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"I feel different though": Narratives of young Indonesian Muslims in Australian public schools

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Abstract: This article examines six Indonesian Muslim youth's narratives and those of their parents in relation to their experiences of being Muslim in Australian public schools. Previous studies on similar issue found a certain degree of exclusion and discrimination for being Muslims in public school, this present article however, perceives Muslims' experience differently. The interview data and their written protocols suggest that while prejudicial sentiments may emerge within the lives at Australian public schools, Indonesian Muslim youth gain a certain degree of enjoyment being Muslims in those schools. This is so because participants in this study report that rarely do they encounter severe exclusions or discriminations. The research provides insights into the ways in which Indonesian Muslim youths construct their sense of religious identity within the Australian public schools. It also briefly analyses Muslim parents' rational for sending their children to Australian public schools. Findings of this study also will enrich literature on migrant communities and their experiences in Australia.

Subjects: Education Studies; Educational Research; Multicultural Education; Sociology of Education

Keywords: young Muslims; identity construction; school environment

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Investigating educational issues using qualitative methodologies, such as classroom research, case study and ethnographic research has been my focus in the past several years. My fields of interests are Educational Sociology; Teacher Education and Educational Management. I have conducted wide range of research exploring the relationship between school cultures and teachers' beliefs, attitudes and practices. My work on this issue has appeared in International Journal of Progressive Education and International Handbook of Progressive Education, in which I explore how Indonesian school cultures shape teaching practices. In addition, my team and I have conducted classroom research to explore teachers' classroom practices in six vocational schools in Aceh, Indonesia. My other research also falls within my research interest where I explore roles of communities in school development. My current article published in Cogent Education falls within my research interests. This research explores Muslims' ways of being in Australian public schools.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This is an article about young Muslims of Indonesian background living in Australia. In this article, I pose several research questions on their ways of being Muslim in a non-Muslim country, such as "what are young Muslims' narratives being in Australian public schools? Are there issues that require them to negotiate their ways of being at school? How do they negotiate those issues? And what challenges do they face?" I will seek answers for these questions through interviewing these young Muslims and their parents in depth, and I also review these young Muslims' written narrative on their experience being at their schools. The study reveals that these young Muslims see their schooling experience positively although tensions may also take place in their interaction. They also negotiate between being young and being Muslim due to some religious constraints.

T. Zulfikar

1. Introduction

This article, an abridged version of my doctorate's thesis, scrutinizes closely Australian-Indonesian students' narratives while they are in Australian public schools. As migrants from different countries influx into Australia, Australian population increases significantly and consists of different ethnic and religious backgrounds; more than in five Australian born overseas (ABS, 2007). To accommodate different backgrounds of Australian societies, the Australian government issues a multiculturalism policy. This policy allows descendants of immigrant communities to merge with mainstream Australian society and thus enable them to enrol in Australian public schools.

The multiculturalism policy took effect in 1970s following the failure of *assimilationist* policy (Birrel, 1995; Galligan & Roberts, 2003). Although the multiculturalism faces severe attacks from its opponents, it prevails to contemporary Australia, and thus it enters to wide ranges of settings, including educational sector. With the spirit of multiculturalism, Australian schools insert multi/inter-cultural education, which entails programmes such as anti racist and maintenance of ethnic cultures to their curriculum (Leeman & Reid, 2006). The benefits of multicultural education have been so far felt by some students of immigrant backgrounds.

However, racialization and discrimination felt by minority students are still evident in the work of many scholars. Ata (2009), for example, who examines attitude of non-Muslim students towards their Muslim friends, found that over 40% of non-Muslim students see their Muslim friends as the *others*. Muslim students are in fact viewed as extremist and sexist. In addition, Mansouri and Trembath (2005) provide similar account, in which Muslim students encounter adverse levels of racism, discrimination and criminalization.

The fact that minority students experience adverse discrimination at mainstream schools has been found in many other studies beyond Australian contexts. For instance, Barron's (2007) ethnographic study on a group of three and four-year-old children of Pakistani heritage in Britain, for example, shows that school settings shape one's identity. Similar account also emerges from the study of Haw and Hanifa (1998), Limage (2000), Zine (2000), Collet (2007), Sarroub (2005), Abo-Zena, Sahli, and Tobias-Nahi (2009), Imam (2009), Mossalli (2009), and Khan (2009). This is because school is seen as an agency of socialization, in which students' identity is moulded.

Those previous studies show that Muslim students are required to negotiate their ways of being at schools. These students should create their own narratives to enable them integrate to mainstream school society. In spite of this abundant literature on young Muslims' voice at school, a close scrutiny on Indonesian young Muslims in diaspora seems lacking. A large number of work on Muslim minority centres on Middle Eastern backgrounds or Asian backgrounds such as Bangladesh or Pakistan. It is for this reason that this article is timely as it attempts to fill in the gap.

