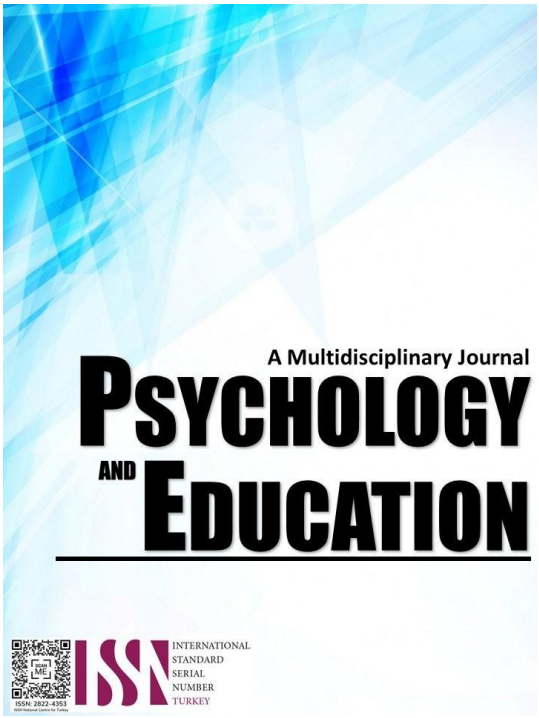
LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM TEACHERS IN NON-MUSLIM SCHOOLS IN THE ADVENT OF RAMADAN



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Research Article

Lived Experiences of Muslim Teachers in Non-Muslim Schools in the Advent of Ramadan

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Abstract

Muslim teachers working in non-Muslim schools navigate complex challenges during Ramadan, where religious obligations intersect with professional responsibilities. This study examined the lived experiences of fifteen Muslim teachers from selected elementary and secondary schools in the Sultan Kudarat Division during the 2024–2025 school year. Employing a phenomenological approach and semi-structured interviews, the research examined how fasting, prayer observance, and dietary restrictions shaped their teaching practices in predominantly Christian institutions. Findings reveal that while teachers adopt strategies such as simplifying lessons, resting during breaks, and relying on faith for resilience, they continue to encounter difficulties due to the lack of prayer spaces, rigid schedules, and limited institutional awareness. Despite these constraints, the study highlighted positive outcomes, including enhanced time management, emotional control, and opportunities for interfaith dialogue. Findings underscore that supportive gestures from administrators and peers foster inclusivity; however, systemic challenges persist due to the absence of clear school policies. Recommendations include institutionalizing policy guidelines, providing prayer facilities, integrating cultural awareness programs, and promoting interfaith dialogue to strengthen inclusivity and uphold the constitutional right to religious freedom.

Keywords: *lived experiences, Muslim teachers, Ramadan, inclusivity, phenomenology*

Introduction

The lived experiences of Muslim teachers in non-Muslim schools, particularly during Ramadan, reflect a complex intersection of culture, religion, and professional responsibility. Ramadan, a sacred period of fasting, prayer, and spiritual reflection, imposes unique physical and emotional demands on Muslim educators who must simultaneously fulfill their duties in learning environments that may lack cultural and religious alignment. Studies show that Muslim teachers in secular or Christian-dominant institutions often struggle with the absence of institutional accommodations for fasting, prayer, and dietary observance, resulting in increased stress and work-life imbalance during Ramadan (Saidun et al., 2019; Padela et al., 2023; Aflahah et al., 2022). These challenges are heightened by organizational cultures that are not always equipped to support Islamic practices, which may lead to feelings of misunderstanding, marginalization, and isolation.

Limited awareness of Ramadan among non-Muslim colleagues contributes to misconceptions and social distance in the workplace. Prior research reveals that the lack of cultural knowledge can foster subtle exclusion, thereby affecting teachers' well-being and professional identity (Charki et al., 2021; Ağırdağ et al., 2012). Moreover, the physical strain associated with fasting—such as fatigue, dehydration, and lower energy levels—poses additional challenges to sustaining classroom engagement and effective instruction (Tuna, 2020; Saidun et al., 2019). Compounding these experiences is the lack of designated spaces for obligatory prayers and the absence of culturally responsive policies, which further complicate the ability of Muslim teachers to meet religious requirements while at work.

