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Navigating Identity and Education: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Muslim Learners in Philippine Public Junior High School

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of Muslim learners in a public junior high school in Tanauan City, Philippines. The research examined how Muslim students navigated their cultural identity, social interactions, and learning experiences within a predominantly non-Muslim school environment. Despite increasing attention to multicultural education, limited research had examined the everyday experiences of Muslim learners in Philippine public schools, particularly outside predominantly Muslim regions. Understanding these experiences was important in a country shaped by a long history of conflict, peace-building initiatives, and ongoing efforts toward social cohesion and inclusive development.

A qualitative research design was employed to capture the participants' lived experiences. Data were gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with six Muslim students enrolled at Tanauan City Integrated High School during the 2022–2023 academic year. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify patterns and meanings in the participants' narratives.

The analysis generated six major themes: cultural practices, social interactions, encountered challenges, adjustment strategies, teachers' classroom management styles, and school climate. The findings revealed that Muslim culture strongly shaped the learners' values and daily practices. At the same time, the students experienced cultural misunderstandings, language barriers, and the need to adapt to unfamiliar school norms. Despite these challenges, the learners demonstrated resilience and maintained their cultural identity while interacting with non-Muslim peers and teachers. Their experiences reflected the principles of the Salad Bowl Theory, which emphasized the coexistence of diverse cultural identities within a multicultural society.

This study contributed to the growing literature on multicultural education in the Philippine context by highlighting how minority students negotiated identity, belonging, and adaptation in mainstream school settings. The findings also underscored the role of inclusive educational practices in promoting intercultural understanding, peace, and social harmony. The study recommended peer language tutoring, teacher orientation on cultural sensitivity, and institutional support programs to better address the needs of Muslim learners.

Keywords: Multicultural education, Cultural identity, Minority students, Inclusive education, Religious diversity

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Introduction

Diversity refers to differences among individuals and groups in terms of ethnicity, religion, gender, age, socioeconomic status, abilities, political beliefs, and cultural background, while inclusion emphasizes recognizing individuals' inherent dignity and fostering a sense of belonging in social and educational environments (Banks, 2004). Cultural diversity has enriched educational institutions by promoting empathy, improving problem-solving skills, and broadening perspectives among learners (Yang & Zhong, 2024). Within this context, multiculturalism describes the coexistence of different cultures, ethnicities, and social groups within a shared political and social system.

Educational institutions play a crucial role in promoting multicultural values. Public schools often serve as spaces where students encounter diversity and learn tolerance, equality, and social responsibility (Palfrey, 2017). Curricula in multicultural societies frequently integrate the histories and traditions of minority groups to foster intercultural understanding. However, these efforts have also faced criticism, as some scholars argue that multicultural initiatives may emphasize political correctness rather than meaningful intercultural engagement. Alvarez (2014) noted that while multicultural participation assumes equal access to educational and social resources, many minority groups remain excluded due to poverty, marginalization, and limited representation. Addressing these structural inequalities is therefore essential to ensure meaningful participation of minority groups in educational and social spaces.

Debates on multiculturalism have also raised questions about how societies balance diversity with shared civic values. Noreen (2019) argued that while cultural exemptions help preserve minority identities, they may also create tensions with dominant social norms. In educational settings, students from minority groups often undergo identity negotiation as they navigate environments shaped by different cultural expectations (Qumseya, 2018). These experiences may involve adaptation, selective assimilation, and the preservation of cultural practices. Theoretical models such as the melting pot and salad bowl provide useful frameworks for understanding these dynamics. While the melting pot model suggests assimilation into dominant culture, the salad bowl model emphasizes the coexistence of distinct cultural identities within a shared social environment.

The Philippines provides an important context for examining multicultural education due to its cultural and religious diversity. The country is home to more than 110 indigenous communities and approximately 170 ethnolinguistic groups (Blanco, 2024). Historical colonization and cultural exchanges have shaped Filipino society into a culturally diverse nation. The Philippine Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and Islam is the second-largest religion, comprising approximately 5.6% of the population (Williams, 2020). Although Muslim communities are largely concentrated in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), Muslim populations are also present in other regions due to migration, education, and employment opportunities.

