revert to primitivism" through their preference of absolutes (Davies, 2008, p. 171). Extremist education denies social and historical complexity and allows unexamined concepts to be held as fact. Schooling processes are somber and have a seriousness that is based in revenge and punishment, while students are taught to be passive rather than active members in their learning. Knowledge learned tends to be based on pretense and fabrication rather than on reasoned evidence (Davies, 2008). Thus, schools that educate for extremism teach students to view the world in ways that justify extremism. Either/or logic and binary thinking processes reduce and impede students from examining and understanding the complexity of social phenomena and their unique agency.

In summary, Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model calls for education as the way to counter extremism and radicalization by encouraging dialogue, democratic participation, and deliberation. For Davies (2008), all the components on the left of the model are necessary to provide an education that counters extremist thought. Davies (2008) concludes by identifying five critical components that summarize her Critical Idealism XvX Model. The components are:

- *Critical scholarship*—sound political education, conflict studies, comparative religion, non-nationalistic citizenship and political skills;
- *Critical (dis)respect*—sound understanding of universal rights and responsibilities;

- *Critical thinking*—skills to weigh up alternative ideals and means to pursue them;

- *Critical doubt*—the acceptance that ideals should be provisional; and,

- *Critical lightness*—the acceptance that ideals and their holders can be mocked and not always taken seriously (Davies, 2008, p. 181-182).

Thus, education against extremism is an active and engaged education, highly critical, and in no way moderate. It is through a critical approach to education that students acquire skills and aptitudes to recognize extremist propaganda and make deliberate choices to counteract its polarizing message.

Design of the Study

This case study took place at a pre-school through 8th grade private Islamic school in a mid-size city in a western U.S. state. Qualitative methods were the best way to obtain the "lived experiences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) of the school principal (PK-12), lower school director (PK- 4), teachers, and students attending Al-Noor School. We used three data collection techniques, specifically: semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and school site observations. Data collection focused on the following research questions that guided our inquiry: How does one American Islamic school attempt to develop and promote anti-extremist beliefs and behaviors through their development of an American Muslim identity in its students? How is this reflective of Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model?

Data collection took place over four separate one-week visits and follow-up phone interviews over the course of a year and a half. Empirical data were collected through 12 semi-structured individual interviews, 7 focus group discussions, 4 phone interviews, and 5 observations at the school. This school was purposefully selected based on the following criteria. First, Al-Noor School is unique in that it was the first Islamic school to receive regional and

national accreditation. Second, Al-Noor School's vision statement articulated the school's focus on developing an American Muslim identity in its students. Third, the school was known in the region for facilitating interfaith dialogue and community service and outreach. Interviews and focus group discussions, which lasted between 70 and 90 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. Most participants interviewed were Muslim; however, a number of non-Muslim teachers were interviewed as well. We removed all "potentially compromising information that could identify the respondents," even if such omissions weakened the findings (Schnabel, 2005, p. 33).

Observations took place during each visit. During these observations, we toured the school, observed classes, talked to students, took pictures, and watched student performances. We sought to observe school activities under naturalistic conditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); however, our time at the school was highly organized. We decided it was best to be courteous guests and follow their lead. After each school visit, we wrote observation memos and debriefed about what we saw and experienced (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These observations were helpful because it allowed us to triangulate the interview data and build rapport with principals, teachers, and parents.

Interview questions began by asking participants to talk about themselves. These questions were nuanced based on the participant's role as leader, teacher, student, or parent. Initial questions for leaders focused on their formal and informal roles in the school and the goals they aimed to achieve during the academic year. They were asked about the mission and vision of the school, the curriculum, and the school's relationship to both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. This was followed by questions drawn from the concepts presented in XvX model. Interview questions for teachers focused on their academic and spiritual roles, how Islamic

studies was integrated into the curriculum, and how socio-political issues such as 9/11 influenced school life. Selected students participated in a focus group discussion, which centered on their academic and spiritual school experiences and issues of diversity within and outside of Islam. Parents also participated in a focus group discussion that asked about their roles as parents, and how and why they chose Al-Noor School for their children, expectations for their children's education, and how they view the school's interfaith activities. Additional questions were structured around the literature review, which focused on: (a) identity development; (b) external pressure related to negative portrayals of Islam and Muslims; and, (c) expression of the Islamic faith in American society. In situ data collection allowed us to gain a better understanding of how Al-Noor School promoted and developed in its students an American Muslim identity as a way to counter religious extremism.

Schnabel (2005) discussed the importance of working in partnerships "based on mutual respect and appreciation of each other's strengths and limitations" (p. 31). This was the case during this project where we both understood the purpose of the research and were able to discuss issues from insider and outsider perspectives. Both authors worked in partnership throughout the data collection process. The second author was from the area originally and had grown children who attended the school. The first author previously studied Islam and Islamic education, but was not a Muslim. Together we built rapport with the participants through introductory conversations about work and family, giving us the opportunity to build a research relationship grounded in commonalities before the interviews began (Dickson-Swift, 2009). At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were thanked for their time and asked if they would be interested in participating in the future. All responded positively.

