

NAVIGATING IDENTITY AND INCLUSION: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM MIGRANT STUDENTS IN REGULAR PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of Muslim migrant students in predominantly non-Muslim classrooms, with a focus on academic engagement, language barriers, and cultural adaptation. It aimed to identify the challenges these learners face, the coping strategies they employ, and the adjustments they make during integration, with the goal of informing culturally responsive teaching, student support, and school program development. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the study examined eight Grade 7 Muslim migrant students enrolled in both the regular curriculum and the ALIVE (Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education) Program. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a researcher-developed questionnaire validated for cultural and linguistic appropriateness. Analysis followed Colaizzi's phenomenological method, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, and clustering themes to reveal patterns in academic, social, and cultural experiences. Findings indicated varied engagement, with participation influenced by language and communication challenges, while adaptation involved negotiating religious practices, social interactions, dietary restrictions, and experiences of discrimination. Participants employed coping strategies such as peer support, practicing Tagalog, spiritual grounding, and practical adjustments. The study highlights the resilience of Muslim migrant students and offers actionable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers to foster inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments that support both academic success and social integration.

Keywords: *Muslim Migrant Students, Academic Engagement, Language Challenges, Cultural Adaptation, Inclusive Education, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

The increasing mobility of families within the Philippines has led to growing cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity in public secondary schools. Among these learners are Muslim migrant students from various ethnolinguistic communities in Mindanao who are integrated into regular classrooms within predominantly non-Muslim educational environments. While inclusive education policies emphasize equity and access, Muslim migrant students often encounter challenges related to language use, cultural adjustment, and social participation that may influence their academic engagement and overall school experience. Related studies consistently indicate that student participation and engagement are shaped by linguistic, cultural, and social factors, with limited engagement often linked to difficulties in peer relationships, communication barriers, and adjustment challenges that negatively affect academic performance and well-being (Yildirim et al., 2023).

Existing literature further underscores the centrality of engagement in shaping educational outcomes. Active participation has been identified as a strong predictor of academic success, motivation, and persistence, positioning engagement as a critical dimension of students' learning experiences (Molin-Karakoc & Ikola, 2024; Momenive, 2024). However, language-related challenges—particularly pronunciation difficulties, speech anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation—have been widely documented as barriers to classroom participation among migrant learners (Coppinger & Sheridan, 2022; Xue & Noels, 2025). These challenges often result in reduced oral participation and social withdrawal, thereby limiting opportunities for meaningful academic and social interaction. Nevertheless, studies highlight that supportive peer relationships, teacher encouragement, and inclusive practices such as translanguaging can mitigate these barriers and foster resilience among migrant students (Wilczewski & Alon, 2022; Bhatti & Alzahrani, 2023).

Cultural and religious differences further shape the school experiences of Muslim migrant students. Research demonstrates that Muslim learners actively negotiate their identities through religious practices, dress, dietary observances, and patterns of socialization within non-Muslim contexts. Visible religious markers, such as the hijab and adherence to halal practices, have been associated with experiences of discomfort, stereotyping, or exclusion, yet they also serve as sources of identity affirmation, moral grounding, and resilience (Essid, 2020; Datucali & Sali, 2020). Coping strategies identified in the literature include linguistic adaptation, relationship-building, faith-based practices, and pragmatic adjustments to school norms, reflecting both students' adaptive capacities and the need for stronger institutional support (Berry, 1997; Guiapal & Usop, 2024).

Situated within this scholarly and institutional context, San Jose National High School in Rodriguez, Rizal represents a relevant site for examining the lived experiences of Muslim migrant students enrolled in regular classrooms alongside participation in the Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) Program. While the ALIVE Program provides culturally responsive support, Muslim migrant students continue to navigate mainstream classroom environments shaped largely by non-Muslim norms.

Understanding their lived experiences is therefore essential to assessing the effectiveness of existing school-based support mechanisms and informing the development of culturally responsive, inclusive educational practices that promote equitable participation, academic engagement, and social inclusion.

The growing body of international literature has documented the educational experiences of Muslim migrant students, particularly in Western contexts, emphasizing issues of discrimination, language barriers, cultural exclusion, and identity negotiation (FRA, 2024; ISPU, 2022; Riaz, 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights, they largely focus on European and North American educational systems and offer limited attention to the localized realities of Muslim migrant learners in the Philippine context. In particular, there is a notable lack of empirical research examining how migration, religion, and schooling intersect for Muslim students from Mindanao who are integrated into predominantly non-Muslim public schools outside their region of origin. This gap is especially evident in smaller urban and provincial settings, where Muslim learners constitute a minority and institutional support mechanisms may be limited or underexplored.

The study is timely in light of increasing internal migration within the Philippines, particularly from Mindanao to Luzon, driven by economic pressures, conflict, and the pursuit of better educational opportunities. National data indicate a rising movement of families from the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) to regions such as CALABARZON, resulting in increasingly diverse classroom populations (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 2023; Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021). As schools accommodate learners from varied cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds, understanding the challenges of integration, inclusion, and academic participation has become an urgent educational concern. Despite policy initiatives promoting inclusive education, evidence suggests that Muslim migrant students continue to experience language-related difficulties, cultural misunderstandings, and limited accommodation of religious practices, which may negatively affect their academic engagement and well-being.

Furthermore, school-based observations and institutional data from San Jose National High School reveal persistent challenges among Muslim migrant students, including communication difficulties in Filipino and English, discomfort related to uniform policies and climate, and experiences of social exclusion linked to religious identity. These issues align with findings from prior studies that associate poor cultural integration with diminished academic outcomes and psychological distress among Muslim learners (Donato-Pua et al., 2024; Torres-Zaragoza, 2024). However, existing research has seldom explored these concerns through the lived experiences of students themselves, particularly within Philippine public secondary schools implementing programs such as the Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) Program.

In response to these gaps and contextual realities, this phenomenological study seeks to provide an in-depth, context-specific understanding of the lived experiences of Muslim migrant students integrated into regular classrooms. By foregrounding their voices, the study aims to generate insights that can inform culturally responsive educational

practices, strengthen school-based support mechanisms, and contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable learning environments for Muslim learners within the Philippine education system.

This study is anchored on Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which together provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how Muslim migrant students adapt to and negotiate their identities within predominantly non-Muslim educational environments. Acculturation Theory explains the processes through which students manage cultural maintenance and adaptation in response to sustained intercultural contact, while Social Identity Theory highlights how group membership shapes students' self-concept, peer interactions, and sense of belonging. Guided by these theoretical perspectives, the conceptual framework illustrates how Muslim migrant students lived experiences in regular classrooms are influenced by academic engagement, language proficiency, and cultural adjustment, as well as the coping strategies they employ based on cultural values, religious beliefs, and social affiliations. The interaction of these elements informs the identification of learners' specific needs and supports the development of targeted, culturally responsive interventions aimed at fostering inclusion, academic success, and a strengthened sense of belonging within the school community.

Research Questions

This study answered the following:

1. What are the experiences of Muslim migrants' students distributed in the regular classes in terms of:
 - 1.1 Engagement in Learning Activities
 - 1.2 Language barrier
 - 1.3 Adjustment to non-Muslim culture
2. What were the challenges face by the migrant Muslim students being distributed in the regular classes?
3. What strategies did the migrant Muslim students employ in coping with the challenges they face?
4. What program can be recommended based on the findings of the study?

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in a culturally diverse public secondary school in Montalban (Rodriguez), Rizal, during the 2025–2026 school year. The school's population included a significant number of migrant learners, providing an appropriate context to examine the academic and social experiences of Muslim migrant students in a predominantly non-Muslim educational environment.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich, contextually grounded insights into migration, cultural adjustment, and linguistic challenges. The study involved eight (8) Grade 7 Muslim migrant students enrolled in both the regular curriculum and the ALIVE (Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education)

program. Participants originated from various provinces in Mindanao, including Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, and North Cotabato, representing ethnolinguistic groups such as Maranao and Iranun. They spoke Maranao, Iranun, Tagalog/Filipino, and English.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a researcher-developed questionnaire. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, scope, and ethical considerations, and provided written consent for voluntary participation. Interviews allowed students to describe their experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies in both academic and social contexts. Follow-up questions were used to clarify responses. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently deleted after transcription.

The primary instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire designed to explore demographics, academic engagement, language challenges, cultural adjustment, and coping strategies of Muslim migrant students. The questionnaire was reviewed and validated by experts, including Social Studies specialists, Arabic language teachers, and the ALIVE coordinator, to ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness. The instrument included open-ended questions and sections for demographic information. It was administered in both paper-based and online formats to maximize accessibility.

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, which emphasizes systematic interpretation of participants' lived experiences. Significant statements were extracted from the interviews, interpreted to derive meanings, and clustered into themes. Thematic clusters reflected academic engagement, language barriers, cultural adjustment, identity negotiation, and coping strategies. Participants reviewed the synthesized findings to confirm accuracy and authenticity. This approach allowed a comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences and the identification of actionable recommendations for culturally responsive practices.

The study focused exclusively on the academic and social experiences of eight Grade 7 Muslim migrant students enrolled in the ALIVE program at the school. Findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to students in other schools, grade levels, or regions. The study was limited to a single school year and relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by participants' willingness to disclose personal or sensitive experiences. Despite these limitations, the study provides meaningful insights into the lived experiences of Muslim migrant students and informs strategies for fostering inclusivity and support within similar educational contexts.

RESULTS

The study involved eight Grade 7 Muslim migrant students (coded MS1–MS8) enrolled in both the regular curriculum and the ALIVE (Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education) program. The participants originated from various provinces in Mindanao, including Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, and North Cotabato, representing Maranao and Iranun ethnolinguistic groups. They were bilingual or multilingual, speaking Maranao, Iranun, Tagalog/Filipino, and English. At the time of the study, participants had been

residing in Montalban, Rizal for periods ranging from one and a half to three years and lived with either their parents or other relatives. Their migration was primarily motivated by educational aspirations, family livelihood, and reunification with parents. While Tagalog was the dominant language in the school environment, students selectively employed their native languages at home or among fellow Muslim peers, often refraining from using them in class to avoid potential misunderstandings or negative perceptions.

Analysis of the interview data revealed that participants' experiences in regular classrooms were shaped by their engagement in learning activities, language-related challenges, and the need to adjust to non-Muslim cultural norms. Levels of participation varied, ranging from limited to active, and were influenced by students' confidence in their language proficiency and their perceived inclusion within classroom activities. Language barriers emerged as a significant factor affecting engagement, manifesting as difficulties in communication, speech-related anxiety, and occasional embarrassment when interacting in Tagalog with non-Muslim classmates.

Participants also navigated cultural adjustments to reconcile their religious and cultural identity with the predominant non-Muslim school environment. These adjustments involved modifications in clothing, social behavior, and dietary practices, demonstrating their efforts to maintain cultural and religious norms while participating in school life. The challenges encountered included cultural constraints within the classroom, communication difficulties, experiences of social discrimination, and limited access to halal food.

To address these challenges, participants employed a variety of coping strategies. They practiced Tagalog to improve communication and facilitate classroom participation, cultivated friendships with non-Muslim peers to foster social integration, and adhered to spiritually guided practices that reinforced positive values. Additionally, students implemented practical strategies, such as adjusting attire or attending to physical comfort, to navigate environmental and cultural constraints. Collectively, these strategies reflect the proactive measures taken by Muslim migrant students to negotiate academic, social, and cultural demands while preserving their religious and cultural identity within a predominantly non-Muslim educational context.

These findings are summarized in **Table 1 – Themes Generated from the Raw Data**, which organizes experiences, challenges, and coping strategies into themes and sub-themes.

Table 1 – Themes Generated from the Raw Data

Research Question 1: Experiences	Research Question 2: Challenges	Research Question 3: Coping Strategies
1.1: Engagement in Learning Activities Theme: Participation	Theme 1: Cultural Constraints in a non-Muslim Classroom Environment	Theme 1: Language Adaptation Strategies

Sub-theme 1: Limited Part. Sub-theme 2: Active Part. 1.2: Language Barrier Theme: Minimal Engagement Sub-theme 1: Struggling Communication Sub-theme 2: Embarrassment 1.3: Adjustment to non-Muslim Culture Theme: Differences Sub-theme 1: Religion Sub-theme 2: Dressing Sub-theme 3: Socialization	Sub-theme 1: Discomforts and Inconveniences Theme 2: Communication Problem Sub-theme 1: Pronunciation and Language Shift Sub-theme 2: Speech Anxiety Theme 3: Social Discrimination Sub-theme 1: Bullying and Prejudice Sub-theme 2: Inferiority Theme 4: Food Limitation Sub-theme 1: Halal Food Sub-theme 2: Fear of Pork Sub-theme 3: Canteen Menu Mismatch	Sub-theme 1: Practicing Tagalog with peers Theme 2: Relationship Building Sub-theme 1: Making friends with non-Muslim Sub-theme 2: Ignoring negative treatment Theme 3: Spiritually guided practices Sub-theme: Positive Values Theme 4: Physical and practical strategies Sub-theme1: Clothing adjustments Sub-theme 2: Hydration and ventilation
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DISCUSSION

1. Muslim Migrant Students Experiences in Regular Classes

1. 1.1 Engagement in Learning Activities

The experiences of Muslim migrant students in regular classrooms indicate varying levels of engagement, shaped by language proficiency, classroom inclusivity, cultural comfort, and peer interactions. Participation is often limited in oral, collaborative, and interactive tasks, reflecting the challenges associated with adjusting to a new educational environment while preserving one's cultural and religious identity. This observation is consistent with Acculturation Theory, which posits that individuals entering a culturally unfamiliar context often experience uncertainty as they negotiate between maintaining their own cultural norms and adopting those of the host environment.

Despite these challenges, several students demonstrated strong academic motivation, particularly in structured, teacher-guided activities with clearly defined expectations and reduced linguistic demands. Instructional tools such as worksheets, visual aids, and performance-based tasks facilitated learners' ability to demonstrate competence while minimizing language-related pressures. As confidence and bilingual proficiency increased, students exhibited greater participation, illustrating the integration strategy of acculturation, wherein individuals adopt aspects of the host culture while retaining their own cultural and religious identity. Peer interactions further influenced engagement: supportive classmates fostered increased participation, whereas experiences of exclusion or misunderstanding reduced involvement. These findings are supported by Social Identity Theory, which emphasizes that students engage more actively when their cultural identity is acknowledged and socially affirmed. Moreover, culturally responsive pedagogical practices that recognize students' backgrounds promote motivation, confidence, and meaningful engagement.

Within the sub-theme Limited Participation, migrant students frequently exhibited passive engagement during classroom activities, observing and completing tasks silently rather than actively contributing ideas. Contributing factors included limited language proficiency, unfamiliarity with classroom procedures, and apprehension regarding errors. Social and cultural considerations, such as perceived exclusion or participation in activities inconsistent with cultural norms, further constrained active involvement. These behaviors suggest that limited participation functions as a coping strategy rather than a reflection of lack of interest or ability. The findings corroborate those of Yildirim et al. (2023), who reported that students encountering adjustment difficulties often experience lower academic achievement, social isolation, and reluctance to participate in classroom activities.

In contrast, the sub-theme Active Participation underscores that, under supportive conditions, migrant students engage meaningfully in learning. Structured activities with clear guidance, teacher encouragement, and peer support facilitated student involvement, enabling them to share ideas, collaborate effectively, and take initiative. Affirmation of cultural identity within the classroom further enhanced engagement, reflecting the role of Social Identity Theory in promoting inclusive learning. These findings align with the work of Molin-Karakoc and Ikola (2024), who identified student engagement as a key determinant of academic progress and adaptation, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive, linguistically supportive, and socially inclusive instructional strategies in fostering active participation.

1. 1.2 Language Barrier

The analysis of Muslim migrant students' experiences in regular classrooms revealed that language barriers significantly influenced their engagement. Students whose first languages were Maranao or Iranun faced difficulties understanding lessons, following instructions, and expressing ideas in Filipino or English. These challenges often limited their participation in discussions, group work, and interactive classroom activities. From the perspective of Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997), these difficulties illustrate the tension students experience as they navigate the host school culture while preserving

their linguistic and cultural identities. Similarly, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) explains that engagement is closely tied to a sense of belonging and recognition; when language differences were unsupported or misunderstood, students experienced marginalization, which reduced interaction with peers and classroom involvement.

Despite these challenges, students demonstrated adaptive strategies to overcome communication difficulties. They relied on peer support, self-correction, and mental rehearsal to participate meaningfully. Even when accent, pronunciation, or limited vocabulary marked them as linguistically distinct, students exhibited resilience, gradually improving confidence and social integration. These findings align with Wilczewski and Alon (2022), who reported that international students often use peer assistance and translanguaging strategies to enhance both academic and social participation.

Language-related anxiety also emerged as a significant factor. Students frequently felt embarrassed when making mistakes or mispronouncing words, particularly in public recitations or discussions. This embarrassment sometimes led to withdrawal, reliance on safer modes of communication, or silence during classroom activities. From the lens of Acculturation Theory, such experiences reflect the negotiation between adapting to the host culture and maintaining one's cultural and linguistic identity. Social Identity Theory further suggests that participation depends on perceived acceptance, and supportive teachers and peers were instrumental in reducing these anxieties. This finding echoes Coppinger and Sheridan (2022), who found that "accent anxiety" and fear of negative judgment can limit students' willingness to speak in class.

In general, language barriers shaped both the academic and social experiences of Muslim migrant students, constraining participation initially but prompting adaptive strategies that gradually facilitated engagement. These insights highlight the importance of culturally responsive teaching, peer support, and linguistic scaffolding in fostering academic confidence, social integration, and meaningful participation among migrant learners.

1.1.3 Adjustment to Non-Muslim Culture

The experiences of Muslim migrant students in predominantly non-Muslim classrooms reveal that adaptation to cultural differences is a nuanced and ongoing process. Students were required to navigate social norms, values, and daily practices distinct from those of their home communities, including dress codes, dietary restrictions, gender expectations, and religious observances such as daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and the wearing of the hijab. These differences occasionally gave rise to misunderstandings, feelings of social isolation, or perceptions of "otherness."

Religious practice emerged as a central aspect of students' identity, shaping both their behavior and daily routines. Students actively negotiated the maintenance of Islamic practices within the school environment, adhering to dietary laws by bringing meals from home, consulting canteen staff, or seeking trusted food sources, and adapting prayer schedules, when necessary, due to limited space or time constraints. These practices exemplify the integration strategy described in Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997), in

which students simultaneously preserve cultural and religious identity while participating in the host culture. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) further emphasizes that recognition and support from peers and teachers reinforced a sense of belonging, whereas lack of accommodation or exposure to prejudice increased acculturative stress. These findings correspond with Essid (2020), who observed that Muslim immigrant youth negotiate religious identity across multiple social domains, balancing cultural authenticity with the expectations of the host environment.

Religious dress functioned as a visible marker of identity and group affiliation. Female students frequently wore the hijab or modest clothing, while male students adhered to Islamic principles of modesty. Such visible expressions strengthened in-group cohesion and self-esteem but also required negotiation in the face of potential social discomfort or misunderstanding. In some instances, students adapted their attire to align with dominant cultural norms or to mitigate peer scrutiny, reflecting a strategic approach to identity management. These observations are consistent with Sanjani (2024), who highlighted the influence of school environments and peer dynamics on Muslim students' decisions regarding religious dress, illustrating the ongoing tension between faith and social integration.

Socialization in the classroom further highlighted the delicate balance between adaptation and identity preservation. Many students opted to communicate in Tagalog rather than their native languages to facilitate interaction with non-Muslim peers, demonstrating strategic code-switching while managing cultural visibility. Students also negotiated stereotypes and negative perceptions associated with their Muslim identity, transforming potential marginalization into opportunities for resilience and constructive engagement. Support networks among Muslim peers and family members provided critical cultural and emotional mediation, bridging linguistic and social gaps, and fostering integration. These findings align with studies by Sancho-Pascual (2019) and Baliwas and Estremera (2025), which emphasize that linguistic and social adaptation among minority students often involves strategic engagement with the dominant language and cultural practices, consistent with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of "linguistic capital."

In summary, Muslim migrant students demonstrated an active and deliberate process of cultural adjustment. Through strategies of integration, selective adaptation, and resilient socialization, they were able to engage meaningfully in classroom life while preserving religious and cultural identities. These experiences underscore the critical role of culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive school policies, and supportive peer networks in facilitating academic engagement, social belonging, and identity affirmation.

2. Challenges Faced by Muslim Migrant Students in Regular Classes

Muslim migrant students in predominantly non-Muslim classrooms encountered a range of challenges that affected academic engagement, social integration, and psychological well-being. Cultural constraints, communication barriers, social discrimination, and limited access to halal food collectively shaped their school experiences. Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997) frames these challenges as opportunities for integration, wherein

students negotiate the maintenance of religious and cultural identity while engaging with the host school culture. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) further emphasizes that recognition and support from peers and teachers reinforce belonging and self-esteem, whereas exclusion or stereotyping undermines participation and engagement. Cultural constraints were evident in daily practices and routines. Limited access to prayer spaces, dietary accommodations, and dress code flexibility often created tension between upholding religious obligations and conforming to school expectations. Students experienced physical discomfort from modest attire, particularly in crowded or poorly ventilated classrooms, which occasionally limited participation and heightened self-consciousness. Despite these obstacles, students demonstrated resilience, maintaining religious dress and practices, reflecting adaptive integration strategies. These experiences are consistent with findings by Kim et al. (2024), who noted that hijab-wearing students in hot climates face additional physical and psychological strain in school environments not designed for cultural inclusivity.

Communication posed another significant challenge. Limited proficiency in the dominant language, coupled with accent differences and unfamiliar speech conventions, constrained students' participation in discussions and comprehension of lessons. Pronunciation difficulties and language shifts reflected the tension between maintaining heritage language and achieving social acceptance. Speech anxiety often accompanied these challenges, as students feared mispronunciation or negative evaluation that might reveal their minority status. These findings align with Xue and Noels (2025), who highlighted "accent anxiety" as a key barrier for second-language learners, linking linguistic competence to identity and belonging. Culturally responsive strategies, including translanguaging, peer mentoring, and teacher scaffolding, facilitated participation while affirming students' linguistic and cultural identities.

Social discrimination further complicated the school experience. Stereotyping, prejudice, and subtle exclusion—often associated with visible markers such as hijab, modest attire, or accent—reinforced feelings of otherness and marginalization. Students internalized these experiences, leading to diminished self-esteem, reduced classroom participation, and selective social withdrawal. These patterns are consistent with Nadal et al. (2021), who argue that everyday discrimination gradually erodes minority students' sense of belonging and self-worth, highlighting the psychosocial impact of exclusion even in the absence of overt bullying.

Dietary limitations emerged as a central challenge. The lack of halal options in school canteens forced students to skip meals, rely on home-prepared foods, or navigate limited safe alternatives, creating both practical and identity-related stress. Fear of accidental consumption of pork underscored the moral and religious significance of dietary observance, reflecting heightened acculturative stress. These findings are corroborated by Guiapal, Usop, and Lumbu-an (2024) and Elshashat and Moffat (2020), who emphasize that insufficient halal provisions in school environments produce emotional strain, reinforce minority status, and restrict social participation. Canteen menu mismatches further reinforced exclusion, limiting opportunities for communal engagement and amplifying feelings of difference.

Collectively, these challenges reveal the intersecting pressures Muslim migrant students face in adapting to predominantly non-Muslim classrooms. Despite linguistic, cultural, social, and dietary obstacles, students exhibited resilience through adaptive strategies, selective socialization, and maintenance of religious practices. These findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive school policies, peer support networks, and strong family-school collaboration to mitigate acculturative stress, affirm religious and cultural identity, and promote equitable academic and social participation.

3. Coping Strategies Employed by Muslim Migrant Students

Muslim migrant students employed diverse strategies to navigate the linguistic, cultural, social, and environmental challenges encountered in predominantly non-Muslim classrooms. These strategies encompassed language adaptation, relationship-building, spiritually guided practices, and practical measures to maintain religious observance and personal well-being. Guided by Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997), these strategies reflect integrative efforts to preserve cultural and religious identity while engaging with the host environment. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) further underscores the importance of identity affirmation, illustrating how supportive social interactions, peer recognition, and faith-based practices reinforce belonging, self-esteem, and resilience. Language adaptation emerged as a primary mechanism for both academic and social integration. Students modified vocabulary, engaged in code-switching, and utilized nonverbal cues to enhance participation in classroom discussions while retaining elements of their heritage language. Peer-based practice of Tagalog, for example, improved pronunciation, reduced perceived harshness of Maranao or Iranun accents, and facilitated confidence in social and academic interactions. While such adaptation promoted inclusion, it also generated emotional and cultural tension, as students occasionally suppressed their mother tongue, highlighting the dual function of language as both a communication tool and an identity marker. These findings align with Torres Centurion and Ferronato (2024), who observed that non-native speakers often internalize negative attitudes toward their accents, reflecting the psychological burden of accent stigma.

Developing relationships with peers and teachers constituted a key coping mechanism. Friendships with non-Muslim peers provided emotional support, fostered social inclusion, and facilitated navigation of cultural and religious boundaries. Inclusive teacher behaviors further enhanced intercultural understanding and collaboration. Cross-religious friendships enabled students to counter stereotypes and reshape peer perceptions, supporting a dual sense of belonging without compromising religious identity. The strategy of ignoring negative treatment—avoiding confrontation with discrimination—functioned as an adaptive mechanism to maintain emotional well-being and academic focus. Grounded in faith-based values such as patience (*sabr*) and moral endurance, this strategy illustrates resilience and self-regulation, even in the face of social exclusion. These observations correspond with Gámez-Guadix et al. (2019), who highlighted avoidance coping as a means to reduce immediate emotional distress, and Rivas-Drake

et al. (2019), who emphasize the role of positive intergroup contact in fostering cross-group friendships and social integration.

Faith-based practices including prayer, Qur'an reading, dhikr, and observance of moral values served as significant coping mechanisms for managing homesickness, discrimination, and acculturative stress. Values such as patience, respect, empathy, and perseverance provided emotional grounding, promoted harmonious interactions, and supported resilience. Faith-driven strategies enabled students to maintain cultural and religious continuity while navigating the host school environment. These findings align with Torres-Zaragoza (2024) and Hatta (2023), who emphasize that religious values encourage moral restraint, self-discipline, and constructive social behaviors in response to prejudice.

Students also employed practical measures to negotiate environmental and cultural challenges. Clothing adjustments such as selecting breathable fabrics, layering garments, and balancing attire with modesty—allowed students to maintain religious compliance while coping with physical discomfort. Hydration and ventilation strategies, including strategic water intake, avoiding strenuous activity during fasting, and seeking shaded areas, ensured physical well-being while observing religious obligations. These strategies reflect integrative adaptation, enabling students to navigate the host environment without compromising core cultural and religious values. Sanjani (2024) and Yusof and Ariffin (2022) similarly note that such adaptations reflect students' capacity to harmonize faith identity with environmental and practical demands.

Collectively, these coping strategies demonstrate a multidimensional approach whereby Muslim migrant students negotiate social, linguistic, and environmental challenges while preserving cultural and religious identity. Language adaptation, relationship-building, spiritually guided practices, and practical adjustments function synergistically to reduce acculturative stress, promote social integration, and sustain psychological resilience. The findings highlight the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive school policies, supportive peer networks, and faith-sensitive practices in fostering equitable participation and holistic development for migrant Muslim students.

4. Proposed program

The program addresses challenges faced by Muslim migrant students in predominantly non-Muslim schools, including language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, social isolation, and limited support for religious practices. While students demonstrate resilience through adaptive and faith-based strategies, structured interventions are essential for holistic development.

It aims to create a culturally responsive, linguistically supportive, and inclusive environment that fosters academic success, social integration, and the preservation of cultural and religious identity. Key components include language support through remedial classes and peer mentoring; cultural awareness initiatives; religious accommodations such as prayer spaces and halal food; psychosocial support via

counseling and mentorship; teacher capacity building; parental and community engagement; and institutionalized inclusive policies.

Through these strategies, the program empowers students to participate confidently and thrive equitably.

The proposed program for Muslim migrant students integrates seven key components to promote academic, social, and cultural inclusion in predominantly non-Muslim schools. Language support enhances communication and classroom participation through remedial classes, peer mentoring, and contextualized activities. Cultural awareness and inclusion are fostered via intercultural seminars, celebration of Islamic events, and curriculum integration. Religious accommodations provide prayer spaces, halal food, and flexible observance schedules, reinforcing belonging. Guidance, teacher training, and community engagement support emotional well-being, inclusive pedagogy, and collaborative partnerships. Policy monitoring ensures sustainability. Together, these measures facilitate holistic development, equitable participation, and the preservation of students' cultural and religious identity.

To ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the *“Bridging the Gap of Different Cultures”* program, a structured evaluation will assess its impact on Muslim migrant students' academic performance, language proficiency, social integration, cultural awareness, and overall well-being. The evaluation objectives include measuring improvements in language and communication skills, assessing cultural awareness and inclusivity among teachers and peers, evaluating the effectiveness of religious accommodations and psychosocial support, monitoring teacher capacity building, examining parental and community engagement, and reviewing the implementation of inclusive school policies.

Program success will be determined through specific indicators, including academic performance and participation, survey results, cultural event participation, student feedback on prayer spaces and halal food, counseling attendance and well-being assessments, teacher reflections and classroom observations, and parent/community participation in orientations and activities. Data will be collected through surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, academic assessments, and program documentation review.

Evaluation will be ongoing, with a mid-year review to identify early outcomes and make adjustments, and a comprehensive end-of-year assessment to evaluate overall impact and sustainability. Findings will be reported to school administrators, teachers, and DepEd offices, with stakeholder feedback sessions to ensure participatory reflection. This plan ensures measurable improvements, fosters inclusion, and supports the holistic development and well-being of Muslim migrant students in non-Muslim school environments.

Table 2 - Program Components and Indicators of Success

Program Component	Indicators of Success
Language Support and Development	• Improvement in academic language proficiency (test scores, class participation). • Increased confidence in classroom communication.
Cultural Awareness and Inclusion	• Teacher and student survey results indicating increased cultural sensitivity. • Number of cultural events and participation rates.
Religious Accommodation and Support	• Student feedback on satisfaction with prayer spaces, halal food availability, and flexibility during observances. • Observation of compliance with religious accommodations.
Guidance and Psychosocial Support	• Number of counseling sessions attended. • Reported improvement in emotional well-being and social adjustment (pre/post surveys).
Teacher Capacity Building	• Teacher self-assessment and reflection reports. • Observation of culturally responsive teaching practices.
Parental and Community Engagement	• Attendance and participation in orientations, dialogues, and community programs. • Feedback from parents and community representatives.
Parental and Community Engagement	• Attendance and participation in orientations, dialogues, and community programs. • Feedback from parents and community representatives.

To ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the *“Bridging the Gap of Different Cultures”* program, a structured evaluation plan is proposed, focusing on students’ academic performance, language proficiency, social integration, cultural awareness, and overall well-being. The evaluation aims to determine the extent to which the program enhances language proficiency and communication skills, promotes cultural awareness and inclusivity among teachers, peers, and the school community, and strengthens students’ sense of belonging through religious accommodations and psychosocial support. It also seeks to monitor teacher capacity building, the adoption of inclusive teaching practices, parental and community engagement, and the implementation of school policies supporting Muslim migrant learners.

Program effectiveness will be assessed through multiple methods. Surveys and questionnaires will gather feedback from students, teachers, and parents regarding satisfaction, outcomes, and areas for improvement. Interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders will provide qualitative insights into program impact. Classroom and school environment observations will assess participation, inclusivity, and adherence to program guidelines. Pre- and post-program academic and language assessments will evaluate improvements in performance and communication, while program documentation, including reports and activity logs, will monitor implementation fidelity and outcomes.

Evaluation will be continuous, with ongoing monitoring during program implementation. A mid-year review will examine initial outcomes and identify necessary adjustments, while an end-of-year assessment will provide a comprehensive evaluation of program impact, sustainability, and recommendations for the following school year. Results will be compiled into formal reports for school administrators, teachers, and relevant DepEd offices, complemented by feedback sessions with stakeholders including parents and community representatives, to ensure participatory reflection and continuous improvement.

Through this evaluation plan, the program aims to achieve measurable improvements in academic achievement, social integration, cultural understanding, and emotional well-being while fostering an inclusive and supportive school environment for Muslim migrant students.

Conclusions

Based on the study's findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Muslim migrant students' engagement in learning activities is influenced by varying levels of participation, language proficiency, and cultural adjustment. Their challenges in communication and adapting to non-Muslim norms underscore the need for targeted instructional and environmental support to ensure equitable learning opportunities.
2. These students encounter multiple challenges, including cultural constraints, communication barriers, experiences of discrimination, and limited access to appropriate food. Such difficulties adversely affect their emotional well-being, sense of belonging, and overall school experience, revealing systemic gaps within the educational environment.
3. Despite these obstacles, students employ diverse coping strategies—language adaptation, relationship building, spiritual grounding, and practical adjustments—demonstrating resilience while highlighting the necessity of institutional support to reduce reliance on individual efforts.
4. A comprehensive program was designed based on the study's results to address the academic, cultural, and social needs of Muslim migrant students, providing a structured and sustainable response to the systemic challenges identified.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the holistic development, inclusion, and well-being of Muslim migrant students in non-Muslim school environments:

1. **Culturally Responsive Teaching:** Teachers should integrate culturally responsive strategies and scaffolded language support to encourage active participation. Classroom activities that respect cultural and religious practices can foster student confidence and engagement.
2. **Inclusive Policies and Awareness:** Schools should implement awareness campaigns, anti-bullying measures, and culturally sensitive policies, including access to halal food and prayer spaces. Professional development on cultural sensitivity is essential.
3. **Peer and Psychosocial Support:** Strengthen peer-mentorship programs, intercultural activities, and support groups for sharing experiences and developing coping skills. Guidance counselors should provide culturally attuned counseling.
4. **Program Implementation and Monitoring:** The proposed program should be formally implemented, monitored, and regularly evaluated, with active involvement from teachers, administrators, parents, and community leaders to ensure sustainability.
5. **Cultural Orientation:** Conduct regular orientation sessions for students and teachers to foster understanding and respect for Muslim culture, traditions, and practices, reducing prejudice and misunderstandings.
6. **Community and Parental Engagement:** Establish partnerships with parents, local Muslim communities, and religious leaders to align interventions with students' cultural and spiritual needs, and to encourage active family participation.
7. **Institutional Policy Development:** School divisions or institutions may create or revise policies to ensure long-term inclusivity, such as guidelines for culturally appropriate meals, anti-discrimination protocols, or flexible practices accommodating religious obligations.
8. **Ongoing Capacity Building:** Offer continuous training on culturally responsive pedagogy, trauma-informed approaches, and effective communication strategies for diverse learners to equip educators with the necessary skills and awareness.

The findings of this study may inform practical interventions for promoting academic engagement, social integration, and cultural inclusion. Future research could employ larger or more diverse samples, different grade levels, or alternative methodological approaches to verify or expand upon these results. Additionally, unexpected patterns or emerging issues, such as long-term adaptation strategies or program efficacy, warrant further investigation to enhance support for Muslim migrant students.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The study strictly adhered to ethical principles to protect the dignity, rights, and well-being of all participants. Detailed written and verbal explanations regarding the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, time commitments, and participant responsibilities were provided to both students and their parents. Informed consent was obtained, including permission to record interviews and use anonymized excerpts, with participants clearly informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without consequence. Participant anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms or codes, and identifying information was removed or generalized. All data, including transcripts, field notes, and audio recordings, were securely stored, with access restricted to the researcher and permanently deleted or archived upon study completion. Interview procedures were conducted with sensitivity to Islamic beliefs, prayer schedules, and cultural norms, allowing participants to respond in their preferred language, with interpreters provided as needed. Special consideration was given to minors and other vulnerable participants, ensuring fair recruitment and avoidance of coercion. The researcher-maintained reflexivity through journaling potential biases and their influence on data collection, interpretation, and analysis. Academic integrity was upheld through accurate citation of sources, peer review of the final manuscript, and strict avoidance of plagiarism. No conflicts of interest existed, and the results were used solely for research purposes. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the FEU Roosevelt Institutional Research Ethics Board.

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