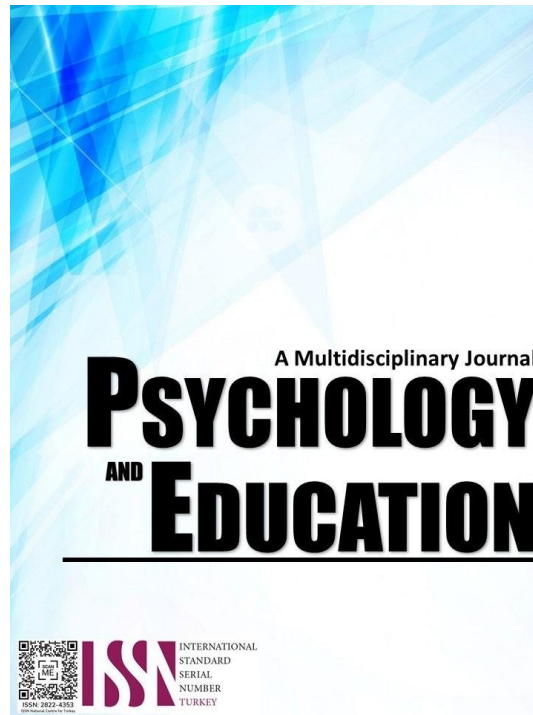


LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM STUDENTS IN SECULAR AND ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES



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Lived Experiences of Muslim Students in Secular and Islamic Educational Institutions in the Southern Philippines

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of Muslim students who navigate both secular and Islamic educational institutions in the Southern Philippines, particularly in the provinces of Sultan Kudarat and Maguindanao del Sur. Employing a phenomenological approach, the research seeks to uncover how these learners interpret, reconcile, and make meaning of their dual educational journeys. Through in-depth interviews and reflective journals, the study highlights the complex interplay between spiritual formation, identity development, and academic engagement. Findings reveal that students do not perceive secular and Islamic education as contradictory but rather as complementary domains that nurture different dimensions of their growth, secular schools providing access to academic and career opportunities, and Madrasahs offering moral guidance and religious grounding. Despite this integration, students face significant challenges such as scheduling conflicts, lack of religious accommodations in secular settings, and resource constraints in Islamic schools. Coping strategies include time management, peer support, family encouragement, and faith-based resilience. The participants advocate for institutional reforms that promote cultural sensitivity, improve Madrasah curriculum, and support inter-system dialogue. By centering student narratives, this research contributes to inclusive education discourse and offers insights for policy and practice in multicultural and religiously diverse societies like the Philippines.

Keywords: *lived experiences, Muslim students, Secular, Islamic, educational institutions*

Introduction

Muslim students in Southern Philippines navigate a complex educational landscape shaped by both secular state schools and faith-based Madrasah programs. Yet, little is known about their subjective, lived experiences in these parallel systems. While previous studies have explored the structural, pedagogical, and institutional dynamics of Muslim education, such as the Department of Education's ALIVE (Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education) program and private Madrasah reforms, most have focused on the perspectives of policymakers and educators rather than students themselves (Milligan, 2004; Sali, 2020, 2023).

This transcendental phenomenology seeks to address that gap by examining how Muslim learners interpret and reconcile their experiences across secular and Islamic schooling contexts. Specifically, it asks: How do Muslim students experience, interpret, and negotiate their dual educational journeys in the Philippines? Through in-depth interviews and qualitative methods, the study uncovers themes related to identity formation, spiritual continuity, and pedagogical navigation, bringing to the fore the voices of students long marginalized in education discourse.

Sali and Ancho's (2021) phenomenological work on Asatidz (Madrasah teachers) in ALIVE schools has already revealed important pedagogical themes such as "teacher as divine responsibility" and "student-centered approach," reflecting the ethical depth of Islamic teaching philosophy. Complementing this educator-focused lens, the present study turns to the learners' side of the story.

Recent literature provides glimpses of how student identity is influenced by educational context. For instance, Regadio (2017) found that Muslim identity is central to student self-concept and is shaped by both peer and teacher relationships in public, integrated, and private Madrasah schools. In more religiously plural settings, Abad et al. (n.d.) explored how Muslim senior high school students in a Catholic institution maintained spiritual routines, negotiated Christian religious content, and sought inclusion within the school community. These findings are echoed in Barihasion et al. (2023), who documented both the positive aspects of interfaith engagement and the students' struggles with religious accommodation and unfamiliar religious rituals in Catholic religious education classes.