Data analysis began with an *a priori* sort using the XvX model, listed above. Then, within each of these categories, we used an inductive and iterative process to thematically code the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This helped us to identify descriptive themes and subthemes. We identified patterns across categories that helped us better understand these issues as interconnected phenomena (Richards, 2005). To provide an example, an initial analysis guided by the XvX model emphasized the importance of hybrid identities and understanding commonalities across faith traditions. This was coded as part of scaffolding's subthemes interconnected, hybrid identities, and emphasis on commonalities. We established trustworthiness through member checks, follow-up interviews, peer debriefing, rich data and triangulation from multiple sources (Creswell, 2013). We shared preliminary analysis with school leaders and they confirmed that our initial findings were consistent with their perceptions of the school. We also acted as 'critical friends' and collaborated on the entirety of the data analysis process. Thus, using the methods of member checking, peer-debriefing, fieldwork, collaborative processes, rich data collection, and triangulation establishes the trustworthiness of our findings (Silverman, 2001).

Findings

The presentation of the findings is organized around the Critical Idealism XvX Model: scaffolding, knowledge, value system, and process. Each is a component of the XvX model, which in their totality, is central to advancing an education for or against extremist thought.

Scaffolding

Although the individuals interviewed did not directly use the term scaffolding, they spoke of the importance of providing learning supports and targeted instruction as a way to help students move toward independent learning. At Al-Noor, lessons and activities included the anti-

extremist components of integrated learning, emphasis on hybridity, and stressing commonalities between groups. The school did not stream or track students, although the administration did not feel that the school was yet 'good enough' and that they were always striving to be better. The students we spoke to felt that they were active participants in their learning and were allowed to construct their own meanings about topics presented.

Integrated. Al-Noor was one of several religiously affiliated private schools in the area, which reflect the diversity in the area. Al-Noor School did not shy away from participating in the larger community and partnering with non-Muslim schools and organizations. The principal explained:

> "We are not a school in isolation. Every week our older students participate in
> community service. This is part of our curriculum. We provide a lot of different
> opportunities to connect our students with the community to take down any potential
> fears held by community members. We participate in interfaith dialogue and we are very
> much a part of the community."

The lower school director, who is not Muslim, added,

> "We are a broad minded school. We are not exclusive and insulated. I think all the
> teachers want to be engaged. It is not okay for just the Muslims to have a voice, to
> give guidance to the school. We want everyone to have a voice."

Additionally, Al-Noor School integrated the teaching of other religions throughout their curricula. The religious teacher chuckled when she recalled her students' reactions to her teaching comparative religion:

> "We always have a comparative religion piece in our Islamic studies program and
> the kids always ask, 'This is Islamic studies. Why are we learning about Judaism?' But

in this school we learn about different faiths. And it is not just in Islamic studies. Our 6th

graders in their social studies program study the Israelites and the growth of Christianity.

They also learn about Buddhism."

Al-Noor School focused on integrating their students into the larger community and building a

foundation for understanding different religious belief systems. They placed importance on

service to the community and bringing the faith traditions of the community into their

classrooms.

Hybrid Identities. Coupled with learning about different religions, Al-Noor School

emphasized the importance of students identifying both as an American citizen and as a Muslim.

The principal explained her approach to the concept and how it provided guidance to the school:

"Our ideals come from the concept of having an 'American Muslim identity.' I ask

students, 'What is America?' The answer is that it is a country of immigrants. I explain to

them that everyone in America has come from somewhere else, except for the Native

Americans. I tell them that everyone has a story about how they ended up here together. I

think that is an important part of the mission of Al-Noor School—emphasizing their

American Muslim identity."

This was a new concept for many students and families who identified themselves through their

country of origin, such as Egyptian Muslim, or Pakistani Muslim. A parent who also worked at

the school explained, "You want the children to be proud of who they are–proud of being a

Muslim and being an American. We teach them that there's no conflict in this." One student

explained her view on having an American Muslim identity,

"The reason my parents send me here is because it is a Muslim school. But, it is an

environment that teaches you how to be a Muslim in America, and how to be strong

about our faith and to not let others bring us down. We are reminded here that our main

goals in life are to be a good American Muslim."

In a focus group discussion, students shared their classroom experiences, with one

student responding,

"In Middle School, our history teacher showed us things people were saying about 9/11,

how they held posters sending Muslims to hell fire—something absurd like that—but we

are taught to stand up and tell people that we respect all religions. We also have an

interfaith program where we meet up with a Jewish school and we learn about each

other's religion. We are taught to look for similarities between religions. We can be good

Americans and still be Muslim, just like you can be a good American and be Jewish."

Al-Noor School taught its students to embrace their hybridity by emphasizing their ability to be

both an active and contributing citizen of the United States while also being a good Muslim.

These were not seen as contradictory.

Emphasis on Commonalities. In the teaching of different faith traditions, teachers

emphasized what is common or shared between groups. The Arabic teacher explained, "I convey

to the kids that there are so many similarities and I think it's the goodness of mankind that is

most important." Yet, when differences arose, the Arabic teacher clarified the importance of

finding the answer in Islam, "When we have an issue, we fall back on the *Qur'an* or we look for

a *hadith*[3] to see what it says to provide guidance." Emphasizing commonalities was met with

some resistance from parents, especially those from the Middle East. The principal shared one

incident that caused her to reflect on her assumption that parents were as open to interfaith

dialogue as she:

"I had families that refused to allow their children to go on a field trip to a Jewish

museum. I spent time talking to concerned parents and explaining that Jews are people of

the book and the political situation in the Middle East should have nothing to do with

their learning about Judaism. I told them that this was for social studies. It is an

unfortunate part of the job and it's an important reality that we have to face."