2. Framing the research

This is a narrative inquiry on six Indonesian young Muslims studying in Australian public schools and their parents. This inquiry seeks to answer questions: "what are students' narratives on their experience at public schools? Are there issues that require them to negotiate between being young and being Muslim? How do they negotiate their ways of being in Australian public schools then? And what challenges do they encounter being students from a minority community?" These questions will be answered through in-depth interviews and also journaling as a written narrative.

It is important to note that narrative inquiry is a research methodology that enables researchers to explore participants' voice in-depth. As this study attempts to examine young Muslims' narrative of their schooling experience, this type of inquiry will help me examine young Muslims' voice. Atkinson and Delamont (2006, p. 165) state that "narratives are embedded in interactional and organizational contexts". This suggests that narratives enable my participants to tell their story or stories and describe their positioning within the Australian society. Narrative inquiry allows

participants to tell various forms of stories, since stories are not constructed in a vacuum. Stories are narrated based on participants' reflection of their experience (Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Kraus, 2006).

In addition to interviewing these participants as means to listen to their narratives, I invited them to express their ways of being in Australian public school through written protocol. This is because some participants may want to express their feeling through written form more in depth rather than through oral reports.

These female young Muslims are Indonesian Muslims of Indonesian background, and they are in years 9–12 by the time of the fieldwork. All of Muslim youth in my study have been born or raised and educated in Australia, and I view them as second generation Indonesian Muslims. In the process of identifying the participants, I contact a gatekeeper, a senior member of the Indonesian Muslim community in Australia. I posted the announcement for participants' recruitment along with the explanatory statement of my project in the notice board of the community centre.

During two time interviews with these young Muslims and once with their parents, I learn many things from their stories in regard with their experience at schools and their parents' perceptions of the Australian public schools.

3. Ways of positioning in Australian public school

3.1. Multiculturalism of Australian public schools

Some commonalities emerge in Muslim girls' description of their schooling experience. Muslim girls admit that discriminations at school due to their religious beliefs are rare. One participant argues that being at public schools is less stressful because a large percentage of their students are from migrant communities such as Asian, African or Middle Eastern communities who have hold on their permanent and citizenship status in Australia. Salma claims that going to public school is a good choice for her because it enables her to interact with people of various backgrounds, she suggested that:

> …it is a public school a lot of students from different racial backgrounds such as immigrants and those who have been here for ages and international students… (Salma, Year 12)

Salma indicated that multiethnic students' backgrounds allow her to feel comfortable being at her public school, and thus gaining acceptance therein is possible. This positive narrative of schooling experience is to a large extent due to Australian willingness to welcome students of multicultural background through its multiculturalism policy in the area of education. Her written narrative also suggests similar tone, she writes that:

> I find that it doesn't really matter what religion or ethnicity you are in our school. Everybody is treated the same for different reasons. If someone was being treated differently (not necessarily badly), but different from others, it would only be because of their academic abilities or their interests. I find that Uni High is very accepting and diverse in its different cultures and beliefs. I think that also being a state school, it gives a chance for all sorts of people to get to know each other and become friends. (Written Narrative-Salma)

This written protocol shows that Salma seems very positive about her school. She does not see that religion become a distinctive maker at school between her and other non-Muslim students. In fact, she reiterates that academic abilities and interests create bigger gap among students and position them differently rather than religious affiliation.

Multiculturalism that characterizes most Australian public schools has enabled students of minority backgrounds to gain spaces within their school settings. However, Salma noted that some discomfort may emerge during interaction which involves sensitive topics and issues such as conversations around global politics or Islamism, which she herself has little knowledge on those

particular issues. This finding suggests that Muslim youth in Australia seem to have lack of interests in politics or in what is going on in the Muslim world. They are just teenagers who happen to be Muslim, and thus their biggest concern is on negotiating between being young and Muslim (see Herrera & Bayat, 2010).

In my interview with her parents, common narrative appears, in which Salma's father perceives Australian public schools as positive. It is for this very reason, he send his children to Australian public school. Salma's father, who is a university professor and holds a doctorate degree from one of the tertiary education institutions in Australia, perceives Australian public schools somewhat positively. He himself observes that because of the multicultural spirit embedded within the Australian societies, especially the city of Melbourne, Australian public schools are proud to receive students from multicultural backgrounds.