The experience of negotiating Islamic identity within non-Muslim institutions has also been studied outside the Philippine context. Adolfo et al. (n.d.) highlighted the journey of Black Muslim men in U.S. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), emphasizing faith-strengthening challenges and the lack of institutional support for religious inclusion. These insights underscore a global dimension to the challenges faced by Muslim students in navigating identity, belonging, and recognition in educational spaces not originally designed for their religious or cultural context.

In the Philippine setting, Muslim Filipinos comprise roughly 6% of the national population, concentrated primarily in Mindanao and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) (Sali, 2023). Since 2004, the ALIVE program has attempted to integrate Islamic values into public education, while private or community-run Madrasah institutions continue to offer fully Islamic curricula (Sali, 2023). While institutional reforms have aimed to broaden inclusivity and access, a student-centered, phenomenological exploration of how these dual systems are experienced on the ground remains scarce.

Thus, this study responds to the pressing need to understand the lived experiences of Muslim learners navigating secular and faith-

based education. Drawing from both local and international literature, it seeks to contribute a grounded, student-oriented perspective to debates on inclusive education, religious diversity, and identity formation in multicultural settings.

Most existing studies focus on program implementation, curricular content, or teacher praxis, leaving a critical gap in understanding the lived experiences of the learners themselves.

No prior research has applied a phenomenological inquiry with its emphasis on epoch (bracketing) and eidetic reduction to explore Muslim students' subjective realities in Southern Philippine schools. Moreover, comparative research on students navigating secular versus Islamic schooling is scarce globally and virtually nonexistent in the Mindanao context. This gap limits our ability to design student-centered policies that honor learners' voices, cultural identities, and personal meaning-making processes.

Research Questions

1. How do students describe their learning experiences in both secular and Islamic education?
2. What are the challenges they experience in learning in both secular and Islamic education?
3. What are the strategies they apply to address those underlying challenges they experienced?
4. What are their suggestions to improve the learning experiences of the students in both secular and Islamic education?

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Muslim students navigating both secular and Islamic educational settings. This methodology emphasizes the importance of setting aside preconceived notions and focusing on participants' descriptions to uncover the essence of their experiences.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting 8 students who have experienced both secular and Islamic education for at least three years. This sample size is consistent with recommendations for phenomenological studies, which suggest 5 to 25 participants to achieve data saturation and depth of understanding.

Instrument

Data was collected using an interview guide questionnaire, allowing for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while maintaining a consistent framework across interviews.

An interview guide was developed based on existing literature and the study's objectives, ensuring that key topics are covered while allowing participants to share their narratives freely. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed to identify emerging themes.

Procedure

The research process began with obtaining ethical approval from the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB) and securing necessary permissions from school authorities. Participant recruitment was conducted in collaboration with school administrators to identify eligible students. Each student and their guardian were provided with detailed information sheets and consent forms to ensure they fully understand the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time.

Once consent is obtained, interviews were scheduled at times and locations that are convenient, private and comfortable for the participants. During the interviews, a semi-structured guide was used to facilitate open discussions, allowing students to freely share their learning experiences. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and data was stored securely, with strict measures to maintain confidentiality and protect participants' identities.

Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adheres to ethical principles that uphold respect for persons, beneficence and justice. Several key ethical considerations will guide its implementation.

First, informed consent was obtained by providing participants and their guardians with comprehensive information about the study, ensuring that they fully understand the purpose, procedures and their rights before signing a written consent form.

Second, confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing all data to prevent unauthorized access. Participation was entirely voluntary and individuals may withdraw from the study at any time without facing any penalties or consequences. The research will also be carefully designed to minimize any potential psychological discomfort and appropriate support resources were made available to participants if needed.

Finally, the research team was trained in cultural competence to ensure respectful, sensitive and appropriate engagement with students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, particularly in the context of Islamic education.

Results and Discussion

Section A: Participant Background

This section explores the participants' educational trajectories, focusing on their engagement in both secular and Islamic educational systems and the influence of family in shaping their choices. Through phenomenological analysis, three central themes emerged:

1. Dual Educational Journeys: Navigating Between Secular and Islamic Schooling
2. Time and Tenure: Varying Lengths of Immersion
3. Familial Support and Moral Anchoring

Theme 1: Dual Educational Journeys — Navigating Between Secular and Islamic Schooling

All participants reported experiences shaped by simultaneous or sequential engagement with both secular and Islamic education. These parallel educational tracks reflect their desire to acquire knowledge while preserving religious identity and cultural continuity.