Although not all students attended the field trip, the message was expressed to parents that Al-Noor School valued interreligious learning and dialogue.

Al-Noor School was active in teaching acceptance of others and the value of different faith traditions. The lower school director commented, "We are getting more students from the Shi'a community, along with Iranians and Lebanese families, because they find our school a place of tolerance and respect." Yet, tolerance and acceptance were not mutually exclusive, and reflected the tension that often existed between parents' beliefs and the school's mission.

Non-Streamed. Al-Noor School did not stream its students into different learning tracks. One teacher described the school as "small and close-knit." Students with differing abilities found the school supportive. A third grade teacher commented about one of her students:

"We have an academically challenged child in 3rd grade. He is unique in every way-the

sweetest little boy, but when it comes to memorizing the *Qur'an,* neither his mom nor

dad read Arabic. They are extremely impressed at how he recites and prays. Although he

doesn't do it perfectly, his classmates cheer and praise him. Everyone is supportive from

day one."

A 5th grade teacher gave another example of Al-Noor School's cohesive school culture:

"At the beginning of the quarter, I had one little guy at 97%. All of my students have

Accelerated Reading goals and I said to him, if you read one more book, you will get

your 100%. He gave up his lunch to read the one book. The class was so excited for him.

Some of the kids cheering him on didn't even meet their own goal."

Al-Noor School fostered a school community that values each child, no matter their difference, and does not participate in separating children based on their academic ability or performance. This openness did not preclude the school's administrators from seeing the school as faultless.

'Good enough' schools. Al-Noor School's lower school director addressed the challenge of never being a "good enough" school. She explained:

"I've been here for 18 years. I think it's been a journey of climbing a mountain. It's never been we're good enough. There is always a challenge that comes our way. We are focused on growing and never being stagnant. I think it's that attitude that nothing is ever good enough-there is always something we can do for children to better their education and their families."

Extending this thought, the financial officer commented, "There were a lot of struggles in the beginning, especially financial struggles. Parents were forgiving at that time, but now, parents only want the best. The expectations are much higher." Al-Noor School administrators rejected the idea of being "good enough." They were focused on being the best and reaching for academic excellence to please parents. Al-Noor School reflected most of the characteristics of scaffolding, with the exception of not seeing themselves as "good enough." Overall, their approach to an education focused on commonalities with others, hybrid identities, and integration reflected their emphasis on educating students with values counter to religious extremism and fanaticism.

Knowledge

Al-Noor School's elementary curricula introduces students to the basics of Islam and Arabic along with the traditional subjects of reading, language arts, hand writing, math, social studies, science, physical education, music and art. At the middle school levels, 5th through 8th grades, the curricula builds on the learning experiences of the elementary years, and encourages critical thinking skills, problem solving, leadership, physical and mental wellness, service, intellectual integrity, and social maturity. As Islam teaches that all knowledge comes from *Allah*, or God, both religious and secular teachings are intertwined throughout the curricula. Yet, within the curricula conflict about religious teachings and understandings often occur.

Conflict education. The lower school director discussed the challenges of conflict and the way the school resolves disagreements. Conflict at the lower school frequently takes a literal approach to understanding Islam. This can become problematic with the different Islamic sects represented. She elaborated on conflict that often arose:

> "One of the biggest issues is having a dog as a pet. Of course a student is excited to tell their friends, 'We got a puppy.' Another child says, 'That's *haram*[4], you can't have a puppy.' Then the student with the puppy goes home and tells their parents, 'It's *haram* to have a puppy.' Then the child's parents think that we are teaching that it is *haram* to have a puppy. The way that we solve this problem is to teach students that it is up to the individual families to decide."

It was the policy of Al-Noor School to solve sectarian differences by referring to the authority of the family. For the principal and the lower school director, there was no one right way to practice Islam and they often had to tell children and parents that they do not take sides on issues. It was their unwritten policy to respect the family's practice and found that this usually ended the conflict.

In the 8th grade, students are asked to deal directly with conflict and provide a resolution. They are required to give a power point presentation on the basics of Islam that also includes a controversy often heard about the religion. The principal explained, "After they complete the power point they have to respond to very challenging questions that they will commonly face once they leave Al-Noor." Thus, conflict education in the early years is a part of the day-to-day non-formal curricula. Rather than ignoring conflict, Al-Noor School accepts the responsibility of teaching students resolution skills.

Media education. Students are aware of the negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media. As a response, Al-Noor School discusses current events. A 6th grade teacher discussed how she addressed the Boston Marathon bombings:

"When the Boston Marathon bombings happened, I talked to the students. We went back to the *Qur'an*, and asked, 'How are you supposed to treat people?' 'Where does it say you are supposed to kill innocent people?' It is important that they understand that not every Muslim is good and that every non-Muslim is bad. I am so comfortable saying this because it is the absolute honest to God truth. The Boston Marathon bombers are Muslim and they are extremely wrong. They will serve their judgment with God. When something comes up, we have to reiterate that Muslims are human. There will be the good and the bad, and it's a choice every human being makes. If you are truly a faithful person, you do not hurt others. No faith says to hurt others. We have to address this."

It was clear that the teachers felt comfortable taking sides and speaking passionately. Students were encouraged to not shy away from topics related to social complexities, politics, and the workings of the larger world.

Political education. Al-Noor School enrolls students whose families come from all over the world. This can cause unexpected problems when political issues arise. The principal explained:

> "A situation that I wasn't aware of at first happened with one of our Syrian families. In Syria, the Shi'a are considered the oppressors and the Sunnis are the oppressed. So, this family asked me why we are teaching about Shi'as. I responded that it was to be respectful."

