

Psychosocial Experiences of Buddhist Students in a Muslim-Majority Student Environment

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the psychosocial experiences of Buddhist students as a religious minority within a Muslim-majority school environment at SMP Negeri 4 Salatiga. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach informed by Freudian psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concept of ego defense mechanisms, the research examined two participants (S1 and S2) through in-depth semi-structured interviews and supporting observation. Data were analyzed following the Colaizzi method, involving repeated reading of transcripts, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, thematic clustering, and construction of an exhaustive description of the participants' lived experience. Six interrelated themes emerged: acceptance of religious identity, peer social relations, school support and cultural sensitivity, structural barriers to religious practice, ego defense mechanisms, and the meanings constructed from being a minority student. Findings showed that although both participants generally adapted well and experienced supportive peer relationships, they also encountered subtle challenges such as microaggressions from teachers and limited facilities for worship. Participants employed mechanisms such as rationalization, suppression, sublimation, and identification to maintain psychological stability. The study concludes that psychosocial wellbeing among minority students depends not only on formal inclusive policies but also on the consistency of everyday interactions, underscoring the need for stronger multicultural competence among teachers and school counselors.

Informasi Artikel

Kata Kunci:

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman psikososial siswa beragama Buddha sebagai kelompok minoritas di lingkungan sekolah mayoritas Muslim, yaitu SMP Negeri 4 Salatiga. Menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi interpretatif dengan perspektif psikoanalisis Freud, khususnya mekanisme pertahanan ego, penelitian ini melibatkan dua partisipan (S1 dan S2) melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dan observasi sebagai teknik pendukung. Data dianalisis menggunakan tahapan Colaizzi, meliputi pembacaan berulang transkrip, ekstraksi pernyataan bermakna, perumusan makna, pengelompokan tema, hingga penyusunan deskripsi menyeluruh atas pengalaman partisipan. Ditemukan enam tema utama yang saling berkaitan: penerimaan identitas keagamaan, relasi sosial dengan teman sebaya, dukungan sekolah dan sensitivitas budaya, hambatan struktural dalam pemenuhan hak beribadah, mekanisme pertahanan ego, dan makna yang dikonstruksikan atas pengalaman sebagai siswa minoritas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kedua partisipan pada umumnya mampu beradaptasi dengan baik dan menjalin relasi positif dengan teman sebaya, mereka tetap menghadapi tantangan halus seperti microaggression dari guru dan keterbatasan fasilitas ibadah. Partisipan menggunakan mekanisme seperti rasionalisasi, supresi, sublimasi, dan identifikasi untuk menjaga stabilitas psikologis. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kesejahteraan psikososial siswa minoritas tidak hanya bergantung pada kebijakan inklusif formal, tetapi juga pada konsistensi interaksi sehari-hari, sehingga diperlukan penguatan kompetensi multikultural bagi guru dan konselor sekolah.

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1. Introduction

Religious diversity in schools reflects the reality of Indonesia's pluralistic society; consequently, it must be managed with equality and mutual respect, in accordance with Law No. 20/2003, Article 12, Paragraph (1), which guarantees students the right to receive religious education aligned with their beliefs. Muqoyyidin & Widiyaningsih (2021) [2] emphasize the importance of inclusive education, Sulanam (2022) highlights the role of religion in the adaptation of minority students, and Hayadin (2020) asserts the need for tangible protection of their rights. Ideally, schools should serve as safe spaces for all forms of diversity.

However, on the ground, religious intolerance persists, ranging from discrimination to the bullying of minority students. The death of an elementary school student in Riau allegedly triggered by religious differences serves as tangible proof of the serious impact of this intolerance. Research by INFID and the Demographic Institute of FEB UI (2021) indicates that while the majority of Gen Z and Millennials tend to be tolerant, opposition toward religious minority groups remains a finding reinforced by Mubarrak & Kumala (2020) in Banda Aceh. This situation has the potential to trigger anxiety, feelings of alienation, and difficulties in forming a personal identity among minority students.