One participant explained the balancing act:

"I've finished my high school education at President Quirino National High School and my high school Islamic education at Mahad Eastern Kutawato As Sharque... balancing both Islamic and secular studies... but Alhamdulillah, Allah is always there making things possible for all of us." (P5)

Participants attended a range of institutions—such as SKSU, PQNHS, St. John and various madaris—each contributing uniquely to their development. Many emphasized that while secular education equipped them with skills for employment and public life, Islamic schooling instilled moral and spiritual grounding:

"In Islamic education, the focus is mostly on Islam, since that is the purpose of madrasah... while secular education provided me the standards of being a civilized individual." (P3)

The overarching phenomenological insight in this theme is the participants' quest to harmonize dunya (worldly knowledge) with deen (spiritual understanding), rather than viewing them as competing domains.

Theme 2: Time and Tenure — Varying Lengths of Immersion

The participants' engagement in secular and Islamic education differed in structure and duration. Secular schooling was typically continuous, lasting 12 to 13 years. In contrast, Islamic education was often pursued intermittently, spanning 3 to 10 years and sometimes through informal or non-institutional settings.

One participant recalled:

"I wasn't really enrolled in my past Islamic school, I only entered and sat there to learn something and have fun with kids my age." (P4)

Others described the time-management challenges of pursuing both educational paths:

"There are many school activities and assignments on weekends, coinciding with the days I study Arabic. Ideally, I would rest after five days of secular schooling but I had to sacrifice that." (P6)

These reflections reveal a pattern of adaptive strategies, as students negotiated competing schedules and institutional limitations in order to sustain both academic and religious learning. Despite logistical hurdles, their continued participation in both systems underscores a deeper personal and spiritual commitment.

Theme 3: Familial Support and Moral Anchoring

Family emerged as a crucial factor in shaping and sustaining participants' educational paths. While some initially encountered resistance from their families regarding the dual path, many ultimately gained strong moral and logistical support.

One participant recounted:

"At first, my family didn't want me to balance my studies—they just wanted me to finish secular education. But I kept fighting to pursue Islamic studies. Now, they are my number one supporters." (P5)

Others spoke of their parents as spiritual guides who grounded them in Islamic values:

"My dad always said a good person tries hard to understand the Quran and live a good life. When things got tough, he reminded me: 'Fa inna ma'al usri yusra'—with hardship comes ease." (P7)

Such familial influences were not merely supportive but actively formative, providing both emotional encouragement and spiritual resilience that guided participants through their educational challenges.

This phenomenological account of the participants' backgrounds reveals a life lived at the intersection of sacred and secular learning. Their stories are shaped not simply by academic ambition but by a deliberate attempt to embody multiple identities—as students, believers and cultural stewards.

Rather than perceiving education as a dichotomy, participants experienced it as an integrated journey—rooted in faith, supported by family and marked by sacrifice, resilience and intentionality.

Section B: Classroom Interactions and Curricular Content

This section examines participants' lived experiences within the classroom setting, focusing on their interactions with teachers and peers, as well as their reflections on the curricular content in both secular and Islamic educational institutions. Four major themes emerged through phenomenological analysis:

1. Teacher-Student Dynamics: Respect, Faith and Pedagogical Boundaries
2. Peer Interactions and Cultural Comfort: Between Diversity and Religious Cohesion
3. Faith and Cultural Representation in the Secular Curriculum
4. Pedagogical Differences Between Islamic and Secular Schooling

Theme 1: Teacher-Student Dynamics — Respect, Faith and Pedagogical Boundaries

Participants consistently highlighted respectful and professional relationships with teachers across both school types. However, clear distinctions emerged in the emotional and spiritual tone of these interactions.