In spite of Salma's positive views on Australian public schools, she notes that students in certain public schools located in suburban areas may be closed-minded and hold negative perceptions on Islam and Muslims. Salma asserts in the interview that:

> If you go to school out here, for example, or you go further, I reckon that the type of people is a bit you know less educated, no offence to them, so they not really open-minded, they do not know and they just look at the media and go, yea yea Muslims are terrorists. They do not know it just a kind of religion, part of a faith, just like Christianity, like Buddhism. (Salma, Year 12)

Terrorism is a word that seems to be labelled out of context. Muslims living in the Western society is subject to such name calling. Young Muslims in my study also voice this concern that terrorism emerges out of nowhere and this word is often associated with Muslims, especially the Muslim youth.

In line with Salma, Darni who attends Southern Secondary College perceives her school positively. She suggests that the school is accommodative towards students of various backgrounds. She asserts that "my school is very accepting, I can wear any headscarf". Darni feels life at her public school is enjoyable, and because of the absence of discrimination towards different religious beliefs, makes her confident to wear veil as a significant marker of being a Muslim girl. In her written protocol, Darni narrates that wearing veil is the marker of piety.

> Wearing the hijab is the first major step I took in being closer to God. I have been wearing the hijab since I was in year 7 because my parents told me to wear it in order to be a good Muslim. At first wearing the hijab was difficult. It was hot to wear in summer and annoying to put on whenever I went out. I didn't like it. But as time when on and my Islamic knowledge increases I thank my parents and Allah for seeing how good it is to wear the hijab. I actually prefer wearing the hijab out now. (Written Narrative Darni)

As I interview Darni's father, I find that due to the degree of trust he has towards Australian public school, he is not very much worried of his daughter's decision to wear veil. Even though his narrative sounds a little worry or his daughter's safety, he suggests that school communities in Australia have been open-minded towards veil. Although Australian public schools welcome students from different religious backgrounds, all parents interviewed in this study seem to be concerned with their children religious identity. For that reason alone, they all agree that sending their children to Islamic weekend school is a way out to their concern. All young Muslims in this study tells me that they go to Islamic weekend school in addition to their formal school.

Other positive point is voiced by Suci, in which she suggests that friends at school are thoughtful and understanding. They respect her regardless of her different religious and cultural backgrounds. The multiculturalism values as adopted in Australian public schools welcome students from different social, cultural and religious backgrounds. As a consequence, interaction among students within the school building can be developed. The enrolment of students from different backgrounds

requires Australian public schools such as Eastern Secondary College to accommodate different values brought by students. Suci said:

> It is like a common thing now that there are a lot of different religions and the school, they understand, and sometimes, they just ask question like fasting and everything but they don't like see me whenever they see me like oh yes she is Muslim or anything like that (not prejudice). They just see me like another person that they understand. (Suci, Year 10)

This narrative suggests that how someone is positioned in a particular society, creates certain feeling of self. As the narrative suggests that Suci positions herself positively due to the way she is positioned by others. She does not feel excluded from the mainstream students due to the fact that her friends do not position her as *the other.*

Fatma of Wealth Secondary College also find schooling in Australian public school enjoyable. She suggests that her friends and teachers understand that she is Muslim, and such comfortable atmosphere is the result of her understanding friends and teachers. She says "Yeah I like the school that people are friendly and the teachers are nice". During interaction at school, Fatma suggests that finding the right person to interact with is indeed important because good people will understand why she embraces a religion different from them.

Unlike narratives of the Indonesian young Muslims in my study, Niyozov and Pluim's (2009) participants suggest that teachers of Judeo-Christian background are not very supportive on the presence of young Muslims. They found that teachers are not very accommodating of Muslim students' educational, social and in fact religious needs. This suggests that teachers in the Western society have yet to establish a common view on their Muslim students. This different view is perhaps due to the fact that these teachers experience different levels of exposure on Muslim society. Lack of interaction with Muslim communities in diaspora allows mainstream societies to be close-minded towards their fellow citizens.

Imani who also goes to the same school as Fatma, states that students attending most Australian public schools come from various ethnic and religious backgrounds: they are Australian-Australians, -Asians, -Africans and some other ethnicities and nationalities. For that reason, she believes that those varieties of students' background bring with them different ways of behaving and thinking. Although she does not see herself as different from other schoolmates, she suggests that in term of dietary issues, she perceives herself to be different from non-Muslim students, in which she does not consume pork or other non-halal meal. Imani asserts:

> I feel different though...because like, they all eat pork and beacon and stuff, but mine is cooked, kind of weird, yea they believe in Jesus and to whatever they believe in and stuff like that, but most my friends, they do not know I am a Muslim, even if I told them, they won't believe me. (Imani, Year 9).

