THE ETHOS OF ISLAMIC SCHOOLS IN THE FORMATION OF GIRLS’ IDENTITY
COMPARISON OF CASE STUDIES IN KEDAH AND LEEDS

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Abstract
The ethos of Islamic schools is one of the ways to transmit beliefs, practices, and values as well as to develop an Islamic identity to the students. Literature on Islamic schools and students’ identity points to the continuing importance of the schools’ ethos. The main aim of this study is to explore how the ethos shape students’ identity at schools. The methodologies employed are participant observations, 72 semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Thereafter this study embarks on two case studies; Maktab Mahmud Alor Setar and New Horizon Community School (NHCS) as they offer Islamic education for Muslim girls. Although the ideas of culture, belief and policy have influenced the wider framework, the findings show that in different contexts and countries, majority of the students agree that the ethos has influence their identities. This study also shows the negotiations that took place between the culture, belief, policy and the Islamic schools in the formation of girls’ identities, the process of inculcation of self-identity and how different it is in comparison to Leeds. This study helps the Islamic schools to build and implement a biasah solehah (Islamic ethos and environment), guide the students to be a good Muslim and make the Islamic schools’ ethos suitable to the contemporary society.

Keyword: Muslim girls’ identity, Muslim schools, ethos and environment

INTRODUCTION
The role of Muslim schools in the development of Muslim identities is increasingly evident (Ishak, 1994; Tamuri, 2004, 2010; Halstead, 2005; Ray, 2010). Thereafter, Muslim schools of one form or another is generally considered essential by Muslims to their religious identity. This is because an Islamic school has an ethos in which the students can learn and live as Islam, create social and emotional stability and develop a strong sense of belonging to the Muslim Ummah. The Muslim school does not only preserve the Islamic heritage and value per se, but contributes towards development and progress of the Muslim Ummah in general (Sound
Vission, 2017). According to Fawziah (n.d), the aim of an Islamic school is to provide an environment which allows the student to realize these ideals and gain an education that enhances his spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical, scientific and linguistic growth that allows a pupil to build a positive relationship with God and human.

Similarly, Sharif (1976, p. 45) argues that Islamic education is ‘the device for helping an individual to full stature’. His elaboration involves the ‘assimilation of Divine attributes’ leading to a life of ‘unity, power, freedom, truth, beauty, goodness, love, and justice’ (ibid). This total commitment to character-building based on the ideals of Islamic ethics is the highest goal of Islamic education (Al-Attas, 1979, p. 104). Education in Islam ‘therefore aims on the balance growth of the total personality of a [wo]man through the training of woman’s/man’s spirit, intellect, rational self, feelings and bodily sense’ (Al-Attas, 1979: 158). Abdul Halim el-Muhammadly (1994) explained that Muslim schools give focus on several concepts namely; life-long learning, to be a responsible human being and to preach and practice the Islam. In fact, this school promotes piety, honesty, propriety, trustworthiness, passion and good moral values (Khadijah, 2009).

Due to the modernization, globalization, and secularization, it is necessary for students to understand how to behave in society. In other words, students must be aware of the values and virtues society want as they face new life demands. The question arising is, how to make students concern on their Islamic identity in such a rapidly changing world. According to Lickona (1992), Nik Rosila (2013), people should be taught both academics and virtue or good character in order to live a noble life. The approach of implementing the national and Islamic curriculum, environment and ethos is in-line with the primary purpose of Islamic education – to produce a ‘good [wo]man’ and the ‘true Islamic [wo]man’ – ‘the insan kamil’ (true Islamic person). The curriculum, environment and ethos of the school enhances the girls' self-esteem and inspires confidence in them about their culture and future, aiming to advance pupils' personal and social development, which are regarded as the most essential educational goals (Mustafa, 1999: 294).

In this research, it examines the role of Muslim schools’ ethos in the formation of Muslim students’ identities both in Kedah and Leeds. In order to investigate the schools’ ethos, in which Muslims find themselves and articulations of their identity, this research examines how they interact with the schools’ ethos and how their identity are structured, the study also
explores other concepts which may potentially shape their experiences, including ideas of culture, belief and policy within the wider framework of these influencing factors. As Knott and Khokher (1993) note, the process of identity formation is not static but ongoing, however, further details may reveal the choice of schools, the environment, the family background, and similar options have influence someone's associations and identities. Similarly, Vugellers (2000) argues that the type of school and schools’ culture will influence the development of the students’ identity and values. Hence, this paper discusses and elaborates these issues based on Vugellers (2000).