Several studies have sought to address this issue. Sulanam (2022) found that minority students utilize religion as a form of social adaptation capital. Other research indicates that multicultural counseling plays a crucial role in preventing discrimination and managing students' emotions, while a study at SMPN 2 Ampek Nagari highlights the role of teachers in fostering tolerance among students. These findings underscore the importance of various efforts to support the psychosocial well-being of minority students in schools.

However, previous research has largely been limited to aspects of social adaptation and counseling interventions; the psychological experiences of minority students from their own perspectives remain underexplored particularly through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis (specifically ego defense mechanisms) to understand the psychological strategies employed by Buddhist minority students within a Muslim-majority environment. Consequently, this study was conducted at SMPN 4 Salatiga, a school characterized by an inclusive religious environment and facilities for various faiths including Buddhism. Despite this, Buddhist students still navigate the psychosocial dynamics inherent to being a minority, particularly during junior high school, a critical phase for identity formation.

This study aims to explore the psychosocial experiences of Buddhist students at SMPN 4 Salatiga a school situated in a Muslim-majority environment using a phenomenological approach grounded in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, specifically focusing on ego defense mechanisms. The study examines the forms of psychosocial pressure experienced, the

ego defense mechanisms employed, and the meanings the students attribute to their experiences as a religious minority. The findings are intended to inform guidance and counseling services, fostering greater sensitivity to the psychological needs of students belonging to religious minorities.

2. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological design to understand and interpret the lived experiences of Buddhist students as a minority group within a predominantly Muslim school environment. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 4 Salatiga, with participants selected via purposive sampling specifically, Buddhist students who met the study's criteria. The study involved one to two participants, consistent with the nature of phenomenological research, which prioritizes data depth over the number of participants. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, supplemented by observations. In the initial stage, the researcher explored the facts by delving into the participants' psychosocial experiences regarding social interactions, their experiences as a minority group, and how they interpreted and navigated the various situations encountered within the school environment.

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved coding the interview results by identifying and categorizing data based on themes related to psychosocial experiences. Each participant was assigned a code such as S1 and S2 to ensure anonymity. Subsequently, the data were interpreted using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, focusing on ego defense mechanisms as an analytical lens to understand the participants' psychological responses to their experiences as members of a minority group. The second stage involved structuring the analysis by linking the identified psychosocial experience themes with ego defense mechanisms, thereby establishing the foundation for presenting the research findings. Data validity was ensured through methodological triangulation comparing interview and observation results and member checking, which involved verifying with participants that the data accurately reflected their actual experiences.

3. Result

Data analysis in this study followed Colaizzi's procedural steps, beginning with repeated readings of the interview transcripts from both participants, the extraction of significant statements, the formulation of meanings, and the clustering of meanings into themes, culminating in the construction of a comprehensive description of the psychosocial experiences of Buddhist students at SMP Negeri 4 Salatiga. The two participants referred to as S1 and S2 to ensure anonymity provided complementary perspectives: S1 exhibited more complex and multi-layered psychological dynamics, whereas S2 described an experience that was relatively stable and free from significant

turmoil. The analysis revealed six interconnected themes: the process of accepting a religious identity as a minority; social relationships with peers of different faiths; school support that lacked consistency regarding cultural sensitivity; structural barriers to exercising the right to worship; ego defense mechanisms employed to cope with psychosocial pressures; and the meanings the participants constructed regarding their experiences as minority students.

The six identified themes do not stand in isolation but are interconnected in shaping the participants' psychosocial experiences. These themes illustrate how social experiences, environmental support, and ego defense mechanisms interact during the process of meaning-making as religious minority students.

Table 1. Results of Interview Data Coding and Interpretation

Theme	Quote	EN	ES	PET
Acceptance of religious identity	S1: "Awalnya saya malu... sekarang saya bangga." S2: "Saya merasa nyaman dan aman."	The emotional shift from shame to self-acceptance.	Social experiences shape the acceptance of religious identity.	The ego successfully adapts to reality, thereby reducing anxiety regarding identity.
Social relationships with peers	S1: "Semuanya menghargai saya." S2: "Hubungan saya sangat baik."	Supportive social relationships.	Social acceptance becomes a source of a sense of security.	The ego gains reinforcement through environmental acceptance, preventing the development of internal conflict.
Support from teachers and the school	S1: "Ada guru yang membuat saya kurang nyaman." S2: "Guru agama mendukung saya."	Experiences with teachers vary.	Students' experiences with and responses to teachers vary, and a teacher's response influences students' psychological comfort.	The ego adjusts to both positive and negative experiences within the school environment.
Fulfillment of the right to worship	S1: "Ibadah sering terganggu." S2: "Saya tidak	Servitude is more situational in nature.	The fulfillment of worship needs is not the same for every participant.	The ego maintains emotional stability despite facing situational limitations.