In secular schools, participants described varying degrees of teacher approachability and formality:

"Some of them are very kind and approachable, but some of them aren't... While in Islamic school, almost all the ustadz I've interacted with are approachable." (P3)

Islamic teachers were often viewed as more nurturing and spiritually engaged:

"They really cared for all of us and even fed us during break time." (P4)

Moreover, Islamic school teachers were seen as religious role models, whose pedagogy extended beyond academics. In contrast, some participants perceived secular educators as less accommodating of their religious practices:

"Some of my secular teachers don't consider Islamic beliefs, like not allowing students to be excused from activities like dancing." (P5)

Despite these differences, the overall tone in both settings remained respectful. Participants generally upheld a strong internal discipline and sense of purpose, maintaining positive relationships with educators in both secular and Islamic classrooms.

Theme 2: Peer Interactions and Cultural Comfort — Between Diversity and Religious Cohesion

Peer relationships varied considerably between the two systems. In secular schools, students engaged with peers from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. While this diversity fostered mutual respect, it also led to occasional misunderstandings:

"In secular school, of course there was a mix of beliefs... That's why most of the time there is misunderstanding and misconception... Although I have a lot of non-Muslim friends, it's a different bond and comfort with my Muslim friends at Islamic school." (P8)

Islamic schools were generally described as spiritually affirming spaces that reinforced religious values through peer interactions:

"My classmates in Islamic school are the ones who remind me about my religious belief and always give Islamic reminders." (P5)

Gender segregation in Islamic schools also influenced social behavior and reinforced moral expectations:

"In Islamic school, there's separation between genders; one should be very careful of their actions." (P2)

Participants appreciated the supportive peer networks in both environments. While secular schools offered opportunities for intercultural exchange, Islamic settings provided comfort, affirmation and a sense of shared spiritual purpose.

Theme 3: Faith and Cultural Representation in the Secular Curriculum

Participants' views on the inclusion of Islamic beliefs in secular curricula were mixed. Some acknowledged efforts to incorporate faith-based perspectives into general subjects:

"In other aspects of each subject there's always a topic related to Islamic beliefs... Eventually it becomes a way of understanding and respect." (P2)

Others, however, critiqued the depth and authenticity of such representation:

"They only address basic knowledge of Islam... just the surface level." (P3)

Despite these limitations, participants recognized attempts at cultural inclusion during school events and social studies discussions:

"Sometimes, we were allowed to share our culture during special events or school programs... The school tried to create an environment where all cultures and beliefs were accepted." (P7)

These reflections suggest that while secular curricula may lack deep engagement with Islamic theology, many institutions promote interfaith awareness and respectful coexistence through inclusive practices.

Theme 4: Pedagogical Differences — Structure, Delivery and Learning Atmosphere

Participants identified marked pedagogical contrasts between secular and Islamic classrooms. Islamic schooling emphasized memorization, Qur'anic studies and spiritual development:

"In Islamic school, lessons were more focused on memorizing and understanding the Quran, learning Arabic... The Islamic school felt more serious and quieter." (P7)

In contrast, secular schools were described as more interactive and technologically advanced:

"In secular school... teachers used activities, group work and encouraged asking questions." (P7)

"In Islamic school they just used chalk and blackboard... unlike secular where teachers use projectors and other materials." (P5)

Some participants also pointed out resource gaps in Islamic schools that affected learning:

"There were few facilities and materials... but we still learned a lot spiritually." (P5)

Despite logistical shortcomings, Islamic schools were highly valued for their focus on faith and moral formation:

"In Islamic school, they teach us to prioritize our Imaan and Taqwa... while secular must be balanced for us to survive both dunya and akhirah." (P1)

These narratives reveal that both educational systems offer distinct but complementary experiences. Secular schools promote academic preparedness, social interaction and exposure to diverse viewpoints. Islamic schools, in turn, provide moral grounding, spiritual discipline and a safe space for religious identity.

Phenomenologically, the classroom emerges as a powerful site of negotiation—where students continuously reconcile knowledge, belief, identity and belonging. The findings emphasize the value of educational pluralism and the need for culturally responsive teaching that honors both the academic and spiritual dimensions of learners' lives.

Section C: Impact on Religious Identity, Self-Esteem and Academic Aspirations

This section explores how participants' experiences in both secular and Islamic educational settings shaped their religious identity, personal beliefs, self-esteem and academic goals. Four core themes emerged from the phenomenological analysis:

1. Integration of Faith in Secular Settings
2. Strengthening of Faith Through Islamic Schooling
3. Impact on Self-Esteem and Identity Expression
4. Evolving Academic Aspirations

Theme 1: Integration of Faith in Secular Settings

Although secular schools are not primarily focused on religious instruction, participants described how supportive spaces—such as Muslim student organizations (MSOs)—helped sustain their faith practices.