Despite peace-building initiatives and development programs, Muslim communities in the Philippines continue to experience challenges related to marginalization, cultural misunderstanding, and unequal access to opportunities. In schools located outside Muslim-majority regions, Muslim learners may encounter cultural differences, language barriers, and limited institutional recognition of their religious practices (Chen et al., 2019). These conditions make educational settings important spaces for understanding how minority students experience inclusion, identity formation, and social integration.

Tanauan City Integrated High School represents one such multicultural learning environment where Muslim learners interact with predominantly non-Muslim peers and

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teachers. Within this context, Muslim students experience both opportunities for intercultural interaction and challenges related to cultural adjustment, identity preservation, and social belonging (Jamal et al., 2023). This study therefore examined how Muslim Junior High School students experienced multicultural interactions and how they maintained their cultural identity within a diverse educational setting during the academic year 2022–2023.

Despite growing literature on multicultural education, limited studies have examined the lived experiences of Muslim learners in Philippine public schools outside Muslim-majority areas. Existing research has often focused on Muslim communities in Mindanao or on international Muslim students, leaving a gap in understanding how Muslim learners navigate identity, adaptation, and belonging in mainstream Philippine schools. This study addressed this gap by examining the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and identity negotiation of Muslim learners in a multicultural public school environment.

Objectives

This study aimed to understand and identify the lived experiences of Muslim learners at Tanauan City Integrated High School. Specifically, this study sought to:

1. Describe the student life experiences of Muslim learners in a public-school environment.
2. Identify the coping mechanisms employed by Muslim learners in response to their lived experiences and challenges.
3. Determine the factors that influence and shape the identity formation of Muslim learners within the school context.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Difference Hypothesis and Learning

The cultural difference hypothesis emphasized the importance of educators understanding the differences between students' home environments and school cultures. The theory suggested that learners raised in diverse cultural settings approached education, communication, and learning processes differently. These differences influenced classroom participation, interpretation of instructions, and interaction with peers and teachers (Aslan, 2022). As a result, educators were encouraged to recognize cultural diversity as a significant factor affecting students' educational experiences.

This perspective was supported by Piaget's learning theory, which proposed that learning involved the transfer and reconstruction of knowledge based on previous experiences. According to this view, students actively constructed new knowledge by connecting new information with their prior understanding and lived experiences. Recognizing students' cultural backgrounds and validating their prior knowledge were therefore essential in facilitating meaningful learning. Integrating culturally relevant examples into instruction helped bridge the gap between students' home environments and school expectations.

However, some scholars critiqued the cultural difference hypothesis for potentially oversimplifying cultural dynamics. Critics argued that focusing solely on cultural differences could unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or overlook structural factors such as socioeconomic inequalities and institutional practices (Gunderson, 2024). Despite these criticisms, the framework remained useful in understanding how cultural background influenced students' educational engagement.

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Models of Multiculturalism: Melting Pot and Salad Bowl

Multicultural societies have been conceptualized through models explaining how different cultural groups interacted within shared environments. Halse and Kennedy (2021) described the melting pot and salad bowl models of multiculturalism.

The melting pot model suggested that individuals from different cultural backgrounds gradually assimilated into a dominant culture. In contrast, the salad bowl model described a society in which diverse cultural groups coexisted while maintaining distinct identities (Berray, 2019). Within this perspective, individuals could participate fully in social institutions while preserving their cultural heritage.

Despite their usefulness, scholars debated the limitations of these models. Critics argued that the melting pot approach often privileged dominant cultures, while the salad bowl model could risk cultural fragmentation without shared social values. Nevertheless, both models provided important insights into how minority groups navigated identity and belonging.

Relevance to the Present Study

These theoretical perspectives provided a foundation for understanding the experiences of Muslim learners in multicultural school environments. The cultural difference hypothesis explained how cultural background influenced learning behaviors and adjustment. Meanwhile, the salad bowl model helped explain how Muslim learners maintained their identity while participating in mainstream education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore and understand the lived experiences of Muslim learners in a multicultural public-school environment. Narrative inquiry focused on examining individuals' personal stories and experiences to understand how they constructed meaning within their social contexts (Butina, 2015). This approach was appropriate because the study aimed to capture the participants' experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms as Muslim learners interacting within a culturally diverse school setting.