This narrative suggests that identity is indeed fluid; it is multiple and it changes according to condition. On the one hand, Imani states that she does not position herself as *the other* and neither do their colleagues at school. On the other hand, she sees herself different from others and the difference refrain her from engaging in certain activities. Two issues that restrict these young Muslims' interaction within their school environment are the diet, in which these Muslims are only allowed to consume the halal food and also the daily praying.

Imani believes that her source of comfort at school is her classmates' acceptance of her different religious backgrounds. She in fact, suggests that her schoolmates are not concerned with religious affiliation. Imani says during the interview:

> They (friends at school) don't really care if you are like a Jewish or whatever, it is like yeah okay, you are a Muslim and that is it yeah. So like they don't really ask and they don't really care about it, so yeah. (Imani, Year 9)

In her written narrative, Imani also states that "the students don't really care what your religion is, because we don't really talk about religions or bring the topic up when we're talking to our friends".

Other students in the study provide somewhat similar reactions about their school. Hera, for example discusses that she gains more freedom being in the public school instead of private Islamic schools. Hera claims that regulations at public school are different from those of the private Islamic school, she used to attend (Hera attended Islamic private school until Year 8). Hera explains that among the freedoms she enjoys at public school are in term of the prayer time. She found that the public school does not restrict or intimidate her with a special praying time. The public school also allows her to have long break time. In her school, she also enjoys its types of uniform, which does not encourage students to put on the veil. Listening and playing music are also some other types of freedom she enjoyed at her public school. The public school also enables her to hang around with students of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Hera noted in her personal narrative:

> Being in public school is much different. Life style and overall feel and surrounding were different. There is no music at [the Islamic school] is taught

> I started at Heidelberg Secondary College at Year 9 in 2006. Public school (non religion) is very different from my old school. Boys and girls talk to each other, no pray time, longer recess at lunch, different method of teaching and definitely different uniform. (Hera, Year 12)

In spite of her good experience at public school, Hera is also sure that not all public schools are tolerable towards religious and ethnic diversity, as she suggested in the interview that:

> it depends which public school you go to, in [my school] they got very tolerant and understanding, I am not singled out or anything but in the party of course because I don't drink like other students. (Hera, Year, 12)

It emerges from my research that religiously and culturally diverse student population at these young Muslims' schools shape schooling environment to be more accommodative and acceptance to multiple religious and cultural values. This atmosphere allows comfort to be nurtured in their school environment in general and their classmates in particular. Discriminations regarding ethnic and religious background are minimal in these Indonesian Muslims' schools. These findings, in a way challenge the myths found in some other studies conducted in this similar concern, such as a study by Ali Tolppa-Niitamo (2002).

3.2. Sense of otherness

Apart from good experience being at Australian public schools, some challenges are also obvious. For example, Suci indicates that some students usually tease other students during their interactions at school. Suci states that not all the teasing is directly link to one's religious and cultural belief:

> Yeah there's always people that are going to be rude and there's always people that are going to tease you and stuff, so of course I've been teased before, but never for my religion, because I think people know there's a line and you can't cross that line, because then that's really rude. But yeah I've been teased before by people. (Suci, Year 10)

Suci suggests that being teased at school is a common place in the life of young Muslims. The teases however are not always related to religious discrimination. This narrative therefore suggests that when students are being discriminated, it is not always due to their religious belief.

Salma also provides some examples of her various kinds of experience while at school.

> Good experience is yes, just the friends. The bad experience is maybe but not really maybe a couple of time a little bit of teasing and stuff. (Salma, Year 12)

> Maybe a little bit uncomfortable sometimes when we are talking about the terrorist and then there just some people that are very uneducated in religion, they don't understand what religion, they don't understand Islam, which is sometimes annoying like why do you pray, why does your mom wear headscarf, and sometimes I feel uncomfortable explaining because they don't even want to understand, so there is no point, if I go because I believe in…they just gonna keep arguing, they just not open minded, that just uncomfortable a bit. (Salma, Year 12)

The quote indicates that the young Muslims in my study feel uncomfortable if they are confronted with some queries about Islam from their non-Muslim friends. This statement also suggests that arguments regarding religious issues still exist in the school settings.

The unpleasant experience is also voiced by Darni who tells me:

> When I first came, I was in year 8 and I was near the canteen, a person called me a terrorist, a boy and he is younger, in year 7, I felt sad, I don't know what to say. (Darni, Year 12)

She chooses not to respond about this incident, and she admits that having been interacting with her school communities, she does not experience any of such incidents again. In this instance, Darni seems to engage in a silent resistance. For her, the best way to confront this kind of *racialization*, such as name calling is by avoiding direct confrontation. This kind of silent resistance is seen to be one of the most effective ways to avoid confrontation.