"We have this MSO organization which provides us a door to perform our faith including 5x a day prayers." (P6)

Some participants found value in how secular schools occasionally engaged with Islamic content, especially in subjects like values education or social studies. For others, exposure to diverse worldviews prompted deeper reflection on their own faith:

"Attending a secular school helped me understand Islam better by comparing it with other ideas." (P5)

However, not all participants found secular schooling spiritually enriching. A few viewed it as merely a requirement, rather than a space that fostered religious growth. These varying perspectives suggest that while secular environments may not deepen faith, they can provide indirect opportunities for religious reflection and interfaith understanding.

Theme 2: Strengthening of Faith Through Islamic Schooling

In contrast to secular settings, Islamic schools were consistently described as transformative and spiritually grounding. Participants spoke of lifestyle changes that aligned with Islamic teachings and a stronger internalization of religious values:

"Most of my identity has changed when I started entering Islamic studies... now it's better to fail than to do things prohibited in

Islam." (P1)

"I've gained enlightenment and learned a lot of things that was helpful to me in the Day of Judgement." (P7)

For some, Islamic education served as a corrective influence—especially for those from non-practicing households—offering clarity and structure amid moral ambiguity. The environment not only taught religious doctrine but cultivated a deeply rooted sense of spiritual accountability.

Theme 3: Impact on Self-Esteem and Identity Expression

Participants' experiences in both school types influenced their self-esteem and the confidence with which they expressed their identities. Islamic schools were often perceived as affirming environments that nurtured belonging and spiritual alignment:

"In Islamic school, I felt a sense of acceptance and unity... In secular school, I faced more challenges in maintaining my identity." (P2)

In secular settings, however, visible expressions of faith—such as wearing a hijab—sometimes led to feelings of otherness:

"Wearing a hijab in secular school, some might see you differently." (P1)

Despite these challenges, some participants described their secular school experiences as character-forming. Navigating these environments required courage and the act of defending one's beliefs became a source of resilience and personal growth.

Theme 4: Evolving Academic Aspirations

Participants' academic goals were significantly shaped by their educational environments. Islamic schools inspired religious vocations and spiritual ambitions:

"When I studied in Islamic school, I only wanted to be an Ustadz... but then I realized I want to become an Ulama." (P1)

Conversely, secular schools introduced students to broader academic disciplines and professional opportunities:

"In secular school, I focused more on science, math and politics that help me lead my dreams." (P3)

Some participants expressed concern that secular schooling might weaken their religious commitment. However, others advocated for balance—emphasizing that pursuing worldly knowledge need not come at the expense of faith:

"It's possible to be religious and still reach for success in this world. Both must go together." (P6)

The narratives in this section reveal that Islamic schools play a vital role in nurturing religious identity, moral discipline and spiritual purpose. Secular schools, on the other hand, offer intellectual stimulation, career guidance and exposure to diversity—yet sometimes at the cost of comfort in religious expression.

This duality underscores the need for support structures—such as MSOs and faith-sensitive curricula—in secular institutions, to create inclusive environments where religious identity is respected and supported. At the same time, it highlights the importance of holistic educational models that do not bifurcate academic excellence from spiritual growth.

Phenomenologically, the participants' journeys reflect a deep commitment to integrating their faith with their personal development and future aspirations—an ongoing negotiation between who they are, what they believe and who they hope to become.

Section D: Navigating Between Secular and Islamic Educational Approaches

This section explores participants' lived experiences as they moved between the distinct philosophical, cultural and practical dimensions of secular and Islamic educational systems. Their reflections reveal both tensions and harmonies across four core themes:

1. Challenges of Transition and Cultural Dissonance
2. Coping Strategies and Adaptive Practices
3. Complementary Aspects and Intersections
4. Formation of Integrated Educational and Life Perspectives

Theme 1: Challenges of Transition and Cultural Dissonance

Participants encountered various challenges while navigating between secular and Islamic schools, particularly during periods of transition. These challenges ranged from logistical inconveniences to deeper moral and cultural tensions. Common experiences included:

- Exposure to school activities perceived as un-Islamic (e.g., dancing, loud music during events)
- Conflicts between school schedules and religious observances such as Ramadan
- Overlapping academic calendars between Islamic and secular institutions
- Adjustment to different disciplinary styles and instructional norms

One participant shared:

"When there is Ramadan they are playing loud music during a program and it makes me uncomfortable." (P2)

Another reflected on the psychological and behavioral adjustment required:

"The rules and teaching styles were different... it took time to adjust and balance both." (P1)

Such moments of cultural dissonance required participants to actively negotiate their identities within dual environments, occasionally leading to emotional discomfort or spiritual conflict.