Through narrative accounts obtained from interviews, the researchers examined how the participants described their everyday school experiences and how they negotiated their cultural identity within the broader school community. The approach allowed the participants to articulate their perspectives in their own words while enabling the researchers to interpret recurring patterns and meanings across their narratives.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

The participants consisted of six Muslim learners from Grades 7 to 10 in Junior High School during the school year 2022–2023 at Tanauan City Integrated High School. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which allowed the researchers to intentionally choose individuals who possessed relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation.

The inclusion criteria required that participants:

1. were practicing Muslims or were raised in Muslim households;
2. were enrolled as Junior High School students at Tanauan City Integrated High School; and
3. had direct experiences interacting with peers and teachers within a multicultural school environment.

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Some participants were born into Muslim families, while others had converted to Islam and were active adherents of the faith. These criteria ensured that the participants possessed sufficient cultural knowledge and lived experiences to provide meaningful insights into the research problem.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Saturation occurred when additional interviews no longer produced substantially new insights or themes related to the participants' experiences. After interviewing six participants, the researchers observed recurring patterns in the narratives, which indicated that the data had reached an adequate level of depth for qualitative analysis.

Data Gathering Instrument

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using a researcher-developed interview guide. Six open-ended questions were designed to explore the participants' school experiences, cultural practices, challenges encountered, coping mechanisms, and interactions with peers and teachers.

The interview questions were developed based on the objectives of the study and were reviewed by subject experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research problem. Prior to formal data collection, the interview guide underwent pilot testing with a small group of students who were not included among the final participants. Feedback from the pilot test helped refine the wording and sequencing of the questions to ensure that they were understandable and culturally appropriate.

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed flexibility in probing participants' responses while maintaining a consistent structure across interviews. This approach encouraged participants to share their personal experiences openly while enabling the researchers to explore emerging themes in greater depth.

Data Collection Procedure

After securing approval to conduct the study, the researchers coordinated with the school administration of Tanauan City Integrated High School to identify potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Permission was obtained from school authorities before initiating the data collection process.

Because the participants were minors, parental consent and participant assent were obtained prior to the interviews. The purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the confidentiality measures were clearly explained to both parents and students.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet and comfortable setting within the school to ensure minimal disruption and to encourage open communication. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' permission to ensure accuracy in data documentation. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected narratives were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, a qualitative analytic approach that identifies patterns of meaning within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis followed a systematic process consisting of several stages:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts.
2. Initial coding, during which significant statements and meaningful segments of the narratives were identified.
3. Theme development, in which related codes were grouped together to form broader categories.
4. Theme refinement, where themes were reviewed and organized to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' experiences.

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This analytic process enabled the researchers to identify recurring patterns across the participants' narratives, which led to the emergence of themes such as cultural practices, social interactions, challenges encountered, coping mechanisms, teachers' classroom management styles, and school climate.

Throughout the analysis, the researchers engaged in an abductive process by moving back and forth between the data and the theoretical framework to interpret the meanings embedded in the participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness and Validation of Findings

Several strategies were employed to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. First, member checking was conducted by sharing summarized interpretations of the interview responses with selected participants to verify the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations. Second, peer debriefing was conducted through discussions with academic colleagues and research advisers who reviewed the coding process and emerging themes. Third, expert consultation was sought from faculty members experienced in qualitative research to ensure methodological rigor and interpretive validity.

These procedures helped minimize researcher bias and strengthened the credibility and dependability of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process, particularly because the study involved minor participants and a religious minority group. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and removing identifying information from the transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and were used solely for research purposes.

Prior to data collection, the research protocol underwent ethical review and approval by the appropriate institutional research authority to ensure that the study complied with ethical standards for research involving human participants. The researchers also ensured that the interview questions were culturally sensitive and respectful of the participants' religious beliefs and practices.

Results

This chapter of the paper presents the data gathered from 6 Muslim Learners of Tanauan City Integrated High School who participated in this research. It also provides data analysis and interpretation that has been organized in accordance with the research questions outlined in the first chapter of this paper.

1. Cultural and Social Interaction

This theme explored the cultural practices of Muslim learners and how these practices influenced their interactions with non-Muslim peers and teachers within the school environment. Two major subthemes emerged: **r**eligious-cultural practices and social interaction within a multicultural classroom.