Theme	Quote	EN	ES	PET
	<i>mengalami kesulitan.</i> "			
Ego defense mechanisms	S1: "Saya berusaha menghargai perbedaan." S2: "Guru tidak membedakan saya."	Efforts to maintain psychological balance.	The two participants employ different ego defense mechanisms.	Rationalization, suppression, sublimation, and identification serve as ego strategies for coping with anxiety.
The meaning of experience	S1: "Saya bangga dengan agama saya." S2: "Saya selalu merasa dihargai."	The experience is interpreted positively.	The minority experience fosters self-acceptance.	The ego achieves healthy adaptation, allowing self-identity to be maintained positively.

4. Discussion

4.1. From Shame to Pride: The Process of Religious Identity Acceptance

One of S1's most striking findings was the emotional shift he experienced since beginning his Buddhist studies in a predominantly Muslim environment. S1 revealed that "*awalnya saya merasa malu dan tidak mau memberi tahu agama saya, tapi seiring berjalannya waktu justru saya bangga dengan agama yang saya anuti.*" The initial sense of embarrassment can be understood as an ego response to a perceived social threat—specifically, the fear of negative judgment from a peer group holding predominantly different beliefs. However, as S1 began to face questions from friends regarding their acts of worship and beliefs, that initial discomfort gradually transformed into an opportunity to share their religious identity. This process aligns with the view that the development of religious life in adolescents runs parallel to their psychological and social development; consequently, the repeated experience of explaining one's beliefs can actually strengthen self-acceptance [1]. A different pattern is shown by S2, who admitted from the start "*merasa nyaman dan aman saat bersosial di SMPN 04 Salatiga*" without undergoing a significant phase of self-rejection. This distinction underscores that the formation of religious identity among minority adolescents is not a singular process; rather, it is influenced by personality factors, prior social experiences, and the quality of support from their immediate environment [2].

S1's experience demonstrates that embracing one's religious

identity is a gradual process. Initially, feelings of shame arose due to concerns about how others might judge them. However, direct interactions with open-minded peers allowed those feelings to slowly transform into self-confidence. This shift illustrates that an adolescent's religious identity is not static but evolves through social experiences within the school environment. When the environment provides a safe space for expressing beliefs, students find it easier to accept themselves without feeling the need to conceal their identity [21].

4.2. Social Relations: Peer Recognition as Psychosocial Capital

Both participants agreed that their relationships with friends of different religions were good. S1 said that *“semuanya menghargai dan menghormati saya sebagai orang yang menganut agama Buddha,”* while S2 mentions *“their relationships with friends ‘terjalin dengan sangat baik.’* This attitude of mutual respect serves as a key factor in the psychological comfort of both participants; similar findings appear in studies showing that tolerance among students such as respecting differences, refraining from disparaging other religions, and being willing to form friendships across faiths is cultivated through daily habits facilitated by teachers and the school culture. Such peer tolerance is crucial, given that other research indicates intolerant behavior in the school environment can trigger emotional stress, a sense of insecurity, and disruptions in identity formation for the students targeted by it [4]. In other words, the inclusive culture of friendship at SMP Negeri 4 Salatiga serves as a protective factor that buffers the negative psychological impact of the minority status held by both participants [3], [7], [17].

The experiences shared by the two participants also indicate that positive peer relationships play a crucial role in the adjustment process for students belonging to a religious minority. The acceptance they experienced ensured that differences in belief did not become barriers to interaction or collaboration within the school environment. This demonstrates that an inclusive social climate can alleviate feelings of alienation while simultaneously bolstering students' confidence in embracing their religious identities. These findings align with research indicating that the quality of social relationships at school is a contributing factor to students' psychological well-being and their ability to adapt when facing various social challenges [19].