Theme 2: Coping Strategies and Adaptive Practices

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated strong agency, resilience and adaptability. They employed several coping strategies to manage the complexity of dual-system education, including:

- Practicing Taqwa (God-consciousness) to maintain spiritual stability
- Effective time management to balance academic and religious responsibilities
- Cultivating open-mindedness and respect for differing institutional cultures
- Relying on daily Islamic practices—such as prayer and Qur'an recitation—for stress relief and focus
- Forming supportive social bonds across both systems

"I always stayed open-minded and learned to adjust to each school's rules." (P1)

"I apply my Islamic learnings, such as daily prayers and Qur'an recitation, which helps alleviate my stress." (P2)

These practices highlight the participants' maturity in navigating institutional differences while staying anchored in their values and faith.

Theme 3: Complementary Aspects and Intersections

While some experiences were marked by conflict, many participants identified points of convergence between the two systems that enriched their overall development. These included:

- Secular education's role in building critical thinking, communication skills and interfaith understanding
- Islamic education's emphasis on moral discipline, spiritual identity and ethical grounding
- The role of organizations like the Muslim Students Organization (MSO) in bridging cultural and religious divides
- A growing awareness of the interconnectedness of knowledge across spiritual and worldly domains

"Islamic school taught me good values... and secular school helped me understand Islam better, like through reading and history." (P4)

"They always complimented me for being disciplined in everything I do—and that's because of what Islam taught me." (P5)

These reflections reveal that, when navigated with reflection and support, secular and Islamic education can be mutually reinforcing rather than oppositional.

Theme 4: Formation of Integrated Educational and Life Perspectives

Participants ultimately articulated a vision of education that integrates intellectual development with spiritual purpose. This outlook views learning as both an academic and moral endeavor—one that prepares individuals for worldly success and eternal accountability.

"These experiences taught me that both religious and regular education are important... together, they made me a better and more balanced person." (P1)

"I thank God (Allahu Subhannah wa Taala) for all of this." (P3)

Through this integrated lens, participants emphasized the need for balance between dunya (worldly pursuits) and akhirah (spiritual preparation), revealing the deep intentionality with which they approach their educational journeys.

The experiences shared by participants underscore that navigating between secular and Islamic education is not merely about managing schedules or adjusting to contrasting norms. It involves cultivating:

- Institutional awareness and sensitivity to religious practices within secular settings
- Dialogue and cooperation between school systems to foster mutual respect
- Mentorship and peer support, especially within secular institutions, to sustain Islamic identity
- A shared commitment to values-based education that bridges academic rigor with moral and spiritual development

Phenomenologically, the participants reveal a model of educational integration grounded in resilience, faith and adaptive identity

work. Their journeys reflect not a division of loyalties but a synthesis of two educational worlds, preparing them to thrive as Muslims in a complex and pluralistic society.

Section E: Reflections and Recommendations

This section captures the participants' retrospective insights and practical recommendations, based on their experiences navigating both Islamic and secular educational settings. Their reflections reveal not only personal growth but also thoughtful calls for institutional support, inclusivity and respect for religious identity.

Theme 1: Life Lessons from Dual Educational Experiences

Participants identified core values they developed through their experiences in both educational systems. These included:

- Respect – for others, for differences in belief and for oneself
- Perseverance – in facing academic and spiritual challenges
- Faithfulness – in maintaining religious identity and practice amid diverse environments

"The most important thing is respect—it's a bridge between any kind of religion." (P3)

"No matter where you are and what you learn, do not forget about your religion and faith." (P7)

"With hardship comes ease... both schools taught me lessons for life." (P2)

Participants described secular education as enhancing their analytical skills and worldly competence, while Islamic education deepened their moral compass and spiritual discipline. This dual formation helped them grow into more self-aware and value-oriented individuals.