Religious and Cultural Practices

Participants emphasized that their religious practices played an important role in shaping their daily routines and identity as Muslim learners. One participant explained the significance of Ramadan:

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"*Ang karaniwang kultura na ipinagdiriwang ng mga Muslim ay ang Ramadan. Ito ay ginanap at nag-umpisa noong Marso 23, 2023 hanggang Abril 23, 2023 sapagkat isang buwan ito idinaraos. Ang kumukumpleto sa pagdiriwang na ito ay ang tinatawag na fasting at kinakailangan na magawa ito sapagkat isa itong obligasyon bilang isang Muslim. Pinaghahandaan ito ng bawat pamilyang Muslim sa pamamagitan ng paglilinis ng buong bahay bilang indikasyon ng pagsalubong ng malinis at may respeto*." [P5]

English translation:

"One of the common cultural practices celebrated by Muslims is Ramadan. It began on March 23, 2023 and lasted until April 23, 2023 because it is observed for an entire month. The completion of this celebration involves fasting, which is an obligation for Muslims. Each Muslim family prepares for it by cleaning the whole house as a sign of welcoming the celebration with cleanliness and respect."

This finding suggests that religious practices serve not only as spiritual obligations but also as cultural markers that reinforce identity. Observances such as fasting and prayer provide a shared sense of belonging among Muslim learners, even within a predominantly non-Muslim school environment.

Another participant highlighted the importance of wearing the hijab:

"*Kami po bilang mga babaeng Muslim, kinakailangan po naming magsuot ng hijab dahil sumisimbolo po ito sa amin bilang isang babae na iniingatan ang aming sarili at pagpapakita ng pagkamahinhin ng mga kababaihang Muslim*." [P2]

English translation:

"As Muslim women, we are required to wear the hijab because it symbolizes how we protect ourselves and demonstrate modesty as Muslim women."

The wearing of the hijab functioned as both a religious obligation and a visible symbol of cultural identity. While it distinguished Muslim female students from their peers, participants reported that it also strengthened their sense of commitment to their religious values.

Social Interaction in a Multicultural Environment

Despite cultural differences, many participants reported positive social interactions with non-Muslim classmates and teachers. One participant shared the following experience:

"*Sa aming seksyon, ako lang ang Muslim ngunit maayos akong nakikisalamuha sa kanila. Ako ang president ng aming klase. Minsan nagkakaroon ng komplikasyon halimbawa sa pagdarasal… ngunit nirerespeto nila ang religion namin*." [P5]

English translation:

"In our section, I am the only Muslim, but I interact well with my classmates. I am the class president. Sometimes there are complications, for example in prayer practices, but they respect our religion."

This narrative highlights how Muslim learners negotiated their identity while maintaining positive relationships with peers. The ability of the participant to serve as class president suggests that cultural differences did not necessarily prevent leadership or active participation within the classroom.

However, not all experiences were positive. Some participants expressed feelings of social distance:

"*Minsan nararamdaman ang pagkalayo o pagiging mag-isa dahil mas pinipiling wag na lang makipag-usap sa mga kamag-aral na hindi Muslim*." [P2]

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English translation:

"Sometimes I feel distant or alone because I prefer not to talk to classmates who are not Muslim."

This finding reveals a tension between cultural inclusion and personal withdrawal. Some students coped with cultural differences by limiting their interactions with non-Muslim peers.

Overall, the findings show that Muslim learners maintained their cultural and religious practices while interacting within a multicultural environment. These experiences reflect the principles of the Salad Bowl Theory, where individuals preserve their cultural identity while participating in a broader social community. However, the narratives also revealed moments of social hesitation and distance, suggesting that cultural integration may occur alongside feelings of isolation.

Table 1 Cultural and Social Interaction

Themes	Subthemes	Exemplar Texts
Cultural Practices	Doctrinal Practice	One of the cultural practices of Muslims is the observance of Ramadan. Muslims are required to fast during Ramadan as part of their religious practice [P5] Muslims read *Qur'an* and *bidding* to expand our knowledge in Islamic and Arabic Values. [P2] At school setting, all Muslim learners are gathered to attend *aLIVE* or what they called *A Learning Islamic Values Every day.* [P1]
	Behavioral Standards	Wearing of *hijab* or *headscarf* for ladies is compulsory to wear every day. [P2]
Social Interaction	Social Freedom	Being able to lead, share, discuss, and interact with non-Muslim classmates. [P5]
	Social Restriction	Cannot participate in some school activities since, it is prohibited by their religion. [P1] Awkwardness of communicating first because of distinct cultural differences. [P2]

Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

This theme examined the challenges experienced by Muslim learners in a multicultural school setting and the strategies they employed to manage these difficulties. Two subthemes emerged: challenges related to cultural diversity and cultural adjustments as coping mechanisms.