METHODS
A qualitative approach using the comparative case study design was employed in developing the study. This research employed participant’s observations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Thereafter it is concerned with the comparison of two case studies, each of which examines matters of ethos and environment in the formation of Muslim women’s identity.

Case Studies
The case-studies in question are Maktab Mahmud (Girls), and New Horizon Community School (NHCS). This undertook case studies are in order to understand the inner feelings and experiences of Muslim girls receiving Islamic education in a Muslim and a non-Muslim country, and the efforts of Muslim schools to provide an Islamic ethos and environment for them. In order to explore and understand their social lives as Muslim girls and women, it required sufficient time at the case-study sites – Maktab Mahmud (MM) and New Horizon Community School (NHCS). However, the presence of the researcher at MM and NHCS for any longer than the three months period, may have started to hinder or interfere with the schools’ time, the students’ learning, and the staff’s duties. Despite the limited time spent at the different institutions, rich data were collected at all of these sites in an intensive way of data collection. Thus, the researcher routinely collected and wrote up the data, recorded the observations, reflections and any developing theories in a notebook.

Instrument
Participants Observation
Participants observations were used to explore and support the data collected from the interviews. It can be used ‘as the only technique or jointly with other techniques’ (Sarantakos, 1997: 207). In this case, it combines with other techniques, as participant observation can also
serve as ‘a technique for verifying or nullifying data provided in face-to-face encounters’ (Hancock, 1998: 13). It also use ‘written descriptions’ as an observation technique. ‘Written descriptions’ mean that the researcher records observations of people, situations or environments and ethos in these institutions, as well as the buildings, events, activities, people and all of the life in these institutions by making notes of what the researcher observed (Hancock, 1998: 13).

In fact, these observation can be used as a justification for what the researcher have gained from the interviews. The environments and ethos needed to be investigated in real-life contexts, where ‘the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’ (Yin, 1991: 23; Bell, 1999: 102; Nga, 2009: 67). In fact, neither the ethos, the environments of the institutions, nor the experiences, feelings, behaviours and identity of the respondents could have been investigated in depth without the researcher’s presence within the data ‘sets’.

**Semi-structured Interviews**

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

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

**Focus Group**

The focus group method is a form of a group interview in which there are several participants who have been selected by the researcher beforehand. It ‘emphasizes the questioning on a particular, fairly tightly defined topic and the accent is upon interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning’ (Bryman, 2008: 475). According to Bryman (2008: 475):
A focus group [...] contains elements of two methods: the group interview, in which several people discuss a number of topics; and what has been called a focused interview, in which interviewees are selected because they ‘are known to have been involved in a particular situation’ (Merton et al., 156: 3) and are asked about that involvement.

This research used the focused interview, as it had already decided on what topics would be discussed and who would be involved in the interviews. In order to decide who would be involved in the focus group, the researcher closely observed the girls’ answers, attitudes and commitment during the one-to-one interviews with the girls, and built up a good rapport with them before using the focus group.

Thus, the data gathered through the above three instruments; participant observations, interviews and focus groups were presented in the number of graphs. Each graph represents the aspects that helped each school in the shaping of good Islamic ethos. They are school’s rules and regulations, school’s co-curriculum, school’s culture and school’s environment and facilities. Based on the respondents’ feedback, each of these four aspects have been broken down into number of themes.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Ethos</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rules and Regulations</td>
<td><em>Shaksiyah, Self-Discipline and Tolerance and Respect</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Co-Curriculum &amp; Islamic Activities</td>
<td><em>Shaksiyah, Active &amp; Brave, Knowledgeable and Leadership Skills</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>School’s Culture</td>
<td><em>Reading Culture and School’s Reputation</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Environment and Facilities</td>
<td><em>No Ikhtilat, Decorations and Musolla</em></td>
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**RESULTS**

Although the ideas of culture, belief and policy have influenced the wider framework, the findings show in different contexts and countries, majority of the students agree that the ethos have influenced their identities. However, in the NHCS the influence of school’s ethos is more important than in the MM.
The above graph shows that all the respondents of NHCS (30 students) agree that the ethos has shaped their identity. On the other hand, the MM is about 28 out of 30 students.