In regard with negative perceptions at school, Fatma expresses her concern that some of her friends who are white Australians think that they are much more intelligent than other non-white Australian students. Fatma feels that this assumption is not true because there are many other students from non-white backgrounds do better in classroom than those of white Australians. Fatma states:

> They think that they're better…Some are yeah…Yeah you can just tell that they think they're so good and yeah they walk around and push everyone around…They just think they do better … Yeah I think they're like that, they think they're better, but depends on; not all of them are like that, there's just some people who are like hmm. (Fatma, Year 11)

It is clear from many narratives that while most of the Indonesian Muslim schoolgirls have positive schooling experiences, there are also instances of unpleasant experiences that relate to religion and race.

3.3. Being in the loop

Young Muslims' narratives suggest that some of them view themselves to be different from their school communities. However, in the other instance, they see themselves to have integrated with other "white" Australian students. For example, some of these Indonesian Muslim schoolgirls in my study have positive social interactions with their schoolmates. Salma states in one of the interviews:

> I'm friends with a lot of boys, like my group vary, it's not just girls, it's like boys and girls. So I have some really good friends that are boys as well, but I don't think it's any different. I've never been mistreated or anything like that, so I've never been to an all girls school, so I don't know what it's like, but I've always been going to a co-ed school, so I'm just used to boys and how they act … Yeah I just keep my limits, I know what the limits are and then I just stop. So they let us have a friendship with them and then that's all. (Salma, Year 12)

The statement explains that interaction among male and female students in the school setting is normal. Salma explains that she in fact feel comfortable interacting with her male schoolmates. However, the other student, Fatma suggests that finding the right person to interact with is indeed important because good people will understand her much better.

Imani and Hera also develop good relationship with their school mates. Imani for example, does things together with her colleagues, she goes to canteen, does sport, goes camping, and also goes clubbing as other students do. In this respect, she views herself as similar to other friends coming from various ethnic backgrounds. Although her friends are from many different cultures, she develops and maintains good relationship with all of them, in which no one is singled out at school.

Darni, the only Muslim girl in my study who wears veil, provides interesting points about her interaction with her school mates. She suggests:

> Most of the time, at school is just good, they are really understanding in all that, ... I just interact with them (male students) in good manner, I talk to them, we all share group, I don't know...pretty normal relationship like friends ... I think I have a fair understanding on the limit for interacting so I don't hug them like other people, I just talk to them like they are good friends. (Darni, Year 12)

She interacts with students from diverse backgrounds. However, she is aware of some of the religious limitations. She understands that Islam does not allow unmarried people of different sexes to hug each other.

Salma, Darni and Suci is involved in their school academic programmes. Salma, for example states during the interview.

> Well from Years 7 to 10, I participated in inter school sport like compete against other school I did several advance programs, which is like I don't know a bit like TAFE subject where they teach you how to communicate with people in working group, that is not really academic, and music, orchestra and that kind of stuff. (Salma, Year 12)

In line with Salma, Darni states in the first interview that she is involved in many school programmes, she asserts:

> I used to when I was in grade 9 and 10, I went to sport and play softball and soccer, I was in SRC for a while...that's all...SRC is like school representative council, like a couple of students in your class go to a meeting...it is just a student council...ya we do fund raising and ask students about their improvement at school. (Darni, Year 12)

The quote suggests that Darni does not find difficulties participating within her school regardless of her attire. She involved in various academic and on academic activities. She also states that her Muslim attire does not inhibit her from engaging in sports such as soccer and softball. She also becomes student representative and engages in fund raising activities at school.

The other student also expresses similar description on her activities at school. Suci, for example stated that:

> Last year I competed in a team called the Windsor Gardens Exchange and it's when there's a squad of about eighty at our school and then we versus a school from Adelaide and it's been the longest running exchange in Australia between two schools. And so that goes for a week and we compete and we just meet lots of people and it's just you compete in sports and academics and music and so that's one of the most standout memories for me. (Suci, Year 10)

Suci is also one of the leading students at her school. For example, she is a school captain and play music for her school band.

Unlike the other young female students in this study, Fatma and Hera are not very involved in school academic programmes. Fatma does not participate in many school activities. She does not do sport. She joins the environmental club, by which she could help keep environment green. Fatma

says, "Not really (doing sport), I join the environmental club. I join the green club and do something for the environment". Hera is also not so much involved in any school activities at the moment; she engages in neither sport nor academic programme. She says that "No sport, no sport I am not very sporty. I am not doing much because year 12 is too busy, you cannot do anything but I have a part time job".