Challenges in a Multicultural Classroom

Participants described several challenges related to communication and cultural differences. One participant explained:

"*Kapag may mga pangkatang gawain nahihirapan ako na makisalamuha. Nahihiya ako na magsalita at magbigay ng ideya dahil iba iba kami ng paniniwala at dahil iba ang aming lengguwahe*." [P4]

English translation:

"During group activities, I sometimes find it difficult to interact. I feel shy about speaking and sharing ideas because we have different beliefs and languages."

Language differences and unfamiliar cultural practices created barriers that affected students' confidence and participation in classroom activities. These experiences highlight the challenges faced by minority students in navigating communication within a diverse environment.

Another participant mentioned difficulties adapting to school traditions that conflicted with Islamic practices:

"*May mga events na iniiwasan po namin bilang mga Muslim dahil ipinagbabawal po ito sa aming kultura… kagaya ng Sinulog Festival kung saan may mga Santo Niño*." [P5]

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English translation:

"There are events that we avoid as Muslims because they are prohibited in our culture, such as the Sinulog Festival where the Santo Niño is involved."

These experiences demonstrate how religious beliefs may influence students' participation in school activities. Such situations required students to carefully balance respect for their religious values with participation in school life.

Coping Mechanisms and Cultural Adjustments

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated adaptive strategies that allowed them to remain engaged in school activities. One participant explained:

"*Nagpa-participate at nakiki-cooperate pa rin po ako without disrespecting our religion… naghahanap kami ng alternative ways para magawa ko ang part ko*." [P5]

English translation:

"I still participate and cooperate without disrespecting our religion… we find alternative ways so that I can still fulfill my role."

This response illustrates how Muslim learners actively negotiated their participation in school activities while preserving their religious identity. Instead of completely withdrawing, they sought alternative ways to contribute without violating cultural norms.

The findings reveal that Muslim learners experienced challenges related to language barriers, cultural differences, and religious restrictions. However, they developed coping strategies such as selective participation in school activities, adjustments to communication styles, and negotiation with peers and teachers. These strategies enabled them to balance cultural preservation with school engagement.

Table 2 Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Muslim Learners

Themes	Subthemes	Exemplar Texts
Cultural Diversity	Language Barriers in Classroom Communication	In a classroom setting, interacting with non-Muslim peers is difficult. [P3] Difficulty to give suggestions or ideas in every group activity due to language barrier [P4]
	Cultural Familiarity	Difficulty to adapt the school culture [P2] Difficulty to understand cultural diversity inside the classroom[P1] Managing a classroom with different cultural background of students is difficult due to unfamiliar practices of non-Muslim peers [P5]
Adjustment to Communication Styles	Communication	The student chooses to become approachable to their colleagues. [P3]
	Differing Values	Participating in different school activities without disrespecting their cultural values [P5] Preservation of cultural practices is highly valued. [P2]

School Factors Shaping Muslim Learners' Identity

The final theme examined the role of classroom practices and school climate in shaping the experiences and identity of Muslim learners.

Teacher Practices and Inclusive Classroom Management

Participants emphasized the role of teachers in fostering inclusive learning environments. One participant described the teacher's approach:

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"*Tinuturuan nya kami in a way na lahat ay makakasabay… sa isang grupo, iba't ibang uri ng indibidwal ang kabilang para equally distributed ang lahat*." [P1]

English translation:

"She teaches in a way that everyone can follow. During group activities, different kinds of individuals are placed together so that everyone is equally distributed."

This strategy encouraged collaboration and helped reduce social barriers between students of different backgrounds. Inclusive classroom management allowed Muslim learners to feel supported and respected within the learning environment.

School Climate and Social Support

Participants also described the importance of a positive school climate:

"*Ang positibong learning environment ay kapag ang mga tao sa paligid mo ay hindi ka ibinababa sa kabila ng iyong paniniwala at pananamit*." [P4]

English translation:

"A positive learning environment is when the people around you do not belittle you because of your beliefs or clothing."

These experiences suggest that respect and mutual understanding among students and teachers play a crucial role in fostering inclusive educational spaces.