The Ethos of MM and NHCS in the Formation of Girls’ Identity

Data from the Observation

MM’s building is adequately maintained and it comprises of number of classrooms, an IT laboratory, Science laboratories, Living Skills Laboratories, a library, counselling room, language rooms, sick bays, musolla, staff rooms and the school office. The MM reflects its Islamic character through its decorations and environment, such as Quranic verses, hadiths, poems and proverbs and Islamic calligraphy along the school’s corridor, on the school walls and classrooms, and boards full with Islamic displays.

The first thing that suggests that this a biah solehah school is the MM community’s clothing, with everyone covering the aurah (certain part of the body that Muslim women need to cover from others to see)\(^1\). Secondly, Islamic greetings are routinely used in Maktab Mahmud’s school life. The students offered me a polite salam, welcome, helpful and friendly such as they helped me to show the school’s office building. Thirdly, the school’s decoration such as a lot of Quranic versus, hadith and Islamic idioms in Islamic calligraphic around the school. Finally, the school’s facilities which are totally being separated between boys and girls.

Meanwhile, throughout the observation at NHCS, I agree that the Islamic ethos and ‘vibes’ are one of the ways to make it different from the non-Muslim school environment. I could see that the students and staff would say ‘salaam’ rather than ‘hi’, and ‘jazakallah/killah’ instead of

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\(^1\) For men, they need to cover between the navel until the lower part of their knee. While for women, they have to close all part of their body except their face and their wrist
‘thank you’. *Quranic* recitation will be played throughout the school before the lessons start. This *Quranic* recitation lifts the Islamic spirit of the school community here, and helps students to realize that Islam is their *Deen* and the *Quran* is their book. One of the students commented:

> What I like about this school is, when I hear the Quran everywhere. It really touches my heart and makes me realise who I am. It makes me remember Allah, our prophet and lifts the spirit to be a better Muslim. It’s something so emotional that it’s really hard to tell you the exact feeling. (Fareeda, age 15).

The Islamic ethos is also portrayed through the Islamic student’s uniform. All of the students are required to wear a white *hijab* and shirt, and long black pinafore, blazer and shoes. The use of cosmetics is strictly forbidden in the school. During Physical Activity, the students are required to cover up, and must wear a long sleeved T-shirt, small scarf, trainers and tracksuit bottoms\(^2\).

The NHCS’s building is adequately maintained and it comprises of eight classrooms, two computer suites, a gym, a library, a playground, a prayer hall, a science lab, a staff room and the school office. *Quranic* verses, *hadiths*, poems and proverbs and Islamic calligraphy are on the school walls and classrooms, and boards are full with Islamic displays. In the hall, for instance, there is information about Muslims in Britain, and articles about Islam and faith.

**DISCUSSION**

Throughout the data from the observations, interviews and focus groups, I have divided the school’s ethos into four aspects. These aspects have helped each school in the shaping of good Islamic ethos. They are school’s rules and regulations, school’s co-curriculum, school’s culture and school’s environment and facilities. I will discuss each in the following paragraphs.

**School’s Rules and Regulations**

The rules and regulations of the school are also one of the factors that affected the students’ identity. Moreover, these rules and regulations are also in tandem with the objectives, vision and mission of the school. Generally, the Islamic schools want to produce *insan kamil*. From the interviews session with the students, I have pointed out that majority of the students; MM

and NHCS; 25 and 30 students respectively, agree that the school’s rules and regulations give three impacts to their identity. They are in terms of *shakhiyah*, self-discipline and tolerance and respect.

*Figure 2: Rule and Regulation*

The above graph shows that about 25 out of 30 respondents of MM and all of respondents at NHCS agree that the rules and regulations of the school can influence their Islamic identity.

The rules and regulations at both schools see itself as offering an opportunity for students to understand the Islamic way of life. In fact, through these regulations, they are nurtured and supported by the staff. Many Muslim parents have concerns about *aurah, ikhtilat* between gender and appropriate Islamic identity. Building on this, both schools have designed the rules and regulations based on *shariah*. The rules and regulations are a medium to maintain the integrity of Islamic identity, value and culture's context. However, the NHCS is higher than the MM because of the UK context; different in terms of religion, culture, policy and values. As stated on the school’s website:\(^3\):

> *Our aim is to create a happy and caring environment in which pupils are able to develop intellectually, spiritually, socially and emotionally. Pupils are taught to develop tolerance, understanding, interfaith etiquette, a sense of responsibility and respect towards people of all races, religions and cultures. This is an integral part of the ethos of the school.*