For students belonging to religious minorities, peer acceptance serves not only as social support but also as validation of their identity. When their religious identity is accepted in daily interactions, individuals no longer feel the need to conceal their beliefs. This fosters a sense of belonging within the school environment, thereby enabling a healthier process of psychosocial development.

4.3. Teacher and School Support: Between Appreciation and a Lack of Religious Sensitivity

In terms of support from the school, contrasting experiences were found between the two participants. S2 said that *“guru agama saya beliau sangat mendukung keberadaan saya”* and added that *“guru-guru sangat toleransi dengan saya, begitupun sebaliknya, dan guru-guru juga tidak membedakan saya dengan murid yang mayoritas Islam.”* This experience illustrates how structural support from the school, when consistently implemented, can foster a sense of safety and equality in minority students. However, S1 had a different experience, as he recounted *“saat pembelajaran kokurikuler ada guru yang asal berbicara tanpa mengetahui latar agama Buddha sehingga terkesan tidak sopan dan sok tahu, dan membuat saya kurang nyaman.”* Comments of this nature while likely not intended to cause harm qualify as microaggressions: subtle remarks or attitudes that unintentionally offend a person's cultural identity or beliefs. Recent studies indicate that the majority of clients from minority groups have encountered such microaggressions in their daily interactions, and the cultural sensitivity of the other party significantly influences how these experiences are perceived [5]. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening multicultural competence among teachers not only guidance and counseling teachers to ensure that inclusive educational services do not remain merely formal policies but are genuinely realized in daily classroom interactions [6], [8], [18].

An undergraduate student's experience of receiving comments from a teacher regarding Buddhism demonstrates that cultural sensitivity in educational practice still needs to be strengthened. Although the comments were likely not intended to be discriminatory, the experience nonetheless caused discomfort for the participant. In the study of multicultural education, this type of treatment is known as a “microaggression” behavior or comments that may appear innocuous but can impact the psychological well-being of individuals from minority groups. Therefore, enhancing teachers' multicultural competence is a crucial step toward creating a truly inclusive learning environment. Teachers are expected not only to master the subject matter but also to possess the ability to understand student diversity, ensuring that the learning process is fair and respectful of every individual's identity.

Although both participants were students belonging to a religious minority, their experiences were not entirely identical. These differences demonstrate that an individual's psychosocial experience is shaped not only by their status as a minority but also by how their surrounding environment responds to their presence. When students feel accepted by peers and teachers, they tend to find it easier to build self-confidence and a sense of belonging within the school community. Conversely, seemingly minor incidents—such as ill-advised comments or a lack of regard for religious needs—can leave a lasting impression, even if they were not intentionally discriminatory. This highlights that an inclusive school atmosphere is cultivated through everyday

interactions, rather than solely through established rules or policies.

4.4. Structural Barriers to the Fulfillment of the Right to Worship

Another theme that emerged from S1's experience was the lack of school coordination in facilitating Buddhist student worship activities. S1 explained that *"terkadang saat beribadah di kelas 9C, wali kelas dan guru lain seringkali tidak menginformasikan bahwa siswa beragama Buddha beribadah di kelas tersebut sehingga terkadang saat beribadah banyak siswa yang asal masuk kelas dan mengganggu jalannya ibadah."* He also added that his religious studies were ongoing *"di ruang kecil perpustakaan"* because a permanent prayer room for Buddhist students is not yet available. Unlike the undergraduate student, the master's student stated that they did not experience significant difficulties and felt the school *"memberikan kesempatan kepada setiap siswa untuk mengikuti pelajaran agama sesuai keyakinannya masing-masing."* This range of experiences demonstrates that the issue lies not in the absence of inclusive policies at the school level, but rather in the consistency of their implementation on the ground specifically regarding communication among teachers. This aligns with studies showing that fulfilling the right to religious education for minority students often faces obstacles related to technicalities and coordination, even though that right is guaranteed by regulation. [9,10]. The absence of a permanent prayer space and a lack of information sharing among teachers constitute structural barriers that, while seemingly minor, have the potential to undermine the sense of security minority students feel when practicing their religion.