The findings indicate that supportive teacher practices and a respectful school climate significantly influenced the identity formation and well-being of Muslim learners. Inclusive teaching strategies and culturally sensitive interactions helped create an environment where students could maintain their cultural identity while participating fully in school life.

Table 3 School Factors Shaping Muslim Learners' Identity

Themes	Subthemes	Exemplar Texts
Classroom Management	Teacher-Student Relationship	She taught us in a way that every student could follow; she is kind and understanding. When there is a group activity, she ensures that we are equally distributed. Lastly, she always gives us awareness about the topic we are to discuss next meeting. [P5]
		When there is a group activity, the teacher always ensures that students are included to their designated group and equally divided. [P6]
	Positive Environment	She promotes inclusive education through asking her students about the beliefs, values and cultures of Muslim so that she would know what activities are suitable for them perform. [P4]
		The teacher shows respect and courtesy in handling diversified students to impart knowledge effectively. [P3]
		The teacher always respects and provides ways on how every individual can socialize with each other particularly during activity time without any intervention to their differences. [P1]
		When the teacher discusses a lesson, the teacher shows sensitivity whenever he asks or utters words. [P2]
School Climate	Open Climate	The teachers together with the principal always gives fair treatment and the school itself shows full support in every student to nurture and excel not just academically but as a whole human being. [P5]
		The setting where mutual aid is practiced; one for all and all for one community. [P1]
	Healthy School Climate	A place where everyone cooperates in all tasks has one goal and helps one another. [P6]
		A school-friendly environment. [P4]
		A community where students respect, encourage and uplift one another. [P2]

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Discussions

Cultural Identity and Social Interaction in a Multicultural School Environment

The findings revealed that religious and cultural practices played a central role in shaping the identity of Muslim learners and their experiences within a multicultural school environment. Participants described practices such as Ramadan observance, Qur'an reading, participation in Islamic learning activities, and the wearing of the hijab as important expressions of their religious commitment and cultural belonging (Abo-Zena & Hassan, 2024). These practices functioned not only as religious obligations but also as identity markers that reinforced their sense of belonging to a minority cultural group.

The persistence of these practices within a predominantly non-Muslim school environment suggests that Muslim learners did not simply assimilate into the dominant culture. Instead, they maintained their religious identity while participating in the broader school community. This finding supports the Salad Bowl Theory, which proposes that individuals in multicultural environments may coexist while preserving their distinct cultural identities rather than dissolving into a dominant culture.

At the same time, the findings indicated that visible religious practices such as wearing the hijab served as both a source of identity affirmation and a marker of difference. While the hijab strengthened the participants' commitment to their religious values, it also made their minority status more visible. This dual role reflects the process of identity negotiation commonly experienced by minority students in multicultural environments, where cultural expression may simultaneously foster belonging and highlight difference (Qumseya, 2018).

Social interaction experiences further illustrated the complexity of multicultural engagement. Some participants reported positive interactions with non-Muslim classmates and teachers, suggesting that cultural diversity did not necessarily hinder participation or leadership opportunities. For instance, one participant who served as class president demonstrated that minority identity did not automatically limit social participation. This finding suggests that inclusive school environments may enable minority students to exercise leadership and social agency despite cultural differences.

However, the findings also revealed tensions within multicultural interaction. Some participants described feelings of social distance and hesitancy in initiating conversations with non-Muslim peers. These experiences suggest that inclusion may coexist with subtle forms of social separation. Rather than experiencing overt discrimination, some learners engaged in self-protective social withdrawal as a coping response to cultural differences. This pattern indicates that inclusion should not only be measured by the absence of discrimination but also by the presence of meaningful social integration.

These findings highlight the importance of fostering intercultural dialogue in schools. While tolerance was present, deeper intercultural understanding may require structured opportunities for interaction that go beyond passive coexistence.

Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Muslim Learners

The study also revealed that Muslim learners experienced several challenges related to communication, cultural differences, and participation in school activities. Language differences and unfamiliar cultural norms sometimes affected students' confidence in classroom participation, particularly during group activities. These findings suggest that communication barriers may function not only as linguistic challenges but also as psychological barriers that influence participation and self-expression.

The findings further showed that some school traditions and activities conflicted with Islamic beliefs, requiring Muslim learners to carefully navigate their participation. Rather than

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completely withdrawing from school activities, participants demonstrated adaptive strategies such as selective participation in school activities and negotiation of alternative roles. This suggests that Muslim learners were not passive recipients of exclusion but were active agents in managing their participation within institutional structures.