Theme 2: Strengthening Student Support through Policy and Practice

A recurring concern among participants was the need for greater institutional accommodation of Muslim students' religious practices, particularly in secular schools. Suggested improvements included:

- Designating prayer spaces and time slots for Dhuhr and Asr prayers during school hours
- Providing alternative activities when assigned tasks conflict with Islamic teachings
- Offering Islam-awareness training for teachers and school administrators
- Integrating interfaith understanding into curriculum design

"Allow Muslim students to pray Dhuhr and Asr... because we get home tired and have to make up prayers." (P1)

"Please give them enough time to study." (P8)

"Teachers should study or have knowledge about Islam... so unity and respect will grow." (P3)

These recommendations highlight the importance of faith-sensitive institutional policies that respect diversity while fostering inclusive learning spaces. Participants emphasized that support from both secular and Islamic educators is vital in nurturing a balanced development of intellect and faith.

Theme 3: Appeal for Empathy, Inclusion and Open-Mindedness

Participants voiced a collective appeal for empathy, fairness and open-minded engagement from educators and policymakers. They expressed frustration with being asked to participate in activities that contradict Islamic values and advocated for a more accommodating, respectful approach.

"Be respectful toward Muslim students the way you respect other students." (P3)

"Come up with different activities that Muslim students can do." (P4)

"Be more open-minded and understanding." (P1)

Their reflections convey a strong desire for educational environments that affirm religious dignity, empower student voices and reduce feelings of marginalization.

Theme 4: Final Reflections – Gratitude and Growth

When asked for any final thoughts, most participants said they had shared what mattered most. However, one participant offered a closing reflection of gratitude:

"Learning in both Islamic and secular schools helped me a lot. It made me stronger in my faith and also prepared me for the world." (P1)

This statement encapsulates the shared journey of the participants—one marked by dual growth in both spiritual resilience and worldly readiness.

The participants' reflections lead to several key takeaways:

- Islamic and secular education provide distinct yet complementary strengths—one grounding identity, the other expanding opportunity
- Respect for religious practices (e.g., prayer times, modesty) is a critical area for reform in secular institutions
- A values-based and inclusive approach promotes holistic development in both systems
- Open dialogue and education about religious diversity can foster mutual respect and prevent marginalization

In multicultural, multi-faith contexts, these findings affirm the importance of creating educational environments where students feel safe to be themselves—intellectually, morally and spiritually.

Educational institutions are thus called not only to inform, but also to transform—honoring the diverse identities of learners while preparing them to thrive as capable, compassionate and ethically grounded individuals.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore that Muslim students are not merely navigating educational systems; they are actively building bridges between sacred and secular domains. Their lived experiences offer several important insights:

Dual education is not a burden but a source of holistic development—intellectually, morally and spiritually.

Challenges are both institutional and internal, involving the emotional labor of balancing identities and expectations.

Students are active agents, drawing strength from faith, family and community to thrive in both worlds.

Educational inclusivity and religious sensitivity benefit not only Muslim learners but also enhance the overall learning environment in pluralistic societies.

To support students more effectively, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed:

For Secular Educational Institutions:

Establish prayer spaces and allow flexible scheduling for obligatory prayers.

Provide alternative activities aligned with Islamic values when students cannot participate in certain school events.

Conduct faculty training on Islamic beliefs, practices and cultural sensitivity.

Promote inclusive curricula that represent diverse worldviews and religious perspectives.

For Islamic Educational Institutions:

Enhance academic rigor by integrating critical thinking, language, science and technology competencies alongside religious studies.

Invest in teacher training and learning resources to improve pedagogical effectiveness.

Create career counseling programs that help students align spiritual goals with professional opportunities.

For Policymakers and Curriculum Developers:

Encourage cross-system dialogue between secular and Islamic educators to identify best practices and areas for collaboration.

Institutionalize values-based education as a central framework in both systems.

Develop policy guidelines that safeguard religious freedom and identity expression in educational settings.

This study affirms that integration of Islamic and secular education is not only possible but profoundly enriching. Muslim learners who traverse these dual landscapes emerge with a unique sense of balance, purpose and identity—well-equipped to contribute to society with both moral conviction and professional competence.

In pluralistic contexts like the Philippines, supporting such integration is not simply a matter of equity—it is an investment in cultivating thoughtful, spiritually grounded and socially responsible citizens for both *dunya* (this world) and *akhirah* (the hereafter).

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