The principal did not elaborate any further on this episode, but changed the trajectory of her comments:

> "The Sunni versus Shi'a conflict is an issue. The same is true for the Iraq situation, but in that case, it was the Sunnis who were the oppressors and the Shi'a were oppressed. Our parents come with some of that baggage and we don't always see things the way they do. One of the things we try to do as administrators is to listen. We let them express everything they feel. This allows us to learn about their thoughts. We then try to come to some understanding. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

The principal gave one specific example about a time politics emerged as an issue unexpectedly during an interfaith fieldtrip with the neighboring Jewish Shoshanat Ya'akov Academy. A small group of parents approached her and said:

> "'We hate the Jews. They hate us and we hate them.' I responded, 'No, sorry, we don't.' The mother then responded, 'The prophet hated them.' I then listed off the verses of the *Qur'an* and several different *Hadiths* that refuted what she said. When we have parents that are really strong in their opinions, I have to correct their thoughts. What we concluded was that we did not do a proper job of educating parents about this experience.

We still do interfaith activities because this is who we are. We are a school and people of

the book—Jews, Christians, Muslims. We are going to teach our students to appreciate

that, even if their parents' have political views that make it difficult for some parents to

see Jews as real people."

The parents often imposed their political views on their expectations of the school. The

administrators worked with parents to explain the importance of respecting different sects,

traditions, and belief systems. Yet, during an observation on Arabic Day, we noticed that maps

of the Middle East only depicted Palestine with no reference to the state of Israel. When I asked

a student why his group drew Palestine and not the current political map, he said, "This is all

Palestine. Palestinians live there." Although the administrators asserted the belief in that all

political topics were presented in a balanced way, this observation showed that at least one group

of students was supported in drawing a pro-Palestinian map without needing to explain the

absence of Jews from the area.

Ambiguity. Ambiguity in interpretations and the allowance of more than one meaning

was supported. Students were asked to debate alternative worldviews and differences of

religiosity were addressed through respect. Al-Noor School did not privilege one sect or tradition

of Islam over another as the Islamic teacher explained:

"We don't stress the Sunni and Shi'a division here, but we also realize that it's easy to

dismiss it. For some of the kids that are different, those differences are important. So, we

can't ignore them. So when we talk about the different schools of thought in Islam we

talk about different ways to pray—and that we should all be okay with that."

The principal explained how she brought up the Sunni and Shi'a division and felt sorry

afterwards:

"I had a 4th grade boy who came to me and asked, 'Am I supposed to pray like this or like this?' I said, 'it depends. You can pray any way that you like.' Then he asked why Jalal prayed like this. I said that it is a Sunni/Shi'a thing. I felt really bad because he wasn't even aware of this. He came back a day later and said 'I'm Shi'a.' So I said, 'okay, then pray like this.' I feel bad that I mentioned the divide. It doesn't make a difference, but the fact that they notice the difference and they don't make a big deal about it, is a good thing."

Most Islamic schools are dominated by a particular Islamic sect. One primary teacher explained, "We do not have one prevailing culture in this school. In my prior experiences with other Islamic schools, there was one dominant culture." Another teacher continued, "It is important that we help kids understand that we can't be judgmental and that we look to our families as a way to guide us. We need to respect each other's differences." Rather than governing the school with a domineering mindset, the principal explained that they allow for ambiguity and uncertainty. She discussed her approach:

"If the *Qur'an* doesn't give you an absolute, 'no, you can't do this,' then there is room for opinion. So you may mention things like, 'there are some scholars who say this' and 'some scholars who say that.' For me, I've done a lot of research on dogs and the thing that is clear to me is that some scholars are this way and others are that way. It leaves you as an individual being able to make that choice. One example is the *hijab*. Our school doesn't teach that you have to wear *hijab*. Our Islamic studies teachers are not expected to and instead of referring to the *hijab*, we ask that they emphasize the importance of modesty. In that way it is up for the individual to choose."

Yet, there was directness and clarity in terms of dress code and behavior. The principal commented, "I do tell the teachers, 'Do not give me a reason to talk to you about your clothing. Here are the guidelines. It says no short skirts. I don't want to have that conversation to tell you that your skirt is too short.'" In matters of clothing, modesty was emphasized over cultural clothing norms. However, on matters of faith, referring students back to their families for guidance allowed the administrators and teachers the ambiguity needed to create a culture of inclusiveness and acceptance.

Value System

Al-Noor School was "committed to providing students with an excellent academic education and firm grounding in moral and ethical values. The school fosters a dedication to God through virtuous living in a balanced Islamic environment" (mission from website). Each month was dedicated to a specific universal value: responsibility, self-discipline, appreciation, honesty, justice, commitment, generosity, kindness, respect and courage. The focus was to develop in each student "an excellent character supported by *Qur'anic* principles, enriched with knowledge, and committed to the betterment of family, community, and humanity."

Human rights. Although the character of the child was grounded in *Qur'anic* principles, values were not founded in religion but in the universal values that were viewed as spanning religion. These values included: equality, dignity, dialogue, and respect for all. The focus on applying these universal values helped foster a school culture of respect. A teacher explained,

> "We have a culture of striving to be respectful. Teachers respect teachers, teachers respect students, students respect teachers, students respect students, and so on. We try to create a whole person out of this child—respectful of other cultures and other religions and other beliefs."