This adaptive behavior reflects identity negotiation processes commonly discussed in multicultural education literature. Muslim learners demonstrated what may be described as selective integration, where they participated in school life while maintaining boundaries around religious practices. This finding reinforces the argument that minority students do not simply assimilate or withdraw; rather, they actively negotiate their participation in ways that allow them to maintain both belonging and identity.

An important insight emerging from the findings is the resilience demonstrated by Muslim learners. Despite structural and cultural challenges, participants developed coping strategies such as communication adjustment, peer cooperation, and value-based decision-making. These strategies indicate that minority students often develop intercultural competence as a survival strategy within diverse educational environments.

Interestingly, the findings did not strongly indicate experiences of overt discrimination, which contrasts with some international studies on Muslim learners. This absence may suggest that the school environment provided a relatively supportive context. However, it may also indicate that students normalized minor challenges or chose adaptive coping strategies instead of confrontation. This represents an important area for future investigation.

These findings suggest important implications for curriculum design. Schools may benefit from integrating multicultural education activities that explicitly address religious diversity, intercultural communication, and inclusive participation. Such initiatives may reduce communication barriers and strengthen intercultural understanding.

School Factors Shaping Muslim Learners' Identity

The findings demonstrated that teacher practices and school climate played a crucial role in shaping the educational experiences of Muslim learners. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of teachers who demonstrated fairness, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive classroom practices. These findings suggest that teacher behavior may function as a key institutional factor influencing minority student adjustment.

Inclusive classroom strategies such as mixed grouping, sensitivity to religious practices, and equitable participation opportunities appeared to reduce social barriers. These practices reflect principles of culturally responsive teaching, which emphasize understanding students' cultural backgrounds as part of effective pedagogy (Caingcoy, 2023). The findings therefore support the view that inclusive teaching is not only a pedagogical issue but also a social justice concern.

The study also revealed that a positive school climate contributed significantly to the well-being and identity development of Muslim learners. Participants described supportive environments where respect, cooperation, and fairness were practiced. Such environments appeared to allow Muslim learners to express their identity without fear of marginalization (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015).

These findings highlight the importance of institutional culture in shaping minority experiences. While individual teacher practices were important, broader school values such as fairness, respect, and cooperation appeared to reinforce inclusive experiences. This suggests that inclusion should be viewed as both a classroom practice and an institutional responsibility.

The findings also have implications for teacher development programs. Training programs that focus on cultural awareness, anti-bias education, and religious accommodation may help educators better support minority learners. Similarly, school policies that recognize religious diversity may strengthen institutional inclusivity.

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Integrative Interpretation of Findings

Taken together, the findings suggest that Muslim learners experienced multicultural schooling as a process of balancing identity preservation with social participation. Their experiences reflected three interconnected processes:

1. Cultural identity preservation through religious practices
2. Adaptive coping through selective participation in school activities
3. Institutional influence through inclusive teaching and school climate

These patterns reinforce the relevance of the Salad Bowl Theory, which explains how minority students may integrate socially while maintaining cultural identity. Rather than assimilation, the findings suggest that multicultural schooling may function as a process of negotiated belonging.

The study also highlights the importance of moving beyond tolerance toward meaningful inclusion. While participants reported respectful environments, subtle barriers such as communication difficulties and social hesitation remained present. This suggests that inclusion requires not only respect but also active institutional support.

Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

The findings suggest several implications for educational institutions. First, curriculum design should incorporate multicultural education content that promotes understanding of religious diversity. Second, teacher training programs should include cultural sensitivity and anti-bias education to strengthen inclusive classroom practices. Third, schools may benefit from developing policies that allow reasonable religious accommodations for minority students.

At the institutional level, schools may consider establishing support mechanisms such as peer mentoring programs, intercultural dialogue activities, and culturally responsive guidance services. These initiatives may help minority learners strengthen their sense of belonging while maintaining their identity.