Although Imani do not engage so much in academic programme at school, she is active in participating in sport. Imani says that:

> yeah I do basket ball, badminton … I practice badminton every Friday after school, basket I usually play during play time or lunch… I am like a leader that we go camping someday, somewhere in a tent and hiking and stuff like that. (Imani, Year 9)

Indonesian Muslim schoolgirls are no different to other schoolgirls in that there are some who actively participate in school activities and there are those who do not. Likewise with their school experiences, they have both positive and negative experiences.

4. Discussion

In this article, I have identified some complexities regarding Indonesian Muslim youth's ways of contesting and negotiating their *Muslimness* in Australian public schools. Part of my research finding shows the level of inclusiveness of these Muslim students in Australian public schools. However, discomfort feelings such as name calling also emerge in their narratives and written protocol data. The findings also reveal that young Muslims in my study in a way contest and negotiate their being Muslims within Australian public schools. In some point of time during the interviews, they see themselves as similar to their classmates in regard with engaging in school activities and programmes, but yet on the other instance they position themselves through the notion of otherness.

It emerges from my research that religiously and culturally diverse student population at their schools shapes schooling environment to be more accommodative and acceptance of multiple religious and cultural values, in which the sense of comfort is nurtured in their school environment in general and their classmates in particular. Discriminations regarding ethnic and religious background are minimal in these young Muslims' schools. These findings, in a way challenge the myths found in some other studies conducted in this similar concern. For example, a study by Ali Tolppa-Niitamo (2002) who explores schooling experience of Somali youth in Hilsinki, Finland found that the generation in between of Somali immigrant encounter linguistic and cultural challenges and tensions during their lives at school. Because of these barriers, some of them experience a degree of racism, prejudice and the enforcement for acculturation.

Other study, which also explore Muslim students' experience in public schools found some commonalities with that of Ali Tolppa-Niitamo (2002). Merry (2005) who conducted a study on Muslim student youth's experience in Belgium public schools, found that Muslim students face a degree of exclusion. Muslim students were accused to have problem at merging with the local culture, and thus teachers have negative views on them. Mansouri and Trembath (2005) also support findings of those previous studies.

My findings shows that Indonesian Muslim youth in Australian public school indeed experience some level of comfort while at their schools although there are indications of some minor discomfort experience. To my analysis, this distinction emerges due to several main reasons. First, my research setting is different from those of the previous ones. Ali Tolppa-Niitamo (2002), for example conducted research in a society adopting Nordic welfare state, Finland, which was characterized with its commitment to promote equity among its inhabitant through homogenizing cultural values. Homogenization of cultural difference creates the risk of threatening the immigrant's cultures. In such a society, culture of immigrant children would be put at stake in the school environment. Students of immigrant descent would be required to adopt dominant culture for the sake of the

school universalism. With this understanding in mind, it seems reasonable that Ali Tolppa-Niitamo (2002) found that immigrant youth in her study feel the sense of exclusion from their school environment.

The other two studies by Merry (2005) and Mansouri and Trembath (2005) also seem to be different from my own. Although Belgium adopts the idea of pluralist approach to ethnic and religious diversity, somewhat similar to British (Merry, 2005) and Australia adopts multiculturalism (Leeman & Reid, 2006), Muslim students' schooling experience seems to be in conflict with the spirit of multiculturalism. My findings show that Indonesian Muslim youth indicates that they have a positive feeling toward Australian public schools. However, Merry's (2005) research on Belgium students and Mansouri and Trembath's (2005) study on Lebanese students in Australia yield different result, in which they found that those minority students encountered various forms of racism and prejudicial sentiments.

This difference, however, can be justified. My research's participants are Indonesian-Australian; they consist of second generation and 1/5 generation Australian Muslim. Australian Muslims of Indonesian descent is the minority among the Australian Muslim minority, count to only 2.5% of Australian Muslims. As the result of their minority status among the minority, the Australian Muslims of Indonesian descent integrate with people of dominant culture in their home of residence. This Muslim minority disperses in their residence across Australia. My participants live in dispersion from one and another; some live in northern part of Victoria but some live in southern part of Victoria. In addition to home of residence, my participants go to a number of different public schools.

As the result, a flock of Australian Muslim of Indonesian descent cannot be found in one school. This fact triggers these participants to integrate well with community of various backgrounds. Unlike my participants, Merry's and Mansouri and Trembath's participants were the majority among Muslim minority. Merry (2005) conducted research on schooling experience of Muslim students of Moroccan descent, which is the largest immigrant community in Belgium, and likewise, Mansouri and Trembath (2005) researched Muslim students of Lebanese background, which is considered as one of the largest Muslim community in Australia. Muslims of Moroccan descent as in Merry's study and Muslim of Lebanese descent as in Mansouri and Trembath's live in concentration; they concentrate in one or two areas and build a strong community, and such a large community enable them to empower themselves, challenge the dominant and even resist the criminalization or prejudicial sentiments on them. This condition encourages these Muslim communities to re unite and create a sense of "us and them".