During a focus group discussion, another teacher expressed the importance of going beyond tolerance toward acceptance:

> "We do get along well with each other. As adults we know how to respect others' religious beliefs and traditions. We talk about students and work for their common good. We cooperate with each other. Religion has not come into any of this and it has not been a problem."

The importance of equality, dignity, dialogue, and respect for all was present in non-formal conversations, formal lessons, and activities of the school. Al-Noor School took advantage of opportunities to teach and build a school culture on human rights principles.

Interruptive democracy. Moreover, Al-Noor School did not shy away from addressing issues of inequality. One example was the inequity of only boys leading prayer. A group of parents with daughters at the school advocated for their daughters' right to lead prayer. This request challenged the existing norm that dictates that boys prepare the *khutba* (sermon) and lead prayer. The principal described the conflict that emerged from this request:

> "The parents made a reasonable request. They thought that girls should also be trained to be leaders of prayer. I decided to have segregated prayer so that the girls could give their sermons to other girls and surely that wouldn't offend anybody. Our more progressively-minded families said, 'Why are you doing that? Girls should be able to give sermons in front of the whole group.' When we talked about giving girls more of a role in leading prayer in front of boys, the teachers were against the idea. Together, we came up with an age policy. Up to grade 4 girls can lead the prayer in front of the boys. In middle school, they don't lead prayer, but they can call the *Athan*[5] and the *Iqama*[6]."

Although some of the parents challenged inequality by advocating that the girls give the Friday

sermon, *khutba,* and lead prayer, the school deferred to the Islamic teachers' stance and took a

moderate approach, striking a balance between traditional and more liberal families.

       Critical idealism: Al-Noor administrators struggled with the demands of critical idealism,

the concept that education should discuss a range of ideals, not holding one over the other, or

diminishing the holder of a contrary idea. The school principal explained:

> "There are times when things get tricky and you have different cultural infusions that
>
> tamper with what we are trying to do. We even have some parents who say, 'Why do you
>
> have to say *Assalam Alaikum* (peace be upon you) all the time? You don't need to say
>
> that here. We're in America, just say 'hello.'' In terms of the faith spectrum, you have
>
> here and there and everything in between. Sometimes that becomes a challenge."

Al-Noor administrators and teachers were often faced with challenging situations that forced

them to reflect critically on their mission, vision, and values guiding their school, which

frequently forced them to take a position. One example provided was the prospective enrollment

of a female student wearing a *niqab*, a veil worn over the face revealing only the eyes. The

principal recounted the episode,

> "We had a family with four children from Qatar who wanted to enroll in the school. But,
>
> the 8th grade girl wears the *niqab*. So we are like, okay. We celebrate diversity, but this
>
> was a challenge for us. We debated this for a while, then I had a meeting with the dad and
>
> I said, 'This is our school mission. This is our philosophy. Here is our dress code. Here is
>
> our uniform code. I didn't outright say she can't wear the *niqab* when she is at school.
>
> But, it was clear what I was saying. A week goes by and they applied online. We were
>
> surprised that they didn't choose another school. We put in the acceptance letter that she

had to follow the uniform code, which does not include the *niqab*. They agreed to it. We

didn't want to go on field trips or have people coming into the school seeing a child in a

niqab."

Although Al-Noor School was willing to discuss and accept a range of ideals, they were

unwilling to compromise with the *niqab*. This situation forced the administrators to think

critically about the behavior and characteristics they desired in their students and how they

wanted to be perceived by the community. They concluded to side with a moderate interpretation

of Islam, respecting the father but at the same time upholding the school's values, norms, and

expectations.

Process

The processes put in place by the school administrators at Al-Noor School allowed

teachers, parents, and students to wrestle with issues in open and honest ways. Faculty

discouraged dualistic thinking. Students were encouraged to not shy away from grappling with

issues of politics, gender, and religiosity—which at times could contest personal belief systems.

Free speech. Teachers were given the opportunity by the principal to express their

concerns about separating gender during prayer time. Two teachers disliked this, and stated their

concerns. The principal explained:

"We made the decision to divide the boys and girls during prayer on a regular basis. Two

of our teachers were uncomfortable with it. I think we created an atmosphere where if

someone is uncomfortable they can come express it. They can ask for suggestions and

ideas of how they can work around it. It helps them to separate their personal beliefs from

what the school is doing. It's their job and we are not asking them to compromise on their

own personal beliefs in any way."

The principal listened to the teachers' concerns, but in the end emphasized the need to separate their personal beliefs from school procedures. Although the teachers expressed their disagreement, the principal did not change her decision.

Free speech was also encouraged in classrooms, especially on difficult topics. The principal explained:

> "Last year a group of graduate students studying to be religious leaders from a seminary visited. One of the Islamic Studies teachers invited them to observe a debate. Half of the class debated that there was a God and the other half debated that there wasn't a God. One of the seminary graduate students said, 'I just wanted to jump in and answer those questions' . . . she was like 'wow.'"

The culture at Al-Noor School allowed teachers to speak freely about their convictions, although this did not necessarily change school practices. Additionally, teachers provided opportunities for students to debate and confront difficult issues, such as the existence of God. The principal felt strongly in supporting free speech, even if this prompted controversy.

Humor. Humor was important to the principal and lower school director at Al-Noor School. Incidences with students and parents were taken in stride. The administrators were happy to recount funny stories, and laughed when telling about a recent incident.