Despite these barriers, Muslim teachers play a crucial role in promoting intercultural understanding in educational settings. International studies indicate that Muslim educators frequently serve as cultural ambassadors, mediating differences and promoting respect across diverse belief systems, despite facing institutional bias and limited accommodations (Ahmed & Smith, 2020; Adams & Clarke, 2021). However, these studies often overlook Ramadan-specific experiences, which profoundly shape daily routines, emotional regulation, pedagogical decisions, and teacher well-being.

In the Philippine context, where Christianity is the majority faith, Muslim teachers continue to experience forms of stereotyping, inadequate religious accommodation, and social biases within educational institutions (Ali & Ramos, 2022). In South Central Mindanao, research on interfaith relations has primarily focused on students, leaving a gap in understanding the lived experiences of Muslim educators during Ramadan (Salik & Villanueva, 2023).

While inclusivity and diversity are emphasized in educational discourse, there remains a lack of empirical literature documenting how Muslim teachers experience Ramadan in predominantly non-Muslim schools and how they cope, adapt, or resist within such environments. To address this gap, this study explores the lived experiences of Muslim teachers during Ramadan in selected non-Muslim schools in the Sultan Kudarat Division. Specifically, it examines the challenges they face, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the ways school environments either enable or hinder their religious and cultural practices.

This study aimed to provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of Muslim teachers in non-Muslim schools during Ramadan for the 2024-2025 school year, addressing these critical areas.

Research Questions

This study examined the lived experiences of Muslim teachers in non-Muslim schools during the advent of Ramadan in the Sultan Kudarat Division. The participants were fifteen (15) selected Muslim teachers from elementary and secondary schools during the 2024–2025 school year, who qualified for the inclusion criteria set by the researcher. It answered the following questions:

1. How do Muslim teachers in non-Muslim schools navigate their religious practices, such as fasting and praying, during Ramadan while fulfilling their professional responsibilities?
2. What challenges do Muslim teachers encounter in adhering to the dos and don'ts of Ramadan within a non-Muslim school setting, and how do they overcome them?
3. How do the cultural and religious beliefs of Muslim teachers influence their interactions with students, colleagues, and school administrators during Ramadan?
4. In what ways do non-Muslim school environments accommodate or hinder the religious practices and cultural traditions of Muslim teachers during Ramadan?
5. How do Muslim teachers perceive and experience cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in non-Muslim schools during the observance of Ramadan?

Literature Review

Cultural and Religious Adaptation of Muslim Teachers

Muslim teachers in non-Muslim schools navigate a delicate balance between maintaining their faith and adapting to dominant cultural norms. International research highlights challenges such as negotiating prayer schedules, fasting, wearing hijab, and experiencing microaggressions that affect professional identity and belonging (Al-Tamimi & Al-Khatib, 2019; Junaid, 2020; Selim, 2021; Syed & Khatun, 2022). This experience aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which explains how teachers continually negotiate their self-concept and group belonging as visible religious minorities in schools where Islamic practices are not the norm. Educators develop heightened cultural awareness and self-regulation to sustain professional credibility while preserving religious practices (Ayman & Zeyad, 2023).

Furthermore, Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) helps explain why Muslim teachers may face compounded challenges, as their religious identity overlaps with their cultural, ethnic, and gender identities, resulting in differentiated experiences of marginalization or acceptance. Studies on Muslim educators also emphasize the moral role expected of them as faith exemplars, not neutral facilitators, especially in non-Muslim settings (Hammad & Shah, 2018). These intersecting pressures suggest that identity negotiation is not merely personal, but institutional and systemic.