The other justification for different research finding is the school population, in which the Indonesian Muslim youth enrolled in. Most Indonesian Muslim youth in my study attended public schools, which were dominated by students of immigrant backgrounds. For example, Fatma, Imani, Salma and Suci mainly go to schools whose population are students of immigrant backgrounds. This fact reduced the level of racism and discrimination, since they hold similar status in the Australian community. This is in line with Imani's argument that students at his school were incapable of discriminating other students because all of them are the minority within the Australian society. This suggests that my research would probably yield different findings if it was conducted in different settings. It is obvious that the difference of research contexts would yield different results. My research which takes different contexts, both in setting and research population found somewhat more positive schooling experience of Muslim youth in public school than those of the previous research. These differences lie on some respects: research setting and research population. The research setting differentiates my findings from those of Ali Tolppa-Niitamo (2002); while the research population differentiates my findings from those of Merry (2005) and Mansouri and Trembath (2005).

Nevertheless, my data also showed some tensions in the life of the Indonesian Muslim youth in Australian public schools. Name calling such as "you are the terrorist", and teasing are two common tensions and conflicts experienced by my participants. Such a name calling, however, is minimal in

my data, in that only one or two Muslim youth exposed to this kind of name calling. It has been a fact that Muslims were projected negatively by media (Ali, 2005), and because of this stereotypical and prejudicial sentiment, such name calling such as "hei you are a terrorist" emerges in the school settings. The other tension as suggested earlier is a kind of teasing by a group of friends to the other groups. Such a teasing was in fact a common phenomenon in the school setting. At school, youth attempts to ask questions about themselves and prove their existence by acting out (Nakkula, 2008); and they oftentimes only consider their own needs and desires and make an effort to meet those needs and desire (Toshalis, 2008). Toshalis (2008) also claims that in constructing their identity, youngsters tend to connect with the wider community on the one hand, but on the other they make an attempt to separate themselves by differentiating themselves with others such as their parents and friends. For this reason, some teasing taking place at the school setting is considered as a form as acting out and differentiating oneself from the rest of school community.

In addition, similar to findings of other research such as that of Zine (2001) and Collet (2007), my data showed that Indonesian Muslim youth also need to engage in some kinds of contemplating and negotiating for being a Muslim. My participants contemplate their being a Muslim through building communication because it allows mutual understanding to occur. Other participants also engage in resisting some youth cultures, which are obviously strongly prohibited by Islamic principles such as drinking and premarital relationship. Research by Zine (2000, 2001) and by Collet (2007), which both took place in Canadian settings, found that Muslim youths in Canadian public school resist dominant cultures as a way of negotiating their ways of being Muslim. Zine (2000) suggests that Muslim students in Canadian school engage in formalized resistance as a way of expressing their identity and preserving their Islamic identity. Unlike traditional definition of resistance, Zine sees formalized resistance emphasizes on how to organize and manage dissenting views; it is not a kind of acting out, which will bring some disadvantage for those who resist. Formalized resistance is initiated by a student body such as Muslim Student Association (MSA). The latter work of Zine (2001) and the most recent work by Collet (2007) also found a kind of resistance taking place in public school as a way of stating and maintaining their Muslim identity through requesting schools to provide facilities to their needs.

Even though my findings suggested that the Indonesian Muslim youth resist the youth culture, a kind of resistance was different to those of Zine (2000, 2001) and Collet (2007). Muslim students in Zine's work engage in formalized resistance through a student organization. The MSA would ask school to provide them with the praying facilities; supported Muslim students who encountered some kinds of bullying or discrimination; conducting Islamic circle and some other activities. Collet (2007) also suggests that students and their parents work together to resist some school policies such as the curriculum content and extracurricular programmes, which are considered as inappropriate for Muslim students to participants. Unlike these kinds of resistance, my participants engage in individual resistance; and it is not a kind of acting out or committing in harsh activities. My participants resist through explaining Islamic principles and also proactively restraining themselves from doing things that contradict to the Islamic principles.