Although the obstacles encountered by the participants did not ultimately prevent them from performing their acts of worship, the experience nonetheless demonstrates that the needs of minority students are not yet fully accommodated in daily school practices. Seemingly simple matters such as communicating information to other teachers or preparing a comfortable space for religious activities can influence students' sense of security when practicing their faith. Therefore, paying attention to such technical aspects is crucial to creating an educational environment that genuinely respects religious diversity [22].

4.5. Ego Defense Mechanisms as Psychological Strategies

When examined through the psychoanalytic perspective of Sigmund Freud, a number of responses displayed by both participants can be understood as forms of ego defense mechanisms that work to maintain psychological stability amidst the pressures of being a minority group. First, rationalization is evident in S1's statement that *"tidak masalah kalau mayoritas lingkungan memiliki keyakinan berbeda asalkan saya tetap percaya dan mengikuti ajaran agama saya."* This statement illustrates the ego's attempt to provide a logical and acceptable justification for the minority situation being faced, thereby

allowing the resulting psychological pressure to be managed without triggering prolonged internal conflict. Secondly, suppression is evident in the way S1 holds back feelings *"risih"* When initially asked by friends about his beliefs, he still chose to interact openly until finally the feeling turned into a feeling of happiness. Third, sublimation is clearly seen in S1's confession that despite being *"satu-satunya murid beragama Buddha di SMP ini,"* he succeeded *"mempertahankan ranking 1 pararel selama bersekolah di sini."* In this context, academic achievement can be interpreted as a way of channeling psychosocial stress into constructive accomplishments, while also serving as a means for the ego to assert self-worth amidst a minority status that renders one vulnerable to being perceived as different. Fourth, Subject S2 demonstrated a tendency to identify with a supportive environment; by absorbing and internalizing the tolerant attitudes of surrounding peers and teachers, S2 showed relatively few signs of significant psychological distress. These patterns reinforce the explanation that ego defense mechanisms are universal employed by anyone facing situations that threaten psychological stability and function not by eliminating the stress itself, but by managing it so that the individual remains capable of social functioning [11].

Interestingly, the ego defense mechanisms exhibited by the two participants did not operate in isolation but rather complemented one another depending on the situation at hand. In the initial phase, S1 primarily employed suppression, choosing to hold back feelings of discomfort regarding questions about their religious identity. As positive experiences within the school environment increased, this mechanism evolved into rationalization and sublimation, helping S1 accept their identity in a healthier manner. Meanwhile, S2 who received social support from the outset did not demonstrate a need for complex ego defense mechanisms. These findings indicate that ego defense mechanisms are dynamic and influenced by the quality of social interactions experienced by the individual.

Upon closer examination, the ego defense mechanisms observed in both participants cannot be understood as a form of denial of reality, but rather as a means of maintaining psychological equilibrium when facing potentially anxiety-inducing situations. For Participant S1, the shift from shame to pride regarding their religious identity demonstrates that positive social experiences can assist the ego in managing previously felt pressures. Meanwhile, the experience of Participant S2 who received acceptance from their environment from the outset indicates a comparatively reduced need to employ complex ego defense mechanisms. These findings reinforce the view that an individual's psychological response is significantly influenced by the interaction between internal conditions and the social support they receive [20].

4.6. Constructed Meanings: Gratitude, Self-Acceptance, and Achievement as Actualization

The psychosocial experiences of the two participants

demonstrate that being a Buddhist student in a predominantly Muslim school environment does not inevitably result in negative experiences. Instead, these experiences are shaped by the quality of social interactions established within the school setting. The study reveals that peer acceptance is a key factor enabling participants to feel secure and valued, while also allowing them to maintain their religious identity. These findings reinforce the view that social support serves as a crucial protective factor for adolescent psychological well-being, particularly for individuals belonging to a minority group. A social environment that fosters a sense of security enables individuals to build self-confidence, enhance adaptability, and mitigate the risk of psychological distress arising from differences in religious identity.