The design of rules and regulations at NHCS nowadays are more challenging than before. It is because the school’s management should take into account the current challenges, issues and problems of the social context. The NHCS students have faced more challenges as Haw 1998,

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\(^3\) Mission statement of New Horizon Community School, [www.nhcs.co.uk](http://www.nhcs.co.uk). (Retrieved on 22 February 2012).
2011; Ali, 1996; Jacobson, 1998; Modood, 2005; Halstead, 2010; Lewis, 2010 noted that the majority of Muslim parents that migrated to Britain were very worried about their daughters’ being educated in British state schools. This was because of conflicts between some aspects of contemporary British culture and Islam, such as the free mixing between different sexes, alcohol-use among British teenagers, and the loss of *adab* (manners) and *akhlaq* (virtue) as a woman.

The NHCS believes that through school’s regulations can bring back the younger generation’s faith and pride in being a Muslim *albeit* in the challenging arena. Although this is school’s regulations, it also can be applied outside of the schools, especially which are related to the religious obligations such as *aurah, ikhtilat, ibadah, adab* and manners. Indeed, they need ‘an enhanced awareness of religion to develop their socio-religious identity’ (Haw, 1998: 152).

**School’s Co-Curriculum and Islamic Activities**

The school’s activities comprise of the curriculum and co-curriculum activities. The co-curriculum activities are such as clubs, sports, uniforms club and so on. From the interviews session with the students, I have pointed out that majority of students agree that the school’s co-curriculum and Islamic activities give four (4) impacts to their identity. These co-curriculum and Islamic activities have promoted them to have good *shaksiyah*; be active and brave; knowledgeable and build leadership skills.

![Co-Curriculum and Islamic Activities](image)

*Figure 3: Co-Curriculum and Islamic Activities*

The above graph shows that the all 30 respondents at each MM and NHCS agree that the school’s co-Curriculum and Islamic Activities have helped in the formation of students’ Islamic identity.
The schools also conducted several co-curricular activities and programs. These co-curricular programs aimed to develop the students’ knowledge and strengthen their attachment to Islam (Tamuri, 2004). Both schools have planned varieties of activities for the students. All of those activities generally focus on the Islamic knowledge or fardh ain as well as the fardh kifayah. Fardh ain programs are like usrah about Islamic pillar and faith, while for the fardh kifayah are like community services and so on. The focus also concerns on the social life and the preparation for students to fit into society as vicegerent of Allah in the future. Most of the students agreed that these activities have triggered their courage and bravery as well as have taught them to be independent. Based on the data given by students from both schools, the activity like usrah or study circle has given a clear advantage in which the girls could explore their potential in a non-threatening environment and express their opinions without having any insecurity. On top of that, they gain Islamic knowledge through the informal way which is the discussion is more relaxed, closed and detailed. Moreover, the topic being discussed are from various perceptive which are different from what they have learnt in the textbooks and classroom.

The other activities that the researcher wants to highlight is the community services at both schools. At the MM, the selected students or members of Nuqaba’ leadership will go out to the society and share the Islamic knowledge to the community. For example, they have been appointed as a volunteer facilitator for any Islamic program organized by the local organization. By doing this, they can prepare themselves in terms of knowledge and leadership skills. Meanwhile, at NHCS this kind of activity may preserve the reputation and good name of NHCS as a Muslim school. This is due to the media and policymakers often perceive madrasahs and other Muslim schools as isolated and invisible to the wider society – a criticism that is frequently directed at Muslim schools even though many of them have reached out to wider society in a number of ways, including holding ‘open days’ and doing voluntary work such as cleaning parks and streets.

Through the above activities, the students from both schools can gain knowledge, experience as well as to shape Islamic identity, develop confidence and courage in themselves as preparation to reach out to the local society in the future. Besides, it can be geared towards providing them with skills and knowledge that will empower them to lead independent lives and able to give aspirations and contribute to the communities.
School’s Culture

The school’s culture in this context comprises of the reading culture and the school’s reputation. This is due to awareness of students about of what this school stands for? What the perception and expectation of outsiders towards the MM? What are the contribution of students in order to preserve and maintain the school’s reputation? From these questions, it has triggered students to have Islamic identity as a preservation of the school’s culture.