> "We had a new student, a second grader. She's Shi'a, so she has a rock with her [representing a natural surface to place one's head on] and half way through the prayer the rock went rolling across the prayer hall and hits the music teacher's door. Of course you have this commotion during prayer [laughing]."

There were also occasions where administration and faculty accepted things as a matter of course even though parents viewed events as insulting or upsetting. The lower school director shared:

"One parent had an issue with Father's Day. The kids were asked to decorate a card that had a puppy on it and write a little note about Father's Day. A dad was completely offended that we were sending home a card with a dog on it. His son put a little post-it note over the dog's chin and then drew his dad's beard on the post-it note under the dog's eyes. To the dad, that was just not okay and he was pretty upset. I don't think he told the teacher. He went straight to us."

Even though the father was irate, the administrators thought it was funny and used humor as a way of diffusing a tense situation where negative emotions came into play. The administrators addressed this with having their teachers attend a sensitivity training the following year. All in all, the idea of being lighthearted and laughing at one's self and cultural anomalies was important to the school.

Honesty. Honesty was one of the school's core values and yet teachers and students' sensitivity to others' beliefs limited their candor. In a focus group discussion, a mother shared her children's sensitivity to differences and how she navigated between honesty and sensitivity. She explained a situation they recently faced:

"My kids are very sensitive to their friends. She participated in trick-or-treating this year. Her friend wasn't allowed. My daughter told me that she decided to not talk about this. I asked her why, and she said that not everyone is on the same page and that those decisions are made at home."

Students were taught to consider the multiple belief systems within Islam, which could limit dialogue of personal experiences; however, the formal teaching of honesty was important to teachers.

"When students ask questions, I say this is the way Allah made us. God makes us all
different. We use it as a teachable moment. But, we shouldn't shy away from it. Yes, they
are looking to see how you are going to guide them. What information are you going to
give them? It can go one way or it can go the other way. So we have to be truthful."

Formally, teachers had a high regard for honesty and truthfulness. Yet, at the same time, students chose silence or avoidance rather than speaking honestly on subjects in which their friends' belief systems or practices differed.

Restorative (reparative) justice. The concept of restorative justice emerged in ways that were provocative for the leaders and parents at Al-Noor School. Tumultuous historical referents stoked emotions and challenged the school's long term endeavors to promote interfaith relationships. Although leadership shared examples of resistance by parents, they were adamant that interfaith outreach was an important part of the learning process as a counter-narrative to the political strife between Jews, Arabs and Muslims. The principal discussed the friction.

"We got push back from the interfaith activities with the neighboring Jewish school.
Parents said, 'How come you don't do anything with Christian schools?' 'Why are we so
focused on Jews?'"

Moreover, the principal added a novel to the 5th grade reading list, *Letters from Rifka*, which has a Jewish protagonist.

"I added this book to the 5th grade reading list so that when they go to the Jewish museum
for the immigration unit, they would have an insight into Jewish immigration to the
United States. A Muslim school that teaches a book that is centered around a key
character that's Jewish is not common. We're okay with that. We think it's important and
we believe and hope that our parents and students realize the value of that."

Moreover, Al-Noor School participates annually at the Daniel Pearl World Music Festival. The principal explained,

> "For ten years we have participated with a Jewish and Episcopal School. What this means is that we have our choir sing about peace and love in the Jewish temple every year. One year, a community member from the Jewish Temple was inspired and created quilts for each of the schools. So every school, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim each have one hanging in their halls."

The principal viewed such events as "building memories to keep forever." Yet, what these activities promote goes beyond memories, but invites Al-Noor students to participate in interfaith acceptance, peace building, and community advocacy.

Advocacy. Participating in interfaith activities was one type of advocacy demonstrated by Al-Noor students and faculty. Another type of advocacy was participation in professional development programs focused on developing teachers' skills to work through challenging issues they faced with parents.

> "We asked the teachers for their own feedback on things that have been awkward or challenging, things that they learned. We are all learning. Just because I come from a Muslim background, I don't know everything about how parents are going to react."

The principal supported the teachers, but also was clear in her commitment to the mission and vision of the school. She explained,

> "We have to be courageous to stand for what our school is about. There are so many people out there who value the job and will work with you. It's hard to find them, but we always do. We hired one teacher and within a few months realized it was the wrong decision. On the first day of *jumaah* (Friday) prayer he left campus. I said, where are you

going, we have *jumaah*? He said that he talked to his friend and if *jumaah* is not held

inside a proper *masjid,* then it doesn't count. So, it was like, Bing! Now I know why this

isn't working."

 After a few months, the teacher was asked to leave and they found a replacement the following

month.

In summary, student learning was shaped by the organizational beliefs and individuals

working at Al-Noor School. The school scaffolded learning by focusing on integrated, non-

streamed curricula that promoted hybrid identities, emphasizing to students the idea that they can

be both wholly Muslim and wholly American. The school culture was built on a foundation of

human rights, free speech, humor, justice, and advocacy and teachers were encouraged to

embrace ambiguity, allowing for the ultimate authority to rest with the family. In this way,

conflicting views were not openly challenged but were discussed respectfully, such as

conversations concerning differing prayer rituals, ownership of dogs, and Jewish-Muslim

interfaith activities. This led to a sense of respect for others' belief systems that expanded to the

respect of both Christianity and Judaism. Yet, there were certain customs that were felt not in

keeping with the mission of Al-Noor School, such as wearing of a *niqab*. In those cases, the

administrators made decisions based on the values of the school. Thus, Al-Noor School, when

explored through Davies' Critical Idealism XvX Model, suggests a culture of learning that

educates Muslim students against extremist thought.