Ultimately, both participants constructed positive meanings around their experiences as religious minority students, albeit through different paths. S1 interpreted the experience as a process of discovering pride in a religious identity they had initially wished to conceal, whereas S2 viewed it as a series of experiences that led them to “*selalu merasa dihargai*” and “*tidak pernah merasa dibedakan karena agama yang dianut*.” Both forms of meaning-making align with findings that a higher level of internalized religious values among students corresponds to a higher level of perceived psychological well-being, as religious beliefs serve as a source of meaning and psychological strength when facing social challenges [12]. Furthermore, social support from peers and certain teachers contributed to the development of psychological resilience in both participants, consistent with findings that social support, coping strategies, and self-esteem play crucial roles in sustaining adolescent psychological well-being [13, 14]. Thus, the psychosocial experiences of Buddhist students at SMP Negeri 4 Salatiga cannot be understood simply as either stressful or entirely comfortable; rather, they constitute a dynamic process involving identity negotiation, ego defense mechanisms, and personal meaning-making that ultimately leads to a more complete sense of self-acceptance.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of school guidance and counseling services being more attuned to the psychological needs of students from religious minorities not only through formal policies but also by strengthening teachers' multicultural competence in daily interactions [15,16]. Consistency between inclusive policies and actual practice is crucial for enabling minority students such as S1 and S2 to continue their psychological, social, and academic development without bearing the additional burden associated with their status as a minority group within a majority environment.

From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, the experiences of both participants demonstrate that ego defense mechanisms do not always manifest as negative behaviors. Instead, the ego can assist individuals in adjusting to social pressures through various forms of constructive adaptation. For Participant S1, the shift from shame to pride regarding their religious identity indicates that the ego successfully managed the anxiety arising from fears

of social rejection; this transformation occurred gradually as positive experiences within the school environment increased. Meanwhile, for Participant S2, the absence of significant experiences of discrimination suggests that a supportive social environment can minimize the ego's need to develop complex defense mechanisms. Thus, an inclusive school environment can strengthen the psychological adaptability of minority students, preventing the stress associated with identity differences from escalating into more severe psychological conflict.

The findings of this study also indicate that religious diversity in schools does not necessarily lead to conflict. For both participants, positive peer relationships proved to be a key factor in their ability to navigate school life comfortably. This dynamic serves as a vital asset for adolescent psychosocial development, as acceptance by one's social environment significantly influences self-identity formation during this period. Consequently, a teacher's role extends beyond merely ensuring equal access to religious education; it also involves fostering a culture of mutual respect through daily attitudes and communication. In this way, minority students feel not only administratively accepted but also genuinely valued as members of the school community.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that the psychosocial experiences of Buddhist students at SMP Negeri 4 Salatiga as a religious minority group are dynamic and shaped by the interaction between individual factors and the school's social environment. Although the participants' experiences differed, both were able to adapt to the school environment through the acceptance of their religious identity, social support from peers and teachers, and the use of ego defense mechanisms when facing situations that could potentially cause psychological stress. These findings demonstrate that an inclusive and tolerant school environment plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of security, self-acceptance, and psychological well-being among students belonging to religious minorities.

On the other hand, this study also reveals that obstacles persist at the implementation level, such as a lack of sensitivity among some teachers regarding religious diversity and suboptimal coordination in accommodating the worship needs of minority students. These conditions indicate that school policies supporting diversity must be matched by consistent practices in daily life. Therefore, strengthening teachers' multicultural competence, optimizing guidance and counseling services, and fostering a school culture that values diversity are crucial steps toward creating a truly inclusive educational environment. In this way, the school functions not merely as a place for acquiring knowledge, but also as a space that supports the identity development, psychological well-being, and self-actualization of every student, regardless of their religious background.

The findings of this study offer practical implications for schools particularly teachers and counselors to pay greater attention to the psychosocial needs of students from religious minorities. Such efforts should be realized not only through the provision of religious education services in accordance with regulations but also by enhancing teachers' multicultural competence, fostering diversity-sensitive communication, and strengthening guidance and counseling services focused on the psychological well-being of all students. In this way, the school environment can become a truly inclusive space for every student, regardless of their religious background.

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