![School's Culture Shaped Students' Identity](image)

*Figure 4: School’s Culture*

The above graph shows that about 10 out of 30 respondents of MM and all of respondents at NHCS agree that the school’s culture can influence their identity.

At Maktab Mahmud, the school’s culture is much influenced by its history and legacy. Since its existence, this school has established a good branding in Islamic education. In fact, this is evident through the numbers of alumni who have become stakeholders and policy makers in the Malaysian government and yet still adhere to the Islamic identity. Literally, this school emphasizes on the development of Islamic identity together with the academic purposes. Undoubtedly, the importance of academic attainment is parallel to the parents, society and state policy’s demands. For example, first; to enroll the students to the tertiary level, they must fulfil the minimum requirements of at least 5 A’s in the Malaysian Higher Certificate (SPM, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia). Second; the SPM qualification is important to apply for job vacancies and has become the main criteria for most employers, especially in the crucial climate in job opportunities affected from the global credit crunch.
On the other hand, for the NHCS, the above graph shows a low number of the respondents is due to the NHCS is a new school, which only opened in 1996. Thus, this school is still working on the development of a good school’s culture.

Environment and Facilities

Most of the students agree that the ethos and environment at their schools have affected their behavior to be a good Islamic identity student. The environment at these schools includes the biah such as no ikhtilat between boys and girls, school’s decoration and facilities.

![Environment and Facilities Shaped Students' Identity](image)

Figure 5: Environment and Facilities

The above graph shows that about 26 out of 30 respondents of MM and all of respondents at NHCS agree that the school’s environment and facilities can influence them in the identity formation.

The numbers of NHCS is higher than the MM because the context of NHCS itself. As NHCS is in a non-Muslim country as Haw, 1998, 2011; Jacobson, 1998; Modood, 2005; Halstead, 2010; Lewis, 2010 noted that the majority of Muslim parents that migrated to Britain were very worried about their daughters’ being educated in British state schools. This is because of conflicts between some aspects of contemporary British culture and Islam, such as the free mixing between different sexes, alcohol-use among British teenagers, and the loss of adab and akhlaq as a woman. Therefore, parents needed a school that could provide the only safe environment, ‘devoid of any explicit threats to their value system’ (Haw, 1998: 155-157; Shaw, 1998; Halstead; 2005).

NHCS shows clear benefits of Muslim schooling for Muslim pupils especially the girls. There are, first; grounded in the importance of maintaining of religious and cultural identities for the Muslim community through education that meets parents’ preferences for their daughters as a
priority (Anwar, 1982; Iqra Trust, 1991; Mabud, 1992 & Haw, 1998). Second, as a way to preserve izzat and sharam in a modern society (Jawad, 2003), third; to provide opportunities for girls to explore their potentials in a female-dominated atmosphere (Haw, 1998; Jawad, 2003; Halstead, 2005), and finally as a stepping-stone for girls to become active, educated and positive Muslims in the future. As Halstead (2005) puts it, children's potentials can be maximized if they are educated within a positive and supportive space.

From my observation, the school’s resources, facilities and decorations at both schools are at satisfactory level, with the potential for improving, as the school looks forward to extending its facilities. Meanwhile, for the school decoration, both schools have decorated the school’s buildings, walls and pedestrians with Islamic calligraphy, verses of the Quran, hadiths, Islamic idioms and inspirational words. The school’s facilities like musolla (Islamic prayer room or hall) has become a center of Islamic knowledge and events. For instance, at MM they are also called as Markaz (Islamic center). Indeed, the facilities have played a role as external factors in developing the Islamic identity. They are numbers of Islamic events that have been held inside the musolla. The role of musolla can be related to the role of Masjid (mosque) during the golden age of Islam as the masjid plays an important role as a place for worship, administration, education and social activities (Al-Oadah, 1998: 79; Rukhaiyah, 2005).

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

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

Thus, this study can give an overall figure about the Islamic schools’ setting and how the process of inculcation of Islamic identity and how different it is in comparison to Leeds. It may have given useful information that will help the teachers, school’s governors and policymakers to build and implement a biah solehah at schools and guide the students to be a good Muslim.
and nation. This can be done by observing the schools’ setting and system and benchmarking them in order to make it suitable for the Islamic contemporary society. Hence, it is the Muslim responsibility to preserve Muslim school institutions in line with and caters to the needs of the young generation, so that they will not suffer from immoral and un-Islamic drain in the future.

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