<div align="center">**Emergent Theme: Finding a "Good Fit"**</div>

One additional theme emerged from the analysis of the data that offered new insights to

Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model. The theme centered on the importance of finding a

'good fit' with teachers and parents, and how important this was to building an open and positive school climate and culture.

Finding 'fit'

The school principal and the lower school director frequently spoke of the importance of having a 'good fit' with parents and how vital this was to building a positive school culture. The lower school director discussed waiting to find the right employee. She reflected, "When hiring a new teacher, we take that extra time to find someone who will support the mission and vision and be a team player." For Al-Noor School, the right teacher wasn't dependent upon his or her being Muslim. Any religion was acceptable, as long as they could support the mission and vision of the school and uphold its Islamic focus.

Fit also extended to parents. The school principal explained, "Muslim parents self-select the Islamic school that aligns with their beliefs. We teach music and performing arts. So, if they are of a tradition that does not encourage music or theater, then we are not a good fit." Yet, often some parents worked against the school's focus on developing an American Muslim identity because they viewed this as counter to their cultural norms. The principal explained,

> "Sometimes parents are unreasonable and they really can't see a balanced view of things. Eventually that relationship disintegrates to where they may take their kids out of school. We get to a point where we don't see that as a personal failure. We have done our part to convey what we do, but we hold true to who we are."

Overall, Al-Noor administrators were grounded in their adherence to the mission of the school and developing in their students an American-Muslim identity. For the administrators, establishing a 'good fit' was paramount. Parents with extremist or fundamentalist ideologies and not open to the school's vision, tended to disenroll their children.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study's findings are consistent with Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model, which she purports to be essential to understanding how schools can educate against religious extremism. According to Davies, the components needed in this type of education include: scaffolding that is integrated, non-streamed and allows for the development of hybrid identities; processes that allow for freedom of speech, humor, honesty, and advocacy; value systems that foster human rights, interruptive democracy, and critical idealism; and knowledge that includes learning about conflict, media, politics—while allowing for ambiguity. Al-Noor School is an exemplar of an Islamic school that applies the components of Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model through its adherence to developing an American Muslim identity in its students. Al-Noor School teaches an identity that embraces both Islam and Americanism, thereby thwarting extremist ideologies of single-truths, silencing, obedience, utopian excellence, political ignorance, and pure identities. This study suggested two areas for discussion. The first one of these focuses on American Muslim identity as a way to impede the development of extremist belief systems. The second attends to Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model as a useful framework for evaluating extremist and anti-extremist education.

Firstly, there is no single definition of radicalization, and radicalization can occur in a variety of ways (Aly & Strieger, 2012; Nasser-Eddine, Garnham, Agostino & Caluya, 2011). How and in what ways formal schooling influences the radicalization process is yet to be fully understood (Davies, 2008); yet in this case, Al-Noor School attempted to limit student radicalization and extremist thought by developing in its students an American Muslim identity—an ideology that advocates for broad worldviews, acceptance of others, and viewing oneself as being both wholly Muslim and wholly American without conflict between the two

(Cordoba Initiative, 2012). The focus on the development of an American-Muslim identity reflects Davies' (2008) emphasis on equality, dignity, dialogue, and respect for all members of the school community. With the mission of Al-Noor School focused on developing in its students an American-Muslim identity, Al-Noor School pushed beyond the schoolhouse to reach the wider community. In doing so, Al-Noor School's administrators fostered a school culture that allowed space for interruptive democracy (Davies, 2008), supporting students' questions and permitting them to negotiate their multiple group identities and complex interrelationships (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Sirin & Fine, 2008) in an America often charged with Islamophobia (Ernst, 2013). Students were taught to wrestle with these concepts and embraced their identities as American-Muslims rather than identifying with their family's country of origin (Hathout & Ricci, 2012; Rauf, 2012). Al-Noor School's emphasis on the development of an American-Muslim identity was not typical for Islamic education, and yet the administrators wholeheartedly believed in the need to re-envision the American Muslim community—moderate in outlook, resonant with American values, participative with community, and supportive and welcoming of diversity (Aly, Taylor & Karnsvsky, 2014; Hathout, 2012; Rauf, 2004). Although Al-Noor School was clear in its mission, parents often struggled with issues of diversity, especially in regards to interfaith activities with Shoshanat Ya'akov Academy. Al-Noor School's administrators did not shy away from using these episodes as teachable moments for themselves and their parents. They acknowledged the importance of reflecting on their practices, recognized areas of improvement, and made adjustments when necessary. Yet, it was their consistent focus on the mission of developing an American Muslim ideology in its students that built and sustained an education against radicalization and extremism.

Secondly, applying Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model to Al-Noor School allowed us to explore its efforts to educate students against radicalization and extremism. Al-Noor school is atypical in that it is not aligned with a particular Islamic sect and students from all backgrounds enroll. Consequently, the school's focus on developing in its students an American-Muslim identity gave the school an ideology to guide their students in embracing an identity that is wholly Muslim and wholly American (Cordoba, 2012), while also being critical consumers of information and questioning metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984). In doing so, Al-Noor School aligned closely with the left side of Davies' (2008) model by delivering an anti-extremist education that promoted social integration, democratic values, and acceptance of diversity. Davies' (2008) model guided our exploration which allowed us to investigate how and in what ways Al-Noor School educated against religious extremism. In terms of scaffolding, Al-Noor students were active participants in their learning, co-creators in their development of hybrid identities (Babha, 1994), and joined in with peers—those in their school community and those of other faith traditions. In terms of knowledge acquisition, students were taught to question the media and discuss global conflicts, politics, and debate issues. In terms of values, Al-Noor School supported and promoted equality, dignity, respect, and dialogue. Students were encouraged to advocate for others, participate in interfaith activities, and understand the commonalities shared by people of diverse backgrounds. Lastly, Al-Noor School established processes that rejected dualistic thinking, and even challenged parents to grapple with multiple realities (Davies, 2008).

Finally, Davies (2008) identified five critical components that summarize her model: (1) critical scholarship; (2) critical (dis)respect; (3) critical thinking; (4) critical doubt; and, (5) critical lightness. Al-Noor School's unique mission of developing an American-Muslim identity

in its students provided a distinctive ideology that guided their vision and educational practices. Students engaged in critical scholarship through their learning about other faith traditions and discussing challenging topics. They were encouraged to engage in critical (dis)respect, understanding the importance of advocating for human rights and social justice. Critical thinking coupled with critical doubt allowed students the space to be inquisitive, ask difficult questions, and to seek answers. Lastly, Al-Noor School allowed for a critical lightness, humor, and joy.

This research suggested that Davies' (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model may be a useful model to explore religious education. Yet, questions remain as to how and in what ways having a 'good fit' may influence education against extremism. More research is needed as to parental influence in educating for or against extremist thought, especially in contexts that are more aligned with fundamentalism and close-mindedness. Additional research might explore the experiences of Muslim students in Islamic schools and how they negotiate their identities. This topic could likewise benefit from further research assessing the outcomes of anti-extremist education. Islamic schools in the United States are not united in outlook, purpose and goals, making large-scale assessment challenging. However, parents chose Al-Noor School because it provided both academic and social development within a universal value system complementary of Islamic values. Exploring Al-Noor School through Davies' Critical Idealism XvX model revealed that Islamic education in post-9/11 America exemplified American values, with its focus on equality, dignity, dialogue, and respect. This moderate outlook is counter to prevailing stereotypes and thus it is imperative that research continues to explore the role formal schooling plays in educating for or against extremism, as it is crucial for humanity's future that education is not complicit in extremism's proliferation.

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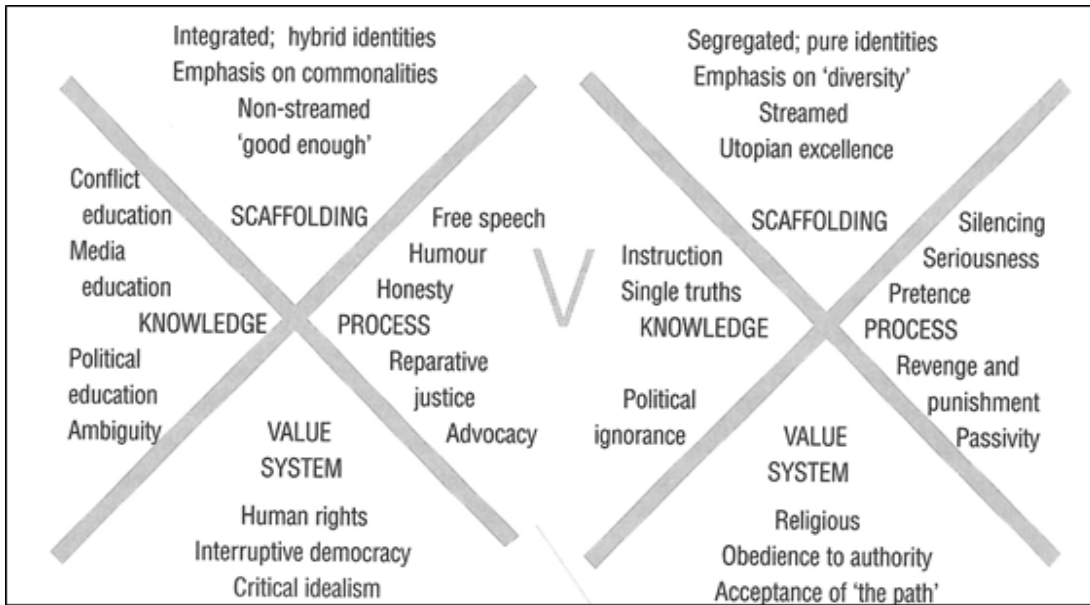
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Figure 1. Davies (2008) Critical Idealism XvX Model.

1. IS views infidels as synonymous to the classical term, *kafirs*, meaning an individual who is ungrateful, or a denier of truth (Olomi, 2014).

2. All names are pseudonyms.

3. *Hadiths* are a collection of traditions containing the sayings of the prophet Muhammad, which accounts his daily practice (the *Sunna).* In addition to the *Qu'ran*, they are a major source of guidance for Muslims.

4. *Haram* in Arabic literally means forbidden as opposed to the word *halal which means permitted.* In Islamic jurisprudence, *haram* refers to any act that is forbidden by *Allah,* God.

5. The *Athan* is the announcement of prayer time.

6. The *Iqama* is the second part, which is the call to commence prayer.