At the policy level, the findings support the importance of inclusive education frameworks that recognize religious diversity as part of educational equity. Supporting minority learners through culturally responsive education may contribute not only to academic success but also to broader goals of social cohesion and intercultural understanding.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved only six Muslim learners from a single public high school, which limited the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. The experiences of Muslim learners in other schools or regions of the Philippines may differ due to variations in cultural environments, institutional support systems, and demographic characteristics. However, the purpose of qualitative research was to provide depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported narratives obtained through interviews. While this approach allowed participants to describe their experiences in depth, the findings depended on the participants' ability to recall and articulate their experiences. As with most qualitative interview studies, there was also a possibility that participants may have withheld sensitive information or framed their responses in socially acceptable ways. Future research may benefit from triangulation through additional data sources such as classroom observations, document analysis, or interviews with teachers and school administrators.

Third, the study focused exclusively on the perspectives of Muslim learners and did not include the viewpoints of non-Muslim classmates, teachers, or school leaders. Including these stakeholders in future research may provide a more comprehensive understanding of

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multicultural interactions and institutional responses to cultural diversity within the school environment.

Fourth, the study was conducted within a specific socio-cultural context, and the positionality of the researchers as educators may have influenced data interpretation. Although strategies such as peer review and member checking were employed to enhance credibility, researcher interpretation remained an inherent feature of qualitative analysis.

Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into how Muslim learners navigated cultural identity, social interaction, and educational participation within a multicultural public school environment. The findings contributed to a deeper understanding of minority student experiences and provided a basis for future research on culturally responsive education in diverse school settings.

Conclusion and suggestions

Conclusion

Muslim learners represented a small minority within the school environment, accounting for less than one percent of the student population. Despite their limited number, they demonstrated resilience and adaptability in navigating a multicultural educational setting. Their experiences showed that cultural and religious practices remained central to their identity even within a predominantly non-Muslim environment.

The findings revealed that cultural differences sometimes created challenges in communication, social interaction, and participation in school activities. Language barriers and unfamiliar school practices occasionally resulted in misunderstandings and feelings of social distance. However, Muslim learners demonstrated adaptive coping strategies such as selective participation in school activities, respectful communication, and cultural adjustment while maintaining their religious identity.

These experiences aligned with the Salad Bowl Theory, which suggests that individuals in multicultural societies may coexist while maintaining distinct cultural identities. Rather than fully assimilating into the dominant culture, Muslim learners participated in school life while preserving their traditions and values. This finding demonstrated how multicultural educational environments could support cultural coexistence rather than cultural assimilation.

The study also highlighted the importance of supportive teachers and a positive school climate. When educators demonstrated cultural awareness and inclusive teaching practices, Muslim learners reported stronger participation and a greater sense of belonging. These findings underscored the role of schools in promoting culturally responsive education that supports both inclusion and identity preservation.

Overall, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of how Muslim learners experienced multicultural schooling in the Philippine context and emphasized the importance of inclusive educational practices in supporting minority students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen inclusive education for Muslim learners.

First, educational institutions should provide professional development programs that enhance teachers' cultural competence, particularly regarding Muslim cultural practices and religious accommodation. Training may focus on culturally responsive teaching strategies and inclusive classroom management.

Second, schools should integrate multicultural education into the curriculum to promote intercultural understanding and reduce misconceptions among students. Activities that highlight cultural diversity may help strengthen mutual respect among learners.

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Third, school administrators should develop inclusive policies that recognize the religious needs of minority students, such as sensitivity in scheduling school activities and reasonable accommodation of religious practices.

Fourth, schools should promote peer tutoring and collaborative learning activities to strengthen communication between Muslim and non-Muslim learners and reduce social barriers.

Finally, future research should examine the experiences of Muslim learners in other educational contexts and include the perspectives of teachers and non-Muslim students to provide a more comprehensive understanding of multicultural interactions.

New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

This study contributed to a better understanding of how Muslim learners navigated cultural diversity in educational settings. The findings demonstrated how religious practices such as Ramadan and the wearing of the hijab influenced identity formation and social interaction.

The study also emphasized the importance of culturally responsive teaching and inclusive school climates in supporting minority learners. Schools that foster respect for cultural diversity may improve student engagement and promote stronger intercultural relationships.

At the societal level, the findings highlighted the need to strengthen awareness of the experiences of Muslim learners in mainstream educational institutions. By identifying barriers such as cultural misunderstandings and communication challenges, the study provided insights that may inform inclusive educational policies and programs.

Ultimately, the study suggested that inclusive educational practices may contribute to stronger social cohesion by promoting respect, intercultural understanding, and educational equity for culturally diverse learners.

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