Managing Cultural and Religious Misunderstandings

Teachers often encounter misunderstandings from colleagues and students regarding Islamic practices. Globally, strategies include fostering dialogue, implementing culturally responsive teaching, and advocating for institutional reforms such as accommodations for attire and prayer (Ubani, 2023; Alberts, 2023; Johnson, 2021; Brown, 2020). Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954) supports these approaches, suggesting that positive interfaith and intercultural contact—when reinforced by institutional support—reduces prejudice and fosters understanding. In Islamic schools, positive relationships are often linked to shared cultural values (Charki et al., 2021), whereas in non-Muslim schools, the absence of this shared foundation can heighten misunderstandings.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education has issued guidelines on religious attire and promotes Peace Education, but gaps remain in structural support and teacher training (Rappler, 2013; ResearchGate, 2023). Studies on Muslim students show similar struggles with acceptance and belonging (Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2025), reinforcing that cultural misunderstanding affects both learners and educators. Community involvement and ongoing professional development are essential to reducing bias and promoting respect.

Support Mechanisms for Muslim Teachers

Support systems vary across contexts. In the United States and Europe, policies emphasize inclusive curricula and respect for teacher identity (Education Week, 2023; Den Brok et al., 2021; Shah, 2024). In the Philippines, initiatives such as the Madrasah Education Program integrate Islamic values into the curriculum, but implementation challenges persist due to limited resources and teacher development needs (Sali, 2020; UP CIDS, 2019). Strengthening institutional policies and capacity-building remains crucial to sustaining support for Muslim educators. The Contact Hypothesis further suggests that institutional support is necessary for meaningful intergroup engagement to flourish in schools (Allport, 1954).

Fostering Inclusivity in Schools

Research highlights the importance of professional development, anti-bias training, and culturally responsive practices in fostering respect for Muslim teachers (Shafer, 2016; DeCuir, 2023). Providing prayer spaces, networks, and localized teaching resources further supports inclusivity (CAIR, 2021; Alameddine, 2019; DFAT, 2014). In the Philippines, the Department of Education and local scholars highlight professional development for Madrasah teachers and contextualized resources as central to creating inclusive school cultures

(Maruhom, 2023; Marasigan & Canales, 2019). From a Social Identity Theory lens, inclusive school policies help religious minorities feel a sense of belonging, reducing identity threat and social distance.

Observance of Ramadan

Ramadan entails fasting, prayer, and reflection, profoundly shaping the daily routines of Muslim teachers. Internationally, practices such as Egypt's Fanous lanterns or Turkey's pre-dawn drumming emphasize community solidarity (Prokerala, 2024). In the Philippines, Ramadan is observed through fasting, Taraweeh prayers, and interfaith Iftar gatherings that foster respect and harmony. The declaration of Eid al-Fitr as a national holiday further affirms the country's commitment to religious inclusivity (POPnews, 2024). Intersectionality Theory explains why individual observance of Ramadan varies depending on factors such as gender, school context, and policy support.

Religious Identity and Professional Life

Religious identity influences how Muslim teachers navigate professional spaces. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) directly explains the tension between authenticity and conformity in predominantly non-Muslim institutions. Teachers often selectively disclose faith practices to avoid stereotypes or scrutiny (Ali, 2018). International studies report that Ramadan heightens visibility, evoking both pride and vulnerability (Mahmood, 2019; Sahin & Çelik, 2020). The Contact Hypothesis suggests that when schools support open dialogue, Ramadan can become an opportunity for positive interfaith contact rather than misunderstanding. In the Philippine setting, Muslim teachers often feel compelled to explain fasting or prayer practices, highlighting the importance of cultural awareness in schools (Mansouri & Vergani, 2018).

Regional and Provincial Support for Ramadan

Across Mindanao, responses to Ramadan vary. Sultan Kudarat highlights interfaith initiatives such as Project SUKRAN and inclusive conferences (PIA, 2024; PS Balita, 2024). BARMM institutionalizes accommodations through adjusted working hours, Ramadan bonuses, and cultural festivals (Inquirer, 2025; Philstar, 2025; Rappler, 2024). These models stress the importance of embedding cultural sensitivity into institutional policies, particularly in schools.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of Muslim teachers in non-Muslim schools during the advent of Ramadan. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it captures participants' narratives, perspectives, and meanings of their experiences within their teaching contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2018).

Participants

The participants were fifteen (15) purposively selected Muslim teachers from elementary and secondary schools from the eleven municipalities under the Division of Sultan Kudarat during the 2024–2025 school year. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (a) be practicing Muslims, (b) currently teach in a non-Muslim school, (c) have at least two years of teaching experience in such a setting, and (d) be willing to participate in in-depth interviews. The sample size aligns with qualitative research standards, ensuring depth of data collection and saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2019; Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020).

Instrument

Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore the religious identity, challenges, and coping experiences of Muslim teachers during the month of Ramadan. Open-ended questions ensured flexibility while remaining aligned with the study's core themes. The instrument was validated by three (3) Master Teachers, whose recommendations enhanced its clarity and cultural sensitivity, and a pilot test with two Muslim teachers confirmed its usability. The finalized interview guide was deemed valid, reliable, and appropriate for data collection (Creswell, 2014).

Procedure

Formal permission was obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent and the participating school principals prior to data collection. After securing informed consent, individual interviews were conducted with all fifteen (15) participants in secure and convenient settings. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission. The researcher then transcribed the interviews verbatim and employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and coping strategies related to observing Ramadan in non-Muslim school environments.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical research standards of Sultan Kudarat State University. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of voluntary participation, and given the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was strictly maintained in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. To acknowledge their contribution, participants received a small token of appreciation.

Results and Discussion

This study uncovered fifteen themes that describe the lived experiences of Muslim teachers in non-Muslim schools during the month of Ramadan. Their narratives highlight both challenges and resilience, framed within cultural and institutional contexts.

Theme 1: Adjusting Daily Routines During Ramadan

This theme highlights how Muslim teachers made significant adjustments to their daily schedules during the month of Ramadan. Teachers often woke up earlier for suhoor (pre-dawn meal), resulting in disrupted sleep and fatigue, while still maintaining punctuality and fulfilling their professional responsibilities. One participant explained, "I take short naps… sleep is life during Ramadan" (P7). Another noted, "I wake up earlier than usual, then I still need to teach, so sometimes I feel very tired" (P2). These experiences reflect how teachers reorganized routines to balance faith and profession. Research confirms that fasting alters circadian rhythms, leading to fatigue but also encouraging micro-sleep strategies to sustain productivity (Al-Kandari & Al-Kandari, 2020; Omar & Ibrahim, 2021). Grounded in Intersectionality Theory, this theme explores how teachers navigate the intersection of their faith and work identities in non-Muslim schools.

Theme 2: Physical and Mental Fatigue While Fasting

Teachers consistently reported exhaustion, dehydration, and reduced stamina during teaching hours. One participant shared, "My throat is so dry, my energy is almost gone" (P3). Another stated, "I feel weak, but I cannot show it because I am teaching" (P9). These accounts emphasize the physical strain of fasting on professional performance. Studies similarly highlight declines in cognitive and physical endurance during Ramadan fasting, particularly in demanding professions (Sadiq et al., 2021; Latif & Karim, 2023). This theme highlights the physical dimension of lived experience, demonstrating how fasting directly impacts energy and resilience.

Theme 3: Strategic Teaching and Energy Conservation

This theme highlights the strategies teachers employed to conserve energy during fasting. Many reduced the length of prolonged lectures and instead relied on student-centered methods. As one participant admitted, "I can't talk for long anymore… I usually just give activity sheets" (P2). Another added, "Sometimes I just let them do group work while I monitor" (P10). Research supports this adaptive shift, noting that teachers often employ activity-based and technology-supported approaches to manage limited stamina during Ramadan (Hashim & Embong, 2022; Al-Nuaimi & Hamdan, 2020). These strategies demonstrate resilience in striking a balance between instructional quality and personal well-being.

Theme 4: Struggles in Classroom Management and Patience

This theme highlights the challenges of emotional regulation during fasting. Teachers admitted they were more prone to irritability and frustration. One explained, "I go out of the classroom, inhale-exhale… I stop myself from getting angry" (P13). Another shared, "Because I am hungry and thirsty, I lose patience faster" (P5). Research confirms that fasting can heighten emotional sensitivity, testing teachers' patience in high-demand environments (Alhassan & Ibrahim, 2020; Ahmad & Yusof, 2022). This theme highlights how fasting amplifies emotional labor in teaching, necessitating conscious self-control to maintain professionalism.

Theme 5: Observing Prayer Times in School

Teachers expressed difficulty in observing the five daily prayers at school due to the absence of prayer rooms and challenges in performing ablution. One participant admitted, "I skip prayers because there is no place for me to pray" (P8). Another added, "Sometimes I pray in an empty classroom, but it feels uncomfortable" (P11). Studies confirm that inadequate institutional infrastructure hinders religious observance in secular spaces (Mahfud & Salim, 2023; Nasir & Syed, 2019). This theme highlights the tension between spiritual obligations and school environments that often lack adequate structural accommodations.

Theme 6: Support from School Administration and Colleagues

This theme underscores the importance of administrative empathy and peer support. One teacher recalled, "They tell me to rest or go home early" (P6). Another added, "The principal allows us to use the gym for Friday prayers" (P4). Research indicates that culturally responsive leadership enhances the resilience and satisfaction of minority teachers (Riaz & Farooq, 2022; Awwad-Tabry et al., 2023). This theme illustrates how informal gestures of understanding create inclusive environments even in the absence of formal policy.

Theme 7: Students' Awareness and Behavior Adjustment

Teachers observed that students became more considerate and respectful during the month of Ramadan. "They say, 'Do not be noisy, teacher is fasting'" (P1), one shared. Another added, "They behave better because they know I am fasting" (P2). These experiences show students' awareness translating into behavioral adjustment, reflecting how direct interaction with Muslim teachers fosters empathy and respect.

Teachers also noted that students expressed curiosity about fasting and prayer, turning these interactions into opportunities for cultural learning. Such exchanges allowed learners to appreciate religious diversity, aligning with Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954), which posits that positive intergroup contact reduces prejudice.

This theme highlights how Ramadan promotes mutual respect and strengthens teacher–student relationships in non-Muslim schools.

Theme 8: Religious Education, Dialogue, and Interfaith Harmony

Teachers shared their beliefs with colleagues and students to foster understanding and bridge cultural gaps. "Islam teaches peace; being kind helps avoid conflict" (P6), one noted. Another said, "I connect Islam teachings to their religion" (P11). A participant added, "My students sometimes ask why we pray many times a day, and I explain that it helps us stay disciplined and thankful" (P4). These exchanges illustrate meaningful teacher–student dialogues that promote curiosity, respect, and interfaith learning.

Grounded in Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954), such positive interfaith interactions reduce prejudice and deepen mutual understanding, as supported by studies showing that religious dialogue fosters empathy and harmony in multicultural settings (Dalilah et al., 2022; Amjad, 2019). This theme highlights how Muslim teachers, through everyday classroom conversations and modeling of faith-based values, actively cultivate inclusivity and interfaith respect in non-Muslim schools—thereby addressing the student-interaction dimension of the research question.

Theme 9: Professional and Personal Growth During Ramadan

Despite challenges, teachers viewed Ramadan as a period of self-improvement. One shared, "I prioritized not being late to school… I became more consistent" (P11). Another reflected, "Ramadan taught me discipline and patience" (P12). Research suggests that Ramadan promotes personal growth, effective time management, and professional discipline (Bakar & Musa, 2020; Farid & Osman, 2022). This theme highlights how fasting not only challenges but also strengthens teachers' personal and professional values.

Theme 10: Limited Awareness of Ramadan's Spiritual Significance

Teachers observed that peers often reduced Ramadan to a period of food abstinence, overlooking its spiritual significance. One participant noted, "They only think it's about not eating, but it is about cleansing the soul" (P14). Another added, "Others don't understand the deeper purpose of fasting" (P3). Studies confirm that Ramadan is frequently misunderstood in secular settings, where its spiritual aspects are neglected (Ahmad & Azzam, 2020; Rae, 2024). This theme underscores the importance of raising awareness and promoting education about the holistic significance of Ramadan.

Theme 11: Institutional Support and Policy Gaps

Teachers identified inconsistencies in institutional support. One participant stated, "No need to explain, they already understand" (P11). Another complained, "There is no official policy, only verbal consideration" (P5). Research highlights that the lack of formal accommodation policies marginalizes minority teachers in secular schools (Weissman, 2023; Modood, 2020). This theme highlights the distinction between informal support and systemic inclusion, underscoring the need for policy-based solutions.

Theme 12: Inclusivity and Respectful School Culture

This theme illustrates how school culture fosters inclusion even without formal structures. One participant said, "They avoid bringing pork dishes during events because they respect us" (P9). Another added, "They give us space when we need to pray" (P7). Research shows that respect and validation of cultural identities are central to inclusivity (Yosso, 2019; Barazangi, 2021). This theme demonstrates that inclusive cultures thrive through everyday practices of respect and empathy.

Theme 13: Facilities and Dress Code Challenges

Teachers, especially women, highlighted challenges with uniforms and prayer facilities. One participant explained, "The uniform has short sleeves, but I want to cover my arms" (P12). Another added, "There is no prayer room, so I just pray in hidden spaces" (P8). Research confirms that a lack of accommodation for modest dress and prayer facilities fosters exclusion in secular institutions (Shamsuddin & Ismail, 2020; Hassan & Rahman, 2023). This theme reflects structural barriers that complicate Muslim teachers' professional comfort and identity.

Theme 14: Faith and Spiritual Discipline as Motivation

Teachers emphasized that faith sustained their resilience during Ramadan. One said, "I really held on to my faith, I realized I can actually control temptation" (P12). Another reflected, "Sabr (patience) always saves me" (P8). Research supports that Ramadan strengthens resilience, patience, and emotional discipline among educators (Kamil & Rahman, 2021; Amini & Sulaiman, 2023). This theme underscores the centrality of spiritual discipline as both a coping strategy and motivational resource.

Theme 15: Ongoing Challenges of Being a Minority

Despite institutional support, teachers still felt isolated and underrepresented in non-Muslim schools. "Sometimes I feel different, like I do not belong" (P10), one shared. Another added, "I adjust all the time because I am the only Muslim teacher here" (P6). Such reflections reveal the ongoing negotiation of belonging and identity among Muslim educators.

Teachers also faced subtle challenges with students' limited understanding of fasting and prayer. "Some students ask why I don't eat lunch or drink water, and I just explain that it's part of my fasting" (P7). "They sometimes joke about me not eating, but I take it

positively and use it to explain what Ramadan means" (P4). These moments demonstrate how teachers serve as cultural mediators, transforming misconceptions into learning opportunities.

Anchored in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989), this theme highlights how Muslim teachers navigate visibility, belonging, and the complexities of their layered identities in non-Muslim environments. Studies echo these experiences, showing that minority teachers often face subtle exclusion and "othering" in secular institutions (Abdullah & Farooq, 2021; Karakaşoğlu & Doğmuş, 2023; Garcia & Chen, 2024).

Conclusions

This study examined the lived experiences of Muslim teachers in non-Muslim schools during the month of Ramadan, focusing on their challenges, coping strategies, and opportunities for growth. Findings reveal that teachers adjusted their daily routines and teaching practices to manage physical fatigue, emotional strain, and limited institutional accommodations while maintaining professional responsibilities. Despite difficulties in observing prayer times, classroom management, and adhering to dress codes, teachers demonstrated resilience by employing energy-conserving strategies, practicing patience, and drawing strength from faith. Support from administrators, colleagues, and students, along with a respectful school culture, eased some burdens, though gaps in institutional policy and facilities remain significant.

The study also underscores the dual role of Muslim teachers as educators and cultural bridges, promoting interfaith dialogue, inclusivity, and mutual respect in diverse school environments. While Ramadan posed challenges, it also facilitated professional and personal growth, fostering discipline, time management, and empathy. However, persistent issues of underrepresentation and subtle "othering" highlight the ongoing struggles of being a religious minority in educational spaces.

Overall, the findings suggest that fostering inclusive school cultures requires both systemic policies and everyday practices of empathy and respect. Schools should provide formal accommodations such as prayer spaces, flexible schedules, and culturally responsive dress policies, while also encouraging professional development on religious diversity and inclusivity. By institutionalizing support and promoting cultural awareness, schools can create equitable environments where Muslim teachers —and all educators—can thrive, balancing their professional duties with their spiritual commitments.

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