My research also shows how the Indonesian Muslim youth see themselves within their lives at public school. I drew from my interview and narrative data that these Muslim youth see themselves as similar to their non-Muslim friends; they argue that they have similar patterns of friendship and they also engage in similar sport and academic programmes at their school. However, interesting findings show that some attributes indeed positioned these Muslim youth in a different corner. Issues such as praying, fasting, halal dietary, the veil, the notion of whiteness and habits were major attributes that distinguish these Muslim youth with the rest of the community. Praying and fasting are two types of worship among the five pillars of Islam (Esposito, 2002; Shepard, 2009; Yaran, 2007), which all Muslim should be committed. Unlike fasting that can be done without requiring special facilities, praying should be conducted within a specific time and also it would be better if they are done in some specific places. This fact results in a problem for Muslim students because public schools which hold secular values were not in a position to provide worshiping place to a

particular religion (Halstead, 1995). The obligation to be committed to these two pillars of Islam forced Muslim students to position themselves as different from the rest of non-Muslim school community. In addition to praying and fasting, the need to consume the halal meat, which is butchered by reciting the name of Allah also differentiate these Muslim youth with the non-Muslim students. In this regard, Hera indicates that she has to restrain herself eating from the school canteen because the food is not halal; and such an attitude positioned Hera in a different pole from her non-Muslim friends.

The other source of difference, which is considered very obvious, is the notion of veil. In spite of the controversy on the obligation of veil for Muslim women (Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Zine, 2006), it is considered as a specific marker of Muslim (Dwyer, 1999). People will easily recognize that someone a Muslim from this specific marker of being a Muslim. Within the Muslim community, the veil issue is seen differently by different groups of Muslim. Some say that being in veil is an indication of devoted Muslim who obey Allah's commands (Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Zine, 2006), while other suggest that it is a form of patriarchal oppression within the male domination towards their female fellow Muslims (Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Zine, 2006). Out of six Muslim schoolgirls participating in my research only one schoolgirl, Darni is committed with wearing the veil. Her definition of veil is very straightforward that it is the obligation from Allah. This expression is similar to those participating in Ali's (2005) study. As I ask further question on what make Darni is so confident to put on the veil, she suggests that her accepting surrounding shapes her ways of positioning within the public school, in which wearing veil is not seen as a burden or challenging for her. Ali (2005) found a commonality in his study with Darni's explanation; most Ali's participants decide to take on veil because of the accepting nature of American wider community. However, the other five Muslim schoolgirls in my study suggest that they are not prepared to put on the veil at the moment. Their reason not to put on veil varied; some say that it is not an obligation for Muslim, but the other engage in different discourses in that they admit that they are not very confident to look different and to be different.

The other striking difference between the Indonesian Muslim youth in my study and their non-Muslim classmate is the notion of "whiteness". My data shows that some Muslim youth claimed that their *Aussie-Aussie* friends regarded themselves as superior in term of academic and also sport. Such an assumption had been regarded as a truth by some "white Australian" because of the sense of superiority as a result of their skin colour, cultural values and cognitive ability. Garner (2007) suggests that the idea of white supremacy has shaped some people of white skin to regard themselves as superior in terms of cultural and also cognitive ability. These students of white background saw themselves differently because of their bright skin colour. As they see themselves as more superior, they tend to create the assumption that other non-white people as inferior (Cooks & Simpson, 2007). The other scholar suggests that white people see themselves as superior because "Whiteness" is considered as hegemonic and thus it is undefined (Perry, 2001). As the above concepts suggest that some white Australian students, or "Aussie-Aussie" students, the term given by my participants, position themselves as untouchable and unbeatable; they are the superior whose ability exceeds that of other non-white students, and such an assumption is stubbornly persisted (Perry, 2001).

5. Conclusion

The article has made an attempt to explore young Muslims' narratives about their ways of being in Australian public schools. Four main research questions are proposed in this article as the attempt to explore these students' narratives. The article found that the six Muslim schoolgirls in my study see their schooling experience as mainly positive. The students enrolling in five high schools claim that their school is caring and friendly. The accepting atmosphere of the school helps them position themselves effectively within their schooling context. They are as involved in the academic and non-academic school programme as do other students of different cultural and religious backgrounds. In fact, some of them become members of student council and also become the school captain.

However, there are also issues that require them to negotiate between being young and being Muslim. For example, some of these young Muslims' comments have alluded to some of the gender

and racial politics operating in the schooling context. The girls are using terms such as "White-Australian", "non-White Australians", "terrorist", "prejudice" when describing their schooling experiences. The dietary issue is also a concern for most of young Muslims while being at school, since there are some religious restrictions. For example, these young Muslims are expected to consume only the halal meat, and that type of meat is not very much available in Australian public schools. In spite of this restriction, these young Muslims seem to negotiate their ways of being at school. They do so through silent resistance. In terms of dietary issues, for example, they still hang out with their friends in school canteen but only limit themselves to consume vegetarian food or fried potato.

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