

MANAGING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSION, BELONGING AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

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Abstract

School climate and students' sense of belonging play a central role in educational inclusion, particularly in culturally and religiously diverse contexts. This qualitative study examines how educators in Greek primary schools perceive and manage religious diversity, with a focus on the inclusion of Muslim pupils. Drawing on interviews with teachers, school principals, and religious instructors in the region of Thrace, the study explores everyday practices, challenges, and coping strategies related to religious education and school rituals. Findings reveal considerable variation in how schools organize exemption procedures, learning activities, and participation in religious events, often depending on local decision-making rather than unified guidelines. Educators express concern that inconsistent practices may unintentionally affect pupils' emotional security and sense of belonging. At the same time, many participants describe deliberate efforts to promote respectful dialogue, inclusive classroom climates, and positive peer relationships. The study highlights the psychological dimensions of inclusion, emphasizing how organizational clarity, professional confidence, and supportive school leadership contribute to a climate where diversity is managed constructively. Implications are discussed in relation to inclusive school environments and educator support.

Keywords: *Educational inclusion, religious diversity, school climate, sense of belonging, primary education.*

1. Introduction

The research literature consistently shows that students' school experiences are shaped not only by the curriculum, but also by the quality of relationships, the sense of safety, and the extent to which schools communicate that students are legitimate members of the community. From this perspective, school climate does not merely refer to the "atmosphere" of an institution, but to the broader constellation of relationships, norms, and practices that influence students' participation, learning, and well-being. Similarly, school belonging is understood as the experience of being accepted, recognized, and supported within the educational environment, and research has shown that teacher support is among the strongest predictors of this sense of belonging (Osterman, 2000; Thapa et al., 2013). Likewise, Allen and colleagues (2018) demonstrate that supportive relationships and well-organized school processes significantly shape students' sense of belonging.

These issues become particularly salient in schools where religious differences are visible in everyday life. In European debates on education about religions and beliefs, emphasis has gradually shifted from strictly confessional approaches toward interpretive, dialogical, and inclusive models capable of fostering mutual understanding and social cohesion (Jackson, 2016). In Greece, this discussion carries particular significance, as the teaching of Religion remains closely tied to ongoing debates concerning the role of Orthodoxy, exemption procedures, and the ways in which public schools respond to religious pluralism (Koukounaras Liagkis, 2015; Markoviti, 2019). In Western Thrace, where there is a historically significant presence of the Muslim minority, education has long been recognized as a sensitive arena situated at the intersection of identity, educational policy, and intercommunal relations (Dragonas & Frangoudaki, 2006).

The present article examines the religious inclusion of Muslim primary school students in Thrace through the lens of teachers' practices and representations regarding the management of religious diversity within the school environment. The analysis is structured around three dimensions particularly relevant to

the theme of the conference: the organizational management of diversity, everyday classroom practices, and the institutional conditions that may either support or undermine inclusive processes. Within this framework, the central research question concerns how educators understand and manage religious diversity in ways that intentionally or unintentionally contribute to strengthening, complicating, or diminishing Muslim students' sense of belonging and the overall school climate.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The study used a purposive sampling strategy to reflect the professional and institutional diversity of primary schools in Thrace, Greece. The sample size was established according to the principle of theoretical saturation and included 30 participants from four professional groups relevant to the study: 10 general primary teachers (PE70) working in public schools attended by pupils from different religious backgrounds; 6 Islamic religion teachers involved in Muslim religious education programmes; 7 PE73 teachers working in minority schools attended by Muslim pupils; and 7 principals or deputy principals from schools characterized by religious diversity.

Participants came from all three administrative areas of Thrace. They were selected from a total of 206 primary schools (107 public and 99 minority schools), allowing the study to include a broad geographical, institutional, and demographic range. Selection criteria included professional experience, willingness to reflect on practice, years of service, and employment status. The group of Islamic religion teachers was particularly important because many of them worked across several schools and religious institutions, offering both educational and community perspectives.

2.2. Instrument

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which are suitable for exploring sensitive and complex topics such as religion, identity, and school inclusion, as they allow participants to describe their experiences in depth within a flexible format (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interview guide was developed through an iterative process that included a review of the literature on religious diversity, intercultural competence, and minority inclusion, consultation of educational policies, and analysis of similar existing tools. The final guide included four main thematic areas: (a) curriculum and teaching practices; (b) perceptions of religious inclusion; (c) institutional policies and practices; and (d) professional experiences and training needs related to religious diversity.

To ensure cultural sensitivity and neutral wording, the questions were written in inclusive language and reviewed by two specialists in intercultural education and social psychology. The guide was then adapted for each participant group while maintaining the same overall themes. Before the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with four respondents, one from each group, to test the clarity and relevance of the questions.

2.3. Data collection procedure

Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online, depending on participants' availability and local conditions. Before each interview, participants were informed about the aim of the study, the use of the data, and their rights regarding confidentiality and personal data protection. Informed consent was obtained in written or digital form.

Most participants did not agree to audio recording. Therefore, data were collected through detailed notes taken during the interviews. At the end of each discussion, the main ideas were reviewed with participants and confirmed by them. All data were anonymized, and each participant received a generic code such as "Subject X," without identifying the school or professional role.

A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted in public and minority schools reflecting the local religious diversity, including Orthodox Christians, Turkish-speaking Muslims, Pomaks, and Roma communities. Interview length was adapted to the context, averaging around 15 minutes for face-to-face interviews and slightly longer online to allow for additional procedural details. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their experiences, while researchers intervened only to clarify responses and support free expression.

2.4. Data analysis strategy

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is widely used in qualitative research to identify and interpret patterns of meaning in textual data. The analysis followed six stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and final interpretation.

The analysis focused both on recurring themes and on the specific perspectives of participants, allowing the identification of similarities and differences across the four professional groups. The credibility of the findings was strengthened through triangulation of perspectives from the different respondent groups and through the use of researchers' reflexive journals, which helped reduce interpretive bias.

3. Results

A comparative analysis of the perspectives of the four professional groups revealed both important similarities and relevant differences in the ways religious diversity is managed in primary schools in Thrace. The findings are presented across four main dimensions: organizational management of religious diversity, everyday pedagogical practices and student engagement, institutional conditions of inclusion, and broader attitudes toward inclusion and areas for improvement.

3.1. Organizational management of religious diversity

A first important finding concerns the lack of consistency in the implementation of administrative procedures related to the exemption of Muslim pupils from Religious Education classes and their participation in Christian religious activities. Participants reported the existence of formal procedures; however, their practical application differed across schools, and the level of institutional clarity varied. One teacher described the standard process as follows: "Parents complete the form in September, we draft the minutes and record it in myschool" (Subject 4). Other participants, however, referred to uncertainty regarding decision-making procedures and the role of exempted pupils during religious activities.

Beyond formal documentation, Muslim pupils were included through different local arrangements: remaining in class with alternative tasks, arriving later at school, or attending certain events without active participation. One teacher explained: "During church attendance, Muslim students stay at school with a teacher and do art activities" (Subject 2). These differences suggest that the status of exempted pupils is not regulated through a common framework, but negotiated at the level of each individual school.

A second organizational issue concerned delays in the appointment of Islamic religion teachers. Both teachers and school leaders viewed their presence positively, but reported that administrative delays affected the continuity of religious instruction and timetable organization. As one principal noted: "The Imam arrived in January, which disrupted the timetable and delayed Religious Education" (Subject 3). As a result, some schools relied on temporary and improvised solutions, increasing organizational pressure and reinforcing the fragile nature of the educational response offered to Muslim pupils.

3.2. Everyday pedagogical practices and student engagement

Across all participant groups, there was a clear orientation toward teaching methods aimed at encouraging active student participation and creating an inclusive classroom climate. Teachers described the use of interactive, interdisciplinary, and reflective approaches such as storytelling, guided discussion, role-play, thematic projects, drawing, and collaborative activities. Although the emphasis varied across professional categories, there was broad agreement that religious diversity is easier to manage when students are actively involved and lessons are based on dialogue and reflection.

PE70 teachers mainly emphasized interdisciplinary approaches and the use of historical or civic content in Religious Education. Islamic religion teachers combined traditional methods with modern participatory strategies, while PE73 teachers more frequently described activities based on questioning, text analysis, and moral reflection. One PE73 teacher stated: "I ask questions so students develop critical thinking" (Subject 6).

Participants also agreed that student engagement increased when lessons involved creativity, personal expression, and collaboration. At the same time, they identified recurring challenges, including different levels of student interest, language barriers, difficulties in understanding religious texts, and the lack of age-appropriate materials. Assessment was described mainly as formative and continuous, based on oral questions, observation, practical exercises, and interactive tools. Summative testing appeared less important, with greater emphasis placed on participation, reflection, and understanding.

3.3. Institutional conditions of inclusion

The analysis also revealed structural constraints affecting the coherence of religious education in multicultural settings. Islamic religion teachers frequently reported a lack of official resources, the absence of a common curriculum, and the need to create their own teaching materials. One participant expressed this directly: "There are no official textbooks for teaching Islam, so we all have to make our own materials" (Subject Y23). Similarly, PE73 teachers referred to outdated textbooks, language comprehension difficulties, and insufficient materials for younger pupils.

Another major issue concerned the limited professional integration of Islamic religion teachers within the school community. Participants described forms of institutional marginalization, including restricted participation in decision-making processes and incomplete professional recognition. One teacher noted: “We aren’t part of the Teachers’ Council, and that makes us feel marginalized” (Subject Y28). This peripheral position affects not only teachers’ professional status, but also the consistency of support provided to Muslim pupils.

School leaders also highlighted the lack of a coherent institutional framework and the need for clearer guidance regarding the status of exempted pupils and their participation in religious activities. Overall, the data suggest that religious inclusion depends not only on teachers’ goodwill, but also on the existence of institutional structures that support coherent, predictable, and fair practices.

3.4. Cross-cutting dimensions: Attitudes toward inclusion and directions for improvement

Despite these structural difficulties, most participants expressed positive attitudes toward religious inclusion. Across all four groups, there was a shared view that Religious Education should promote mutual respect, empathy, freedom of conscience, and dialogue among pupils. Teachers tended to associate the subject with the transmission of universal values and the creation of opportunities for mutual understanding, rather than the promotion of a single confessional perspective. One participant summarized this view as follows: “All students can gain something from Religious Studies—whether knowledge or experiences that foster skills like acceptance, inclusion, and tolerance of diversity” (Subject 12).

Participants also offered similar recommendations for improving current practices. The most common suggestions included clarifying exemption procedures and participation in school rituals, updating teaching materials, strengthening professional training, and introducing comparative or dialogical approaches to Religious Education. One principal proposed that: “A single comparative religion course would solve many problems and reduce exemptions” (Subject 18). Participants also stressed the importance of collaboration with parents and the wider community so that religious inclusion does not remain the sole responsibility of individual teachers.

Overall, the findings indicate that there is a positive attitudinal basis for inclusion; however, this is weakened by limited institutional coherence and insufficient resources. Inclusive practices do exist, but they often depend on local initiative and the personal commitment of educational actors rather than on a strong systemic framework.

4. Discussion

The central finding is that religious inclusion should be understood as a process of building school climate and belonging, not merely procedural compliance. Muslim pupils’ experiences are shaped by ordinary moments, who joins morning prayer, where exempted pupils wait, what alternative activities they receive, that carry psychological significance by signalling legitimacy and equal status (Allen et al., 2018; Osterman, 2000). Building on this, the study introduces the concept of the Exemption Paradox: exemption procedures intended to protect freedom of conscience may unintentionally signal symbolic peripherality when pupils are managed through improvised arrangements or spatial separation. The result is a tension between legal accommodation and psychological belonging, students may be formally enrolled while experiencing everyday signals of secondary membership (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Two implications follow. First, organizational coherence matters for belonging: schools with clearer rules produce more stable experiences, while ad hoc solutions lead pupils to perceive their place as conditional or peripheral. In the Greek context, where debates on Religious Education and exemptions remain sensitive, the quality of local decision-making directly shapes students’ lived experiences (Markoviti, 2019). Second, the data reveal a distinction between relational inclusion - teachers’ sensitivity, dialogical methods, avoidance of stigma (Jackson, 2016) and institutional inclusion. Positive interpersonal relations are necessary but not sufficient: a school may be relationally inclusive while remaining institutionally fragile. Inclusion also requires adequate resources; participants noted persistent structural gaps including absent textbooks for Islamic religion, lack of a common curriculum, and outdated materials, all of which constrain engagement regardless of teacher goodwill (Aseery, 2024; Koukounaras Liagkis, 2022).

The professional status of Islamic religion teachers and the role of school leadership are equally significant. Teachers who reported delayed appointments and exclusion from decision-making processes carry symbolic weight: when educators serving a minority group are institutionally marginalized, pupils implicitly receive a message about the value placed on their needs (Dragonas & Frangoudaki, 2006). School principals mediate between policy ambiguity and everyday practice, but leadership alone cannot compensate for absent systemic guidance (Thapa et al., 2013). More broadly, this study shifts attention from narrow debates about exemptions toward the quality of the school environment as a whole, showing

that belonging is produced through the practical organization of everyday school life — not curriculum content alone.

5. Conclusions, practical implications, limitations and future research

The study shows that religious inclusion in primary schools emerges not from individual teacher goodwill alone, but from the convergence of predictable rules, inclusive leadership, adequate resources, and diversity-sensitive pedagogy. Muslim pupils' sense of belonging depends on the everyday institutional signals that their presence is legitimate, recognized, and equal. Four practical improvements follow: (1) clearer and consistent exemption procedures and rules for participation in school rituals; (2) alternative activities with genuine educational value for exempted pupils; (3) timely appointment and full professional recognition of Islamic religion teachers; and (4) updated resources and continuous professional development to help teachers address religious differences constructively. Three limitations should be noted: the study captures adult rather than pupil or family perspectives; the absence of audio recording in most interviews restricted verbatim data, though participant validation of notes supported credibility; and the socio-cultural specificity of Thrace limits transferability. Future research should incorporate pupil and parent perspectives, comparative designs across regions or school types, and longitudinal studies tracking how policy changes shape everyday